

OFF-ROAD RACING: THE BAJA 500

"Griffin!" shouted Chris, my friend, as a torrent of spray broke over our McKinsey River boat.

I laughed as I watched the six-foot-four curly headed giant shake water from his hair like a dog.

"What?" I said.

"Hang on!" our guide shouted, struggling to keep the boat from flipping over.

Thirty seconds later, we were out of the Salmon River canyon and back in the sun.



Navigating a rapid. South Fork of Salmon River (1972)

"What I started to say," he said, "was next year let's run the Baja 1,000."

The Baja 1,000 is the world's most dangerous off-road race. It starts in Ensenada, Mexico, and finishes in La Paz at the bottom of the Baja Peninsula.

"I thought we were running with the bulls in Pamplona?" I said.

"You guys are nuts!" hollered Chris's wife, who was in the trailing boat with my wife, Wendy.

"Okay," I said, pretending disappointment, "Baja next year, but Pamplona the year after."

I had met Chris Reynolds in the fall of 1969. His wife, also named Wendy, had grown up in Phoenix with my wife Wendy. They were spending a night with us in Tacoma, Washington, while on a trip from their Phoenix home to Canada. Chris and I talked until dawn. We found that we had many things in common, including Stanford University, although he had attended Stanford after I left.

Chris and I knew nothing about off-road racing. We agreed to meet in Las Vegas the following April in 1973 for the Mint 400, the first major off-road race of the year. We talked on the phone regularly over the next eight months and mailed off-road magazine articles to each other (the Internet was still someone's dream).

April finally arrived and Wendy and I flew to Las Vegas. We passed every conceivable off-road vehicle on our cab ride to the hotel: motorcycles, some with three wheels, others

with sidecars; dune buggies, Ford Broncos, Jeeps, full-sized and mini-pickups; and vehicles that I had no idea what they were. It was a kaleidoscope of freak cars.

Chris and his Wendy had already checked in and were waiting for us. After lunch, Chris and I went looking for someone to build us a car. We returned a few hours later without success, and found our wives excited about an invitation to the pre-race banquet by the Stroppe Team drivers.

Chris and I were speechless. Bill Stroppe was the premier builder of off-road racing vehicles and was under contract with Ford Motor Company to convert factory models for racing. Stroppe was famous for his winning Baja, Indy 500, and Pike's Peak cars, as well as Gold Cup unlimited hydroplanes.

"How, may I ask, did you pull that off?" I asked.

"How do you think?" Chris's Wendy smirked, winking at my Wendy.

They told us they'd been looking at race cars in the hotel parking lot (some of the drivers were staying at our hotel) when two men dressed in Stroppe uniforms slid out from under a pickup and asked if the girls would like to attend the pre-race banquet.

That was no mystery to me. Both of our Wendys were professional models. Chris and I knew instantly what had happened. The Stroppe drivers had popped out to see if the girls' upper halves looked as good as their lower halves. They did.

Our Wendys knew the banquet could give Chris and me an opportunity to meet off-road car builders, so they had accepted the invitation and asked if they could bring two friends. The drivers, thinking that would be four women at their table, were delighted.

At the banquet, Chris and I immediately recognized Bill Stroppe from his picture. He was nearly six-feet tall, solidly built, no fat, and had a full head of graying hair. His photo hadn't reflected the sparkle in his eyes. He would have looked like a typical athletic corporate executive if not for his hands, which were muscular and hardened from years of working with machinery.

Introductions turned out to be awkward. It took several rounds of beer, which Chris and I bought, before the drivers were able to appreciate our wives' chicanery. Eventually, the drivers began reliving their past glories—our Wendys were a whole new audience—and it gave Chris and me the opportunity to talk to Stroppe.

"Mr. Stroppe."

"Call me Bill."

"Bill, would you build Chris and me a car? We want to race the Baja 1000."

The table grew quiet. All conversation stopped. Bill looked at me, then at Chris, sizing us up. After what seemed like a minute, because I was holding my breath, he answered.

"I'll do it," he said. "I'll prepare a Courier. You can join our Baja team."

You could have heard a pin drop. The Ford Courier mini-pickup raced in category 10, the largest division. But there was no mistaking what Stroppe had said. His drivers, and later the entire race community, couldn't believe that Stroppe had added two rank novices to his team of Baja and Indy 500 champions. To this day, I don't know why he took us on. Possibly, he recognized in us those qualities he saw in his veteran drivers: a hard-core competitive spirit.

"Do you have any suggestions on a race school?" I asked.

Stroppe laughed. "There are no race schools. Run the Baja 500 with us in June and you'll be ready for the 1,000."

Chris and I slapped hands in a high-five.

We made several trips to Stroppe's plant in Long Beach, California over the following weeks. To reduce the Courier's weight, the side windows, dash board, interior fittings, and all nonessential items were discarded. Bucket seats with five-point harnesses and a roll bar with rubber-padding on the inside cab roof were installed to keep us from being thrown out and to protect our heads if the pickup flipped.



Jim at Stroppe plant in Long Beach, California where a 1973 Ford Courier pickup is being rebuilt.

All instruments except the tachometer, which indicates the number of revolutions-per-minute the engine is turning, were reconnected in front of the co-driver so the driver could concentrate on driving; until we could distinguish the engine speed from the sound of the transmission, we would have to rely on the tachometer to prevent the engine from overstressing.

A two-gallon water cooler with twin plastic tubes was bolted to the cab frame behind the bucket seats to supply drinking water. The axle, shocks, springs, and every nut and bolt were replaced with alloyed materials that could withstand the constant battering. A heavy-duty clutch, designed for maximum engine revolutions, was installed along with a quarter-inch steel-plate to protect the oil pan from punctures. The fuel tank was replaced with a 27-gallon reinforced tank with an enlarged intake for rapid fueling, similar to that used by Indy 500 cars.

The truck's engine was tuned to burn high-octane gasoline, which Stroppe would truck to Mexico and disburse at the mandatory race checkpoints. If not for the balloon tires, for extra traction and to absorb shock from airborne landings, our Courier looked like a factory model with its windows rolled down.

In late May, driving a Ford Bronco that Stroppe outfitted for us to learn the course, Chris and I pre-ran the Baja 500 with the Stroppe team, which included Indianapolis 500 drivers Parnelli Jones, Mickey Thompson, and Rick Mears. All three racers had won the Baja 500 and Baja 1,000.

Also on the team was seven-time Baja champion Walker Evans, who went on to win more off-road races than any other competitor; and motorcyclist Malcolm Smith. Smith, who was featured in the 1972 movie *On Any Sunday* and the 2005 movie *Dust to Glory*.



Jim checking out terrain and hair-pin turns during the pre-run.

The final members of the team were Frank Vessals, owner of the Los Alamitos horse track, his son Scoop, Ron Price, and Stroppe's friend, musician Ray Coniff, who was along for the ride. Vessals' horse, Time to Think Rich, had just won \$1 million at Ruidoso Downs in New Mexico, the largest purse at that time.

In the Ford Bronco, Chris and I followed the 612-mile course for three days and two nights over some of the world's toughest off-road terrain. With the Bronco's worn-out shocks, every hole in the road and every airborne bounce felt like a chair being pulled out from under us. Our backsides were bruised and sore for days, but the pre-run couldn't have been more fun—enhanced by tequila and Baja racing stories around a campfire.

On June 6, 1973, when I was thirty-six, the team met Stroppe's low-boy truck and trailer in Mexico at the Tijuana Bull Ring. We unloaded the cars and drove sixty miles south to Ensenada to a police-secured compound, safe from sabotage. The drive gave Chris and me an opportunity to get a feeling for the vehicle, which felt top-heavy like it wanted to flip over on the turns.



Chris Reynolds and Jim unloading Stroppe team cars at the Tijuana Bull Ring.

We spent the remainder of the day assembling items we might need during the twenty-four-hour race. A canister was taped to the roll bar, for race officials to insert tags at the mandatory checkpoints to verify that we had followed the prescribed course. We taped a shovel and flares to the roll bar; then packed a first-aid kit, sleeping bags, goggles,

emergency food, a compass, snake anti-venom, pillows (for me to sit on because the bucket seats were designed for Chris's large frame), and a bottle of Jack Daniels in case the Courier broke down.

The last item was a ten-foot antenna with a flag. The dust cloud created by 350 cars, pickups, motorcycles, and dune buggies racing across pulverized ash, dirt, and salt washed down from the Sierra San Pedro Mountains would make navigation across the Diablo Dry Lake bed virtually impossible without the visual reference of the antenna flags.

Stroppe stopped us as we left to join our wives at Chris's father's hunting club, La Grulla, near the town of Maneadero ten miles south of Ensenada, and gave us some last-minute advice. He told us to follow a teammate if possible until we got a feeling for the road, to keep an eye on the tachometer, to use the gears when descending the mountains to save the brakes, and not to stop on the way across Diablo Dry Lake because the car would sink into the sand. He also told us to make minimum driver changes, because it would take precious minutes for the new driver to bring the car's average speed back up. The latter was one rule Chris and I would ignore. We had agreed to change seats at every checkpoint.

"What about taking a pee?" I asked with a grin.

Stroppe laughed. "That's why you're wearing yellow racing suits."



Scott, Wendy, Sterling, Jim, Ashley and Whitney before start of race.



Jim, Wendy and Chris making last minute adjustments.

The race started early the following morning. With a vehicle leaving every sixty seconds, it took nearly six hours for the 350 entries to get underway. Chris and I were number 256 (our car number). When our turn came, the sun was high in the sky and the temperature was approaching 90 degrees.



Wendy, Jim and Chris.



Arriving at starting gate.

Ten minutes before the start, we zipped up our fireproof Nomex suits designed for NASA astronauts, put on our helmets, climbed into our bucket seats, and attached the restraining harnesses. Our Wendys ducked through our windowless doors and gave us final hugs and a lecture on safe driving, which we would ignore.

Chris was behind the wheel. He had won the coin toss to drive first. Perspiration was running down my back and chest before we even reached the top of the starting ramp.

"Are we crazy or what?" I said as the starter raised his flag.

The flag dropped.

"Hooo haaa!" Chris shouted and popped the clutch.

The Courier went airborne, and then bounced off the pavement.



Starting gate.



We're off.

Thousands of spectators had lined Ensenada's main boulevard, some blocking the road ahead. We were doing sixty miles an hour when we reached them.

"Chris, slow down!" I shouted. At the last moment, the crowd parted, providing an open corridor.

Christ! That was close, I thought, and we aren't even out of town.

The route took us past La Grulla where our Wendys, Chris's parents and their friends had set up a roadside picnic. As we accelerated by, they cheered wildly and raised high their Bloody Marys.

Near the town of Maneadero and still on the pavement, our teammate, Parnelli Jones, literally flew past us doing 150 miles-per-hour in his Olympia Beer Ford Bronco.

"Go get um, boys!" Bill Stroppe hollered to us from his co-driver seat.

We left the pavement a few miles south of Maneadero and turned west toward the Pacific Ocean into Santo Thomas Canyon, where some of the finest Mexican vineyards are located. I tried to keep Chris updated on directional changes and road conditions using our pre-run notes, but it was difficult for him to hear me. Without a muffler, the noise was deafening; none of the cars had mufflers because it reduced engine torque. With our modified 109.5 horsepower engine, we could turn 7,000 revolutions-per-minute and accelerate to 100 miles-per-hour on the straight-aways. Any hole or bump in the road sent us airborne.



Then on a hairpin turn, we flew off the road and upside down. Our windshield exploded on impact. The sound of metal grinding against rock was ear-piercing.

Our pickup finally stopped skidding and we were hanging upside down like monkeys in an inverted space capsule. Blood trickled down Chris's forehead and pooled onto the cab roof beneath us. He was still holding the steering wheel, though it was no longer attached to the steering column.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Yeah. How about you?" Then he added, "I hope the Jack Daniels didn't break."

His Jack Daniels comment started a gut-wrenching fit of laughter between us, which was drowned out by an engine gearing down and we were engulfed in a cloud of dust. Seconds later, our teammates, Walker Evans and Shelby Mongeon, had our doors open and were helping us unbuckle. I'll never forget their looks of total disbelief when Chris crawled out clutching the steering wheel.

"You guys okay?" they asked.

"Yes," we answered in unison.

A Toyota slowed, then accelerated as Walker waved off the driver.

We four rolled the Courier over. Stubs of wire protruded from holes in the cab's roof where our spotlights had been attached.

Walker sighed. "The Diablo Dry Lake will be a tough crossing tonight without spotlights."

"Any suggestions?" I asked.

"Yeah. Get on somebody's rear end and stay there," Walker chuckled.

Then he took the steering wheel from Chris. He inserted the wheel back into the steering-column sleeve and tightened the locking nut with a crescent wrench, which he

pulled from his racing suit. Shelby grabbed our shovel and knocked out the remaining glass shreds from the windshield. I threw my pillows on the driver's seat, jumped in, and hit the ignition switch, as Chris climbed into the co-driver seat. The engine sputtered, belched smoke, and turned over.

Walker and Shelby sprinted to their pickup, and Walker hollered back to us, "You've got another seventeen hours. Are you sure you want to go on?" They didn't think we had a snowball's chance in hell of finishing. Chris and I traded smiles.

"We'll see you at the finish!" we shouted.



Above the ocean (taken during pre-run).



On the beach (taken during pre-run).

Within seconds, our goggles were down and we were following a trail of dust. Fifteen miles later, before the town of La Bocana, we turned south onto a century-old wagon road that connected the coast settlements. We traveled along a bluff with magnificent views of ocean swells crashing into rock cliffs. Then we descended and drove parallel to a series of uninhabited gray sandy beaches. Then the race course turned inland and circled the villages, to keep the cars from endangering the residents and animals.

The first checkpoint and Stroppe pit was at Camalu, 124 miles south of Ensenada. I stopped momentarily, so the race official could insert the tag into our canister. Then I pulled into the Stroppe pit.

"You guys okay?" the pit boss asked. He grimaced at the Courier's dents and gouges. "Walker and Shelby said you flipped and, though they got you back on the road, they had doubts about you finishing. They asked me to alert Ensenada." There was a ham radio operator at every checkpoint.

"We're okay," I said.

I leapt out of the driver's seat with my pillows and ran around the pickup to the passenger side, and Chris got behind the wheel. We buckled up while the pit crew filled the gas tank, checked the water and oil levels, and the tires for air pressure. Chris and I locked eyes, thinking the same thing. We would complete this race even if we had to push the Courier over the finish line.

We were back on the road with slightly more than a minute's delay and headed inland across the Baja Peninsula. We had two mountain ranges to cross, Sierra de San Miguel and Sierra San Pedro, before we would reach the desert of San Felipe and the dreaded Diablo Dry Lake bed.



Typical terrain (taken during pre-run).

We had no problem staying on course. We followed the tire ruts. Chris carefully chose his passing lanes in the switchbacks. We seldom passed a big-engine vehicle, because they were much faster than us. Dune buggies pulled over when Chris honked—but not the mini-pickups; they were our competition. Fortunately, we never bumped another car, but we did get showered by rock and dirt flying out from under the tires of the vehicles we were trying to pass.

Descending the mountain took precision-timing to coordinate the gears with the brakes. Chris quickly learned when to back off the accelerator and when and how much to apply the brakes. Too little brake swung the Courier to the opposite side of the road where the drop-offs could be 100 feet. Too much brake put us into a skid and caused the same result as not enough brake.

Once back on the desert, Chris kept the gas pedal to the floorboard, and every bump sent us airborne. It reminded me of bouncing off waves in a hydroplane as a teenager. Chris passed cars on every straightaway. Whether they lacked our speed, or the drivers were being cautious, we didn't know or care.

Thirty minutes later, we reached the second checkpoint and we changed seats at the Stroppe pit.

"You're making good time," the mechanic said. "The latest report has car 256 (that was us) running in the top third of class 10."

I sped out of the pit in a cloud of dust. One hour later, we were in the San Pedro foothills, looking up at 10,000-foot Cerro Del Diablo. Then near the top of the first steep hill, our engine stalled. We'd had no problem making the top during the pre-run, but then we'd been driving Stroppe's four-wheel-drive Ford Bronco.

"Take a run at it," Chris said.

I coasted backwards to the bottom, made a wide turn, and was doing forty miles-an-hour in third gear when I hit the slope. Halfway up, I shifted to second gear; two-thirds of the way, at two-hundred feet from the summit, into first gear. Before I reached the top, I had to depress the clutch to keep the engine from stalling.

"How the hell are the two-wheelers doing it?" I shouted to Chris in exasperation.

His answer was drowned out by the screaming pitch of another engine accelerating from behind us. We looked around and couldn't believe our eyes. A dune-buggy was backing up the hill in reverse.

"My God!" I shouted. "Stroppe didn't tell us everything."

So, I coasted back down to the bottom of the hill, shifted into reverse, and backed the Courier up and over the rim. Chris and I did a high-five, then I spun the Courier around and tore after the dune buggy. We passed it minutes later.

We drove through ranch after ranch, each at a higher elevation. Race officials had arranged with the owners to leave their gates open. I don't remember ever seeing a cow, although on the pre-run there had been herds. The ranchers had obviously moved their stock to a safer environment. The ground was rocky and, as we climbed, the grass became sparser. Periodically, a lone Saguaro cactus stood out like a sentinel. We skirted Martir National Park and came out of the Sierra San Pedro foothills after dark, on the west edge of the Desert of San Felipe, where we now followed taillights, as well as, the dust.

Less than an hour later, lights from the checkpoint ahead lit up the moonless night. We passed through and changed seats at the pit, where we learned we were only minutes behind the leaders. However, we knew it would be difficult to hold our position with the Diablo Dry Lake coming up; most of the drivers were veterans.

There was no mistaking our entry onto the infamous dry lake bed. As the temperature was still in the eighties, it reminded me of walking barefoot off pavement into sand.

While there was still a base to the sand, we disregarded Stroppe's advice and gave a competitor—not class 10—a shove. But the further we progressed onto the dry lake, the deeper the Courier's balloon tires sank. Eventually, the surface became like a bottomless mud bog. If we stopped now, the race was over.

The dust grew thicker. We lost sight of the antenna flags on the cars ahead of us and only occasionally were able to see taillights. The vehicles that had crossed in day-light had had it much easier. Now everyone was driving in circles. It reminded me of trying to find my way out of a fog bank while flying my Cessna floatplane.

"Chris, over there!" I shouted. "It looks like a hill. Maybe we can get enough elevation to see over the dust."

Chris took a run at the hill, which was more like a big mound, then stopped with the Courier's back tires on the downward slope to make sure we could get going again. We weren't above the dust, but we were sufficiently high enough to see through it.

"My God!" I said, as we watched cars moving in every direction. "It looks like a tilted pinball machine."

I got out the compass and located north. Out beyond the swirling dust was a long string of lights that looked like a passenger train.

"Chris, look! Those cars got through."

He was accelerating off the hill before I even finished the sentence. We crossed in front of confused drivers, with me wildly waving hand-signals to Chris.

Ten minutes later, we took our place in line behind a Toyota mini-pickup. Nobody was trying to pass. However, when the ground grew firmer, we all left the lake bed in a drag race. It was like a horse race where the horses are lined up perpendicular to the track and, at the sound of the gun, race for the rail—in our case, race to be first back on the course.

The big engines surged ahead. Chris pulled behind the Toyota, which had slightly more horsepower than us. But when the Toyota driver braked on the first turn, Chris slipped ahead of him.

We climbed back into the Sierra San Pedro foothills onto a century-old cart path that meandered from San Felipe on the Sea of Cortes through the Valle de Trinidad. Before

the plateau town of Colonia Cordenas, we passed through the last checkpoint and changed seats at the pit. There was less than one hundred miles to go.

After we dropped out of the hills and were back on the straight-aways, I was able to keep the accelerator pressed to the floor, except when going around the villages. A few of the "unlimiteds" passed us on the last leg, but no one else. I can't recall being passed by a mini-pickup.

Spurts of smoke now shot out from the exhaust pipe whenever I shifted. The hard driving had taken its toll. The engine would have to be rebuilt before the Baja 1,000.

We'd been on the road nearly sixteen hours, and I was having trouble staying awake. My goggles prevented Chris from seeing when my eyes were closed, so he poked me before each turn and periodically squirted water down my neck. I sucked nonstop from my own water tube. This ritual went on until the predawn lights of Ensenada appeared on the horizon.

The road grew progressively better, and finally we were back on the macadamized pavement made of small stones mixed into tar. Like a marathon runner getting his second wind, I pushed the Courier's 1,800 cubic-inch engine to its maximum and passed a category 10-pickup on the final sprint.

Our Wendys were at the finish. We could see them fifty yards away, jumping and waving their arms like high-school cheer leaders. We crossed the line as the sunrise was peeking over the horizon.

I geared down—there was little break pad remaining—and pulled over and stopped behind the most recent finishers. Race officials immediately cut free the token canister from our paint-scraped roll bar as Chris and I gave each other a congratulatory hug.

"Griffin, we did it!" Chris hollered.

Our Wendys came running up and reached into the cab. As we lifted our goggles, they threw their arms around us. Then their faces were soot black, too, and we all laughed. The smell of urine was overpowering, but the Wendys said nothing.

It took some doing to get Chris and me extracted from our harnesses and out of the cab. Our knee and hip joints barely functioned. Chris and I walked off our cramps, then took the Courier to the secured impound area. Our Wendys followed in a van, then drove us to La Grulla.

After a quick breakfast, Chris and I went to our rooms to sleep. When I shed my clothes to shower, Wendy gasped. I turned to the mirror to see what had caused her reaction. Black-and-blue stripes crossed my shoulders and ran down my chest.

I slept until it was time to go to the awards banquet. When I struggled out of bed, I was coughing dust and blowing black mucus from my nose, and I felt like someone had beaten me with a baseball bat.

Chris and I and our Wendys joined our teammates for dinner. Parnelli Jones and Bill Stroppe won the "modified non-production four-wheel vehicles" category and Walker Evans and Shelby Mongeon won the "two-wheel-drive utility vehicles" category. The Stroppe table grew quiet when it came time to announce the results of category 10. Then the announcer said, "In third place, car 256, driven by Jim Griffin and Chris Reynolds."

The table erupted in applause. Bill Stroppe threw an arm around each of us and told us he'd never heard of a higher novice finish.

First place went to veteran racer Jim Conner, owner of Conner Racing Enterprises. He'd driven a four-wheel-drive Datsun pickup, which had a distinct advantage over our Courier on the hills and hairpin turns.

Five months later, in October 1973, a story and picture appeared in Off Road Magazine under the heading, "Here's Bill Stroppe's version of Ford's better idea from the East—a potent Courier pickup for off-road racing."

The lead paragraph stated, "Category 10, which has become the fastest growing segment of off-road racing, is reserved for the small sized but mighty mini-trucks. This Stroppe-prepared Courier, owned and driven by Chris Reynolds and Jim Griffin, made its debut in the recent Baja 500 and finished third in this highly contested class. It was the highest finishing Courier and, as such, bears some looking into."

POSTSCRIPT

In July, a month after finishing the Baja 500, Chris and I raced the Baja 1,000 with the Stroppe team. Sadly, our Courier's engine burned up one hundred miles from the La Paz finish near the southern tip of the Baja Peninsula.

That year, for the first time, Mexico required all race participants to use Mexican Pemex gasoline. Unfortunately, the fuel didn't have the octane level required by a finely tuned engine, so more than a third of the competition was unable to finish the race.

At the moment of our breakdown, Chris and I were running in first place in Category 10. Our one compensation was that we had remembered to pack the bottle of Jack Daniels Tennessee sour-mash whiskey.