

# iViva Baja!

Story and photos by  
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MIKE CAFRO >>



## BAJA 1000 PART 2: RACING 1048 MILES WITH TEAM TEMECULA MOTORSPORTS

◆◆ The story picks up where we left off in our February issue with additional planning and prerunning. These steps are all-important and really separate the masses as teams could go faster if they had the logistic issues (the real king-pin of any successful effort) ironed out. A fly-by-the-seat-of-the-pants approach doesn't work well on a race of this scale and severity. The brutality of the long Baja 1000 course was evident in the dented, mangled and filthy machines stumbling down the streets of La Paz a little more than a day after the start. But more on that later...

Unlike most race stories, covering this one was nearly as stressful and required almost as much planning as actually racing it. But as we shadowed Mike Cafro and the Temecula Motorsports ATV crew from Ensenada to La Paz, Mexico, it was readily apparent that we were getting an extraordinary up-close-and-personal perspective of the Baja race and the pit action. Witnessing this tight-knit bunch work fluidly together made all the long hours worthwhile. We didn't know it as we headed south in the dark of night to San Diego to meet Elias Marana, father of Temecula teammate Levi, before heading across the border, but we were in for a hell of a show with Cafro and company.

The day began like the long days that were to follow—on the road before daybreak. From San Diego we continued down the coast to the race headquarters in Ensenada. The scale of the race became ever more apparent the closer we drew to the start. It's hard to aptly describe the fervor of the Baja 1000, but it's a mix of a carnival atmosphere and major race action—like a NASCAR event on steroids. We picked a good year to attend as the 2006 running turned out to be a record-breaking race with 431 starters, with 234 of those arriving at the finish line in time. The 1047.8-mile trek was a point-to-point winding along the entire peninsula instead of a loop.

A point-to-point race means teams must pre-position riders farther away and their chase crews must drive longer distances. Yes, the hurdles to simply finish this race mount at a blinding rate. Proper planning is a must, and the teams that are best prepared to handle the inevitable contingencies are the ones that win, or at least finish. Planning and executing the plan fell to team captain Cafro. When he told us while prunning that he wanted to "win so bad he could taste it," he was dead serious. The stakes didn't allow for anything less than victory, and he was under immense pressure from above and himself to make it happen.

*BN: The day before the race foreshadowed the stress case Cafro would become as he ironed out all the last-minute kinks on the Honda and handled the paperwork side (from sign-up to tech inspection), too. But I was in for the full Psychology 101 episode the next day: I rode in the chase truck with Cafro once he got off 7A for the last time, and I watched him deal with the stress while effectively orchestrating the winning performance.*

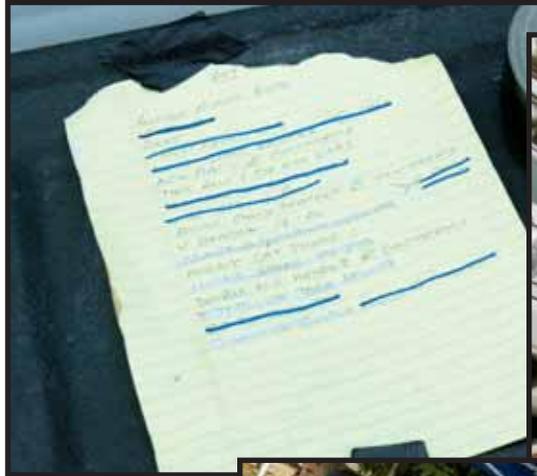
The start of this long, tortuous epic came bright and early as the first



CAFRO >>



SAL FITCH >>



ELIAS MARANA >>



RED >>



<< DENANE FIEDLER



motorcycle left the line at 6:30 a.m., with the rest roaring off after it in 30-second intervals. An hour of bikes and it was time for the ATVs to hit the trail. Cafro and 7A lit off at 7:32, and all that pent-up anxiety was finally unleashed as he blasted hell-bent down the Ensenada streets to the dirt. Over the course of the next 24 hours, the five-man team of Cafro, Dana Creech, Marc Spaeth, Levi Marana and Danny Prather would battle through almost 1048 miles of sand, rocks, cacti and chaos in their quest to be the first ATV finisher all the way down in La Paz. Their support crew, consisting of Cafro's girlfriend Julie Russell, Joe Graves, Tim VanGelder, Elias Marana, Clancy Cornell, Denane Fiedler and the team's engine builder, Alan Knowles, had the challenge of keeping the riders sane and the ATV in one piece.

*BP: Meanwhile, almost 400 miles south in Bahía de los Angeles, the vast scale of this race becomes clear. I'm shadowing Marana and chase crew members VanGelder, Fiedler and Cornell. While we're still asleep in our motel room, Cafro is passing the baton to teammate Creech at mile-marker 34.3. Cafro will take the helm again at mile 177, but even then he won't arrive in Bahía de los Angeles until early afternoon. As I imagine Cafro shredding down the Ensenada streets in the pale early-morning light and Creech pounding through the rough whoops by San Felipe, we eat a leisurely breakfast, fuel up at a local Pemex station and head out to the checkpoint, where we wait and wait...and wait.*

*The peacefulness of the desert is quite a contrast to the uproarious nature of Ensenada, but we've still had fun on this leg. At small villages along the way, hordes of children and even adults stood on the side of the road yelling, "Stee-kers!" hoping that we'd toss them some stickers or posters from the window. At one stop, Fiedler is overwhelmed by children and teenagers who just want to be able to say they were a part of the largest event their town sees all year.*

*As we wait, a helicopter on the horizon and a plume of dust beneath it signals the arrival of Steve Hengeveld aboard Honda 1X, then minutes later a few more motorcycles fly by. Some stop at the Team Honda pit, while others roar on past. Bryan Nylander and cigar-chomping Elias arrive in another chase truck shortly thereafter. As his son fuels up on sandwiches and puts on his helmet, Elias helps adjust Levi's backpack and radio transmitter.*

"Quad!" someone yells over the crowd as Cafro materializes out of the sagebrush, engine wailing. "Ride safe, son," Marana says, then pats his son on the back and turns away to take a puff on his cigar with his arms folded across his chest. In this macho shorthand, it's clear that father and son just let each other know they love each other. Baja is a dangerous place, and over the years, racers and spectators alike have been killed.

As Cafro skids into the pit area, the Temecula Motorsports pit crew finger the





triggers on their cordless impact wrenches and twirl T-handles in their hands like gunfighters ready to draw. A beehive of activity erupts in the pits as team members, photographers and the Honda gasman swarm around the TRX450R. Like an army field medic at a triage station, Cafro shouts instructions and demands for tires, air filters, larger sockets and more.

The patient soon roars to life, fresh as a daisy as Levi Marana tears off into the wilderness, spewing sand and rock behind him. It's reminiscent of the Pony Express, except instead of riders changing horses, the ATV changes riders. Cafro takes a swig of ice-cold water, some of it trickling down his dusty beard. He wipes his chin with the back of his sweaty hand, squints at his partner riding off into the distance, then looks at the ground reflectively for a moment. Suddenly, he springs back to life and yells: "Let's get out of here!" Tools and spray cans are tossed into plastic bins, tailgates slammed shut and the macho rattle of crew-cab diesel trucks fills the air as Team Temecula Motorsports and two journalists from *ATV Rider* hit the pavement, trying to beat Marana to the next checkpoint. It's over as quickly as it began, and soon the desert is silent again, with locals milling about aimlessly, waiting for the next round of excitement. The drive and chase down were an adrenaline junkie's delight. Gas was always a concern. Many Pemex stations we hit were out of diesel—if they even carried it. The one's that did usually had a lineup of chase trucks with the same objective in mind—fill up when you can.



« TIM VANGELDER



*BN: We skipped one with a short line and several hours and hundreds of miles later were thankful a fellow chase crew had a backup 5-gallon can of the engine nectar. We took advantage of a traffic jam caused by a toppled semi on the tight, twisty mountain section between San Ignacio and Santa Rosalia to stave off disaster.*

Fuel was only one of the many concerns facing the crews. They had to successfully fight off fatigue during the day-long or longer dash, avoid livestock and race vehicles on the road, find the pits and, of course, get there and be set up and ready for their vehicle in time. Animals—from dogs to cows—are a constant worry to chase crews and racers alike. Cafro witnessed one dog commit suicide near the start when it suddenly darted right into the path of a fellow racer.



« CLANCY CORNELL



DANA CREECH »

BAJA IMAGE MAKERS

*BN: I got my Baja cattle experience sometime after midnight when we crested a hill at approximately 75 mph to be greeted by a herd of cows in the left lane. Driver extraordinaire Julie Russell*

*was on the brakes in no time and we avoided potential disaster, though Russell believes one cow now has a pierced ear thanks to the dualie's wheel flare. Watching and listening to this pro desert racer, Cafro, inhale sharply as we repeatedly skirted the perilous road*

edge and disaster—the same guy who is still laughing about blasting past me on the Rincon 680 as I gingerly made my way over a rock-infested whoop section on his TRX450 racer when we were prunning last month—was priceless. I think Russell also had something like this on her mind as she floored the gas pedal with a giggle in the twisty stuff, leaving Cafro cringing every time.

Chase crews repeated this scramble from pit to pit several times over the entire course—the more crews that were available, the fewer times they had to reposition. With 19 Honda pits offering gas and assistance to Honda teams that signed up, it was a no-brainer why the majority of teams rode red. This vital service—needed about [every?] 50 miles—allowed teams to space out their appearances and only provide for rider swaps or necessary maintenance intervals like filter changes. And when you're trying to round up a large number of volunteers—usually family, friends and naive coworkers—the fewer you're indebted to, the better. So naturally, this ad hoc collection of amateurs has a pretty steep learning curve to climb. Ideally, the neophytes get paired with old Baja hands who know the ropes and tricks to a victorious race. Experience counts because all it takes is a crash or something small like a broken A-arm to throw a careful plan into disarray in an instant. So chase teams must be flexible, quick-thinking and in communication with each other and the rider. This last part was the hardest to pull off as the large mountains blocked the short-range radio signals along with intermittent satellite phone reception. Cafro's cell phone turned out to be his most reliable communication tool—having three different methods only reinforced that the Boy Scout mantra of "Be Prepared" was a must for overcoming the myriad of obstacles facing every team. But then Cafro planned for that.

*BP: "Elias, we've got to flat-pedal it if we want to get there ahead of Levi," Clancy Cornell advises.*

*Elias puffs a stream of smoke out of the driver's window, looks over at Cornell and calmly says, "That's what we're doing," as he mats the pedal and the turbo spools up in the Chevy Silverado. The speedometer climbs to 75, 80 and then 85 as we barrel down this narrow two-lane blacktop that is Mexico Highway 1. Elias is a father in hot pursuit of his son, eager to show his support. Unlike other sports, desert racing isn't something that parents watch from the sidelines. They drive, wrench, advise, counsel and cheer. "I love my St. Louis Rams football," Marana says, "but my son's not on that team. He's on this one, and I want to be there for him."*

Three hours later in San Ignacio, exhausted 21-year-old Marana hands the Honda off to Spaeth, who will carry the team's hopes of



victory down to Checkpoint 7, north of Loreto. The Baja veteran put in a great ride, just as his predecessors did, and the team's lead grows. However, darkness has fallen and the course becomes more dangerous, despite the massive wattage thrown onto the terrain by the machine's huge headlights. The flickering of campfires sparsely illuminates the desert as crowds gather to party and stay warm. Although race participants cuss them heavily, booby traps on the course are as much a part of the fabric of the Baja 1000 as the racers themselves. This year there's one particularly dangerous section involving a buried telephone pole. Spaeth avoided any mishaps and delivered the ATV intact to Prather on time and at the right place.

And while we were dashing down the ever-narrowing roads, the Temecula Motor-sports racer was negotiating the rocks, sand,



whoops, water and the menagerie of animals and other ATVs and bikes while navigating to the next pit—and doing it ahead of the competition. Prather had to ride through some of the toughest sections, but that's his specialty. An old desert hand, he arrived 130 miles later in good spirits at Honda pit 16, just past Checkpoint 8, near Ciudad Insurgentes.

*BN: This was the epitome of the chaotic pits. I got my first dose of this insanity when we set up camp by the Insurgentes Highway 1 crossing. Mixed in with all the noise, traffic and crews scrambling over a sick machine or rushing to*

*give their charge a thorough checkup were throngs of local spectators—even at 4 A.M.—adding to the confusion in the rows of pits as the newly arriving chase trucks tried to find an open spot to set up and guide their rider in easily.*

In the middle of nowhere, a large crowd of hundreds of people have encircled our chase trucks as we unload and prepare to pit. Although they mean well, they came to see a show and the first quad of the night to arrive causes quite a stir. As if there was not enough anxiety in the air over not knowing how the race was developing, where exactly the rider was or if he was still going, the unease was only heightened in the constant challenge of keeping sticky fingers away from expensive hardware and tools as the next rider preps for battle.

Besides needing a person on or by each truck to keep a watchful eye on the enthusiastic spectators lest they take a souvenir, once rider Prather rolled in, it took VanGelder, Fiedler and our helpful pit neighbors forming a human fence to keep the crowd at bay while the crew worked on the ailing lighting system and frantically prepped it. They inspected the ATV for any loose skid-plate bolts or frame cracks, in addition to performing the usual round of tire and air-filter replacements as well as refueling for Marana's last stint. By the time a refreshed Marana hopped aboard again, Prather had taken off in a truck to beat him to the next check. There, just south of Santa Rita at mile-marker 943.7, he'll take the helm one last time and plow to the finish.

The prerace threat of Carmen Cafro's team (Mike's older brother) and the Honda team under Wayne Matlock never materialized. It was

JOE GRAVES >>

<< ALAN KNOWLES

SPAETH >>

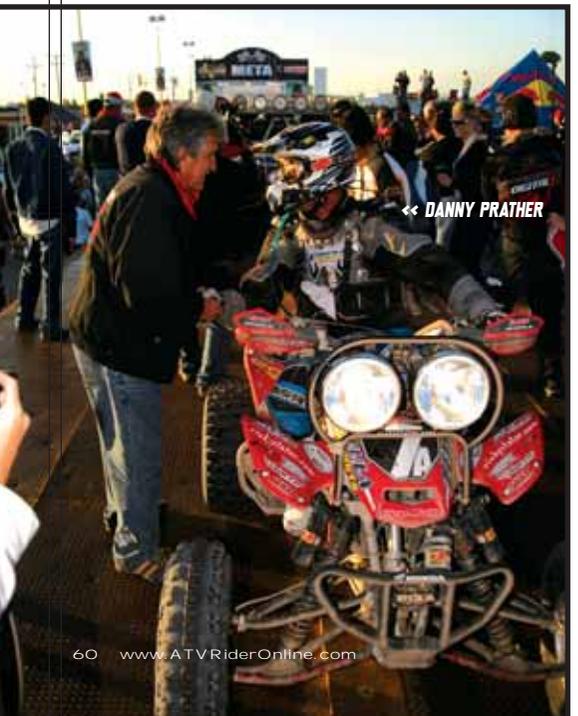
<< PRATHER

<< CAFRO

<< MARANA



<< JULIE RUSSELL



<< DANNY PRATHER



Jeff Hancock's group that gave the guys a worry early on. The number 4A quad was a mere five minutes behind Marana as he took off from a messy pit stop at La Cruzera—inexperience and communication problems hindered the smoothness of the wheel and an unexpected air-filter change and checkup on the Honda. A big rock gave the Temecula guys some breathing room—like an hour and a half—by breaking an A-arm, tie-rod and shock on the Hancock team's machine. It was a lucky break for Temecula and the team capitalized on it by slowing down some to make sure they didn't blow such a good lead.

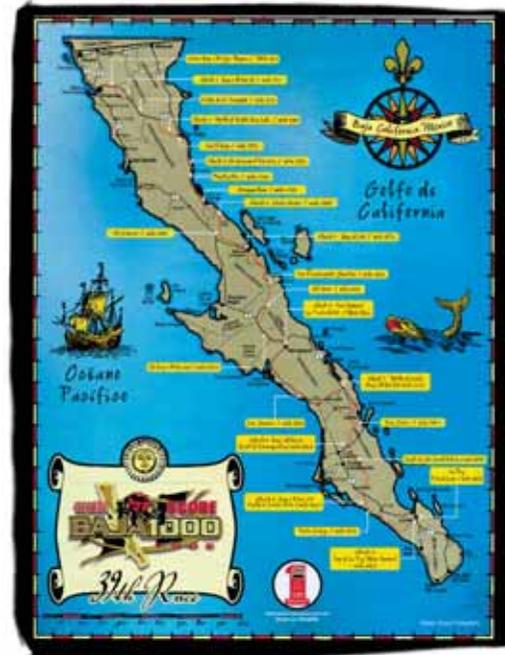
Cafro's team's only mechanical issues were the lights—our first news came around 2:35 A.M., when the radio crackled with bad news, "Team 7A, this is Honda pit 17. 7A has lost its light and is on backup, do you copy?"

"Copy that," a frustrated Cafro answers. Marana is out of radio range and everyone envisions a disoriented Levi frantically trying to get the backup lights working as the team's lead diminishes. The main HID lights went out completely on Marana, and he did his second stint using only the PIAA 55-watt backup light. It might have been a blessing in disguise as some 40 miles during his penultimate leg were in fog. There's nothing the team can do but drive onward, wait for his arrival and hope for an update when he comes within radio range. To come this far only to be stopped dead in their tracks by faulty lighting would be harder to swallow than an engine grenading at the starting line.

*BP: "Levi, this is your dad, do you copy?" Elias repeats over and over, trying to reach his son. A garbled message comes crackling back, but it's too broken up to understand. Still, it rallies the team, and after a long, suspenseful wait, a pinhole of light pierces the blackness of the desert. As it draws closer, two helmet lights shine above the headlight, and the shadowy silhouette of an ATV can be seen. It's Levi, and the Temecula Motorsports gang cheers as he arrives. They service 7A one last time and mount a backup set of lights. They huddle around Prather like a football team before one last overtime play as he mounts the Honda for the roughest—and final—section of the race. They've done everything they can do, and it's all out of their hands now. Soon the sky will begin to grow lighter, and day two will dawn on the Baja 1000.*

*BN: The madcap journey of some 26 hours flew by at an astonishing rate. Towns and pits blended together too completely, and I was glad I scribbled down notes as we bounced down Highway 1, dodging cattle, hopping over the speed bumps that announce the arrival of another town along with its hordes of happy children seeking stickers. We darted around slower traffic while avoiding the hurtling semis that seemed to suck the breath right out of us as they whooshed by in alarming proximity.*

The finish was something right out of a Hollywood action flick. Instead of a relaxed cruise to victory, Prather came into La Paz with the Red Bull Chevy CK1500 trophy truck hot on his tail. The screaming 800-horsepower engine sliced through the still early morning, announcing the imminent arrival of the blue and silver beast. Prather rounded the corner leading to the last dirt stretch with Cafro yelling on the radio, "Pin it, you have a trophy truck on your ass!" The Chevrolet gobbled up terrain with its long-travel suspension and drove the crowd into an even higher frenzy. Some say a smile is the universal language. Others say it's music. But in Baja, it's the guttural



roar of a heavily modified V8 with open exhausts. If the crowd had had pistols, they would have fired them into the air in celebration, but instead they blew whistles, screamed, yelled and rattled cowbells. By the time Prather zoomed by us tapped wide-open in fifth, the truck was around the same corner and on the gas as driver Andy McMillan tried in vain to beat the little red Honda to the last pavement section, where racers were limited to 60 mph. The trophy truck bellowed like a charging bull elephant, its ears flared and tusks lowered, ready to gore the mouselike quad in their race to the asphalt. If Prather could just reach the highway, he would be safe. Any racer caught speeding on the highway is subject to time penalties or disqualification, and no one wants to risk that after 1000 miles of hell. Nevertheless, the McMillan team was determined not to finish behind a machine with seven fewer cylinders and many times less horsepower, despite their leading their own class. At last, 7A's tires hit pavement, the rest of the team realized they forgot to breathe and

McMillan has to settle for finishing behind an ATV. You can't buy memories like that!

It was a fitting end to the race. We jumped into our trucks and the caravan set off for the finish—a place 46 percent of the teams never reached! And with all of these factors working against the competitors and their crews, it was no surprise. Witnessing the tough race firsthand definitely drove home why the SCORE Baja 1000 is truly a benchmark of tough racing.

*BP: The scene at the finish reminds me of that video clip that's always played every February before the Daytona 500. It's 1989 and a jubilant Darrell Waltrip climbs from the window of his car in the victory lane and shakes the reporter by the shoulders yelling, as they're being soaked with champagne and confetti, "I just won the Daytona 500! I just won the Daytona 500!" Prather's response is much more subdued. Surrounded by cameras, interviewers sticking tape recorders in his face and scantily clad trophy girls, he takes a gulp of Tecate beer, adjusts his Temecula Motorsports hat, smirks and coolly says, as both he and the ATV are given congratulatory pats, "I just won the Baja 1000." The rest of the team arrives shortly thereafter and it's beers and handshakes all around at 6:30 in the morning. The crew's eyes seem distant and glassy as they gaze at their winning steed. Then I realize they're just soaking in the moment, burning it into their brains so they can carry this moment in time.*

*It's a long journey home, especially after wild postrace celebrations in La Paz that spanned two days. The hot water pressing into my aching back in my shower feels heavenly, and all I did was write and take pictures. I can't imagine how the riders themselves feel. After 30 minutes, I finally feel clean, but I've brought back memories that can never be washed away. The race, its participants and spectators all become a part of you somehow. The racers aren't multimillionaires whining about contract negotiations or a teammate's screwup. They're just regular guys and gals out to experience the thrill of a lifetime in a land that seems custom-made for racing. Anyone with a love for dirt and knobby tires must put this event on their to-do list. The Baja 1000 is off-road racing at its finest.*

For more on our Baja 1000 experience, log on to [www.atvrideronline.com](http://www.atvrideronline.com). Peruse personal travel logs, pictures and everything else about Mexico that couldn't fit into the magazine!