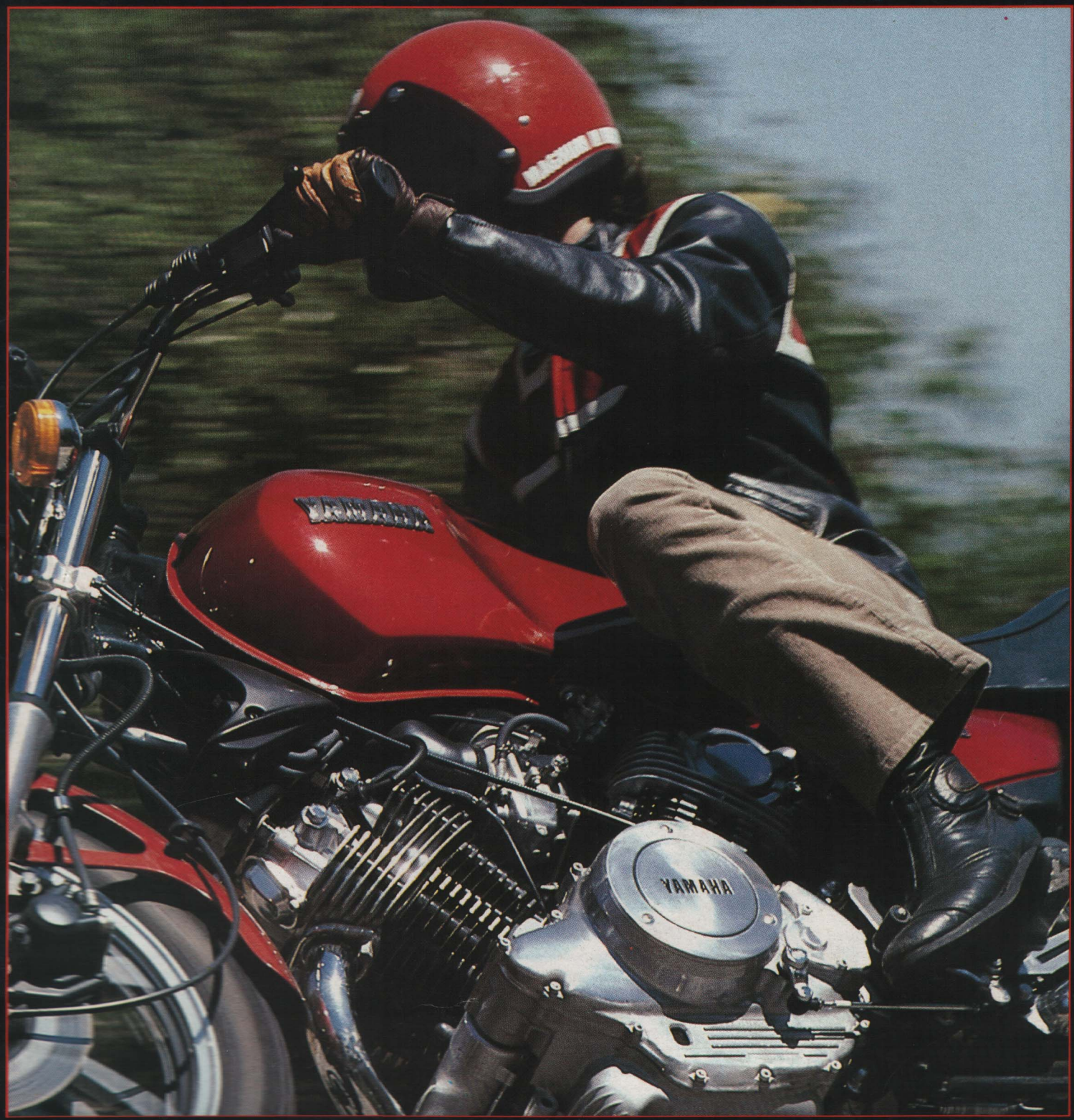
CIRCUIT

OCTOBER 1981 50p



DOUBLE TEST: YAMAHA TR1, THE SUPREME GRAND TOURER

LEAD FEATURE: BAJA! WORLD'S TOUGHEST

LEAD FEATURE

THE BAJA 1000 — IT'S THE

One thousand miles, 100-degree temperatures, barren desert, boulder-strewn mountainsides, oncoming traffic on two-rut dirt roads, wandering cattle, rattlesnakes and marijuana farmers! All part of the unique hazards that off-road riders in Baja have to contend with while averaging 60mph for the entire race!

The infamous San Andreas fault runs the length of the state of California and many people predict that a massive earthquake along its course will one day deposit a huge chunk of America into the Pacific Ocean. There's already a precedent for this "doomwatch" thinking. Many thousands of years ago, action along the faultline separated a long sliver of land from the southwest corner of the North American continent.

That 1,000-mile sliver is now the Mexican state of Baja California, which shares a common 120-mile border with its American namesake at its northern edge. The peninsula is bounded on the western side by the Pacific Ocean and on the east by the Gulf of California, the vast sea created by the monstrous earthquake which split Baja from what is now the Mexican mainland.

The long, narrow peninsula averages about 60 miles in width for its entire length, and its terrain encompasses everything from 9,000-foot mountains to below-sea level deserts where even the rattlesnakes find it hard to survive.

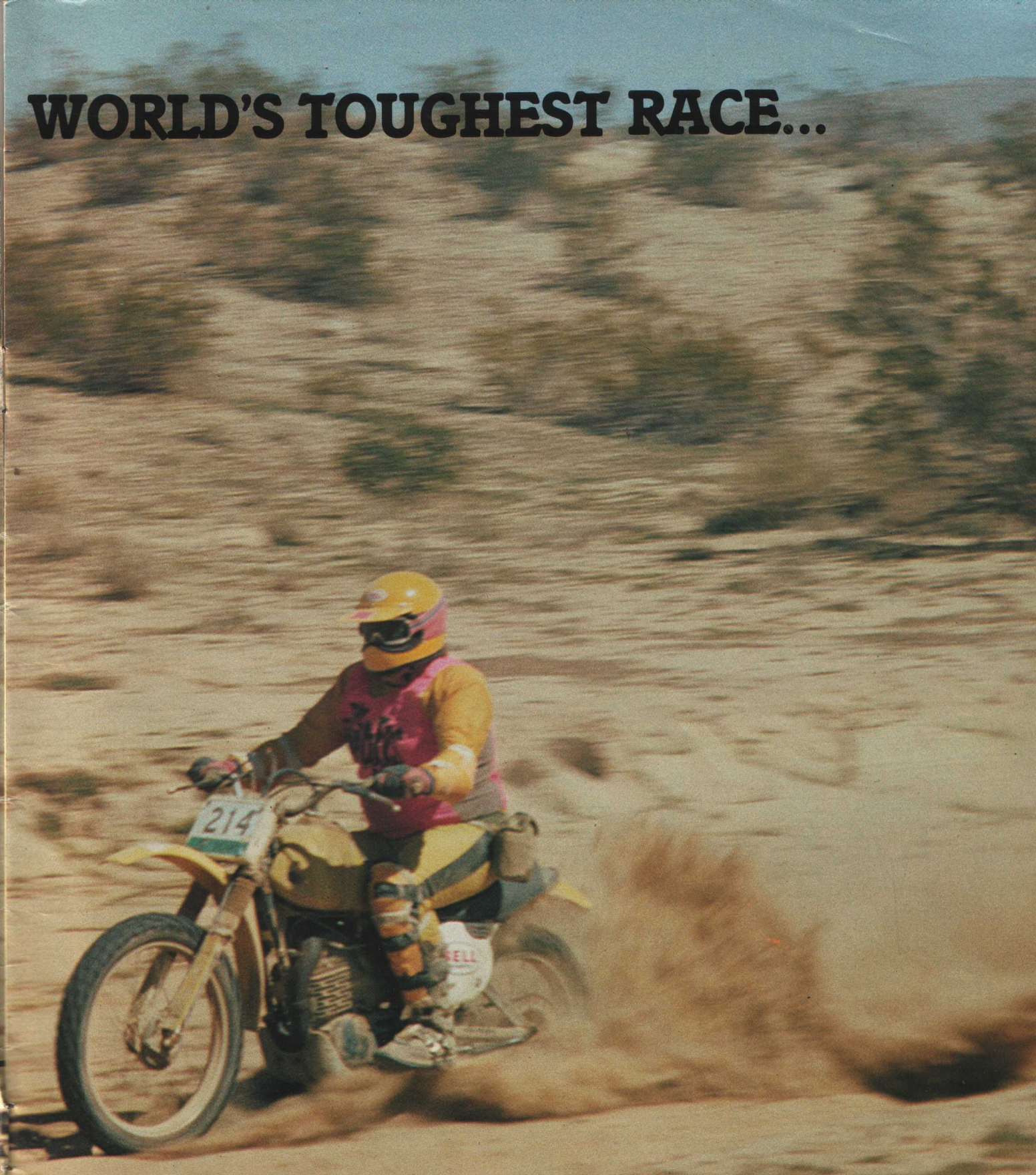
Temperatures can change dramatically. Within 50 miles you can drop down from the high mountains to the desert floor and experience a 70-degree rise in the heat level!

Apart from relatively small pockets of civilisation, Baja is for the most part still the same foreboding wilderness that it was in prehistoric times.

To off-road riders, it represents the supreme challenge, so it is hardly surprising that Baja is now the mecca of long-distance off-road racers from all over the world.

To cope with all of the hazards of Baja and even complete a race there is to earn the admiration of your peers. To win a Baja race is to be put on a pedestal head and shoulders above mere motorcycling mortals!

WORLD'S TOUGHEST RACE...



As well as the inhospitable terrain, the weather on the peninsula can go from one extreme to the other. Temperatures on the desert floor that rise to over 120 degrees in summer can drop to near-freezing point when violent winter storms whip in from the Pacific.

The Mexican version of the hurricane —the "chubasco"—can be so violent that it completely obliterates huge sections of the single paved road which runs the length of the peninsula from Tijuana on the northern border to Cabo San Lucas at the tip.

In fact, the first organized "speed contest" in Baja took place between five jeeps in September, 1967. It is one of the few races in history with no finishers. The field ran into a chubasco and none of them reached the halfway point!

During the 1960s, the road from Tijuana to the flourishing seaport of La Paz (almost at the tip) was mainly dirt . . . with less than 100 miles of asphalt. Today, the paved road runs all the way, apart from post-chubasco diversions, and this is opening it up to tourists and trade in general. What this means to Baja racers is a whole new set of hazards —oncoming traffic on a road that is too long and too remote to be properly policed.

The legendary Baja 1000 is the most famous of a dozen or so races and enduros that are held on the peninsula each year. It grew out of a fascination for a series of early and unofficial "speed records" between Tijuana and La Paz in the early '60s.

The first of these "records" was set by American desert racer and ISDT Gold Medal winner Dave Ekins. On a 250cc

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Honda twin in 1962, Dave made the 985-mile trip in 39 hours and 56 minutes.

Sibling rivalry then set in and Dave's big brother, Bud, made an attempt the following year with another U.S. desert star and top flat-track racer, Eddie Mulder. Bud was no mean rider. He won ISDT Gold Medals, was a desert racing star in his own right and was also the first American to score World Championship motocross points. In the mid-'50s he took a 500cc Triumph twin to a top six placing in the British GP at Hawkstone Park! Not only that, Bud was the guy who did the famous stunt riding for Steve McQueen in "The Great Escape."

Using 650cc Triumph twins, Bud and Eddie did beat Dave's time. But only by eight minutes!

The step from these record runs to an actual race was but a short one and, at midnight on October 31, 1967, the first Baja 1000 was flagged away from Tijuana. Off-road racing enthusiast Ed Pearlman had formed NORRA (National Off-Road Racing Association) to organize the race. He had set up five gas stops along the 1,000-mile route and, apart from hitting those and a mandatory stop at Ensenada 60 miles from the start, the competitors could use whatever route they pleased between Tijuana and La Paz.

Sixty-eight teams started, split about evenly between cars and bikes. Overall winners were Vic Wilson and Ted Mangles in a Volkswagen-powered dune buggy. Close behind were desert racers, J.N. Roberts and Malcolm Smith, on a 360cc Husqvarna. Smith did the daytime running and had built up a huge lead by the halfway check at El Arco. Then night fell while Roberts was in the saddle. He got lost and forfeited the lead before locating the right road again.

Few areas are darker than the middle of Baja on a starless night. The course covers large tracts of pure desert and, even with the twin quartz lamps that today's bikes use, getting lost is easy. Last year's Baja race crossed the powdery surface of Diablo dry lake and many competitors milled around on it for hours before getting back on course. Observers flying above the lake in clear moonlight said that a dustcloud of several square miles was kicked up by the competitors and covered the lake bed to a height of about six feet. In the darkness and dust fog, the riders had to struggle to see even a bike's length ahead!

The second year of the Baja 1000 did see a motorcycle take the overall win. Larry Bergqvist and Gary Preston took 20 hours and 38 minutes to run the length of the peninsula on a Honda 350 twin prepared by Bill Bell, father of U.S. Yamaha motocross star Mike Bell. Bill is still the supreme king of Baja racebike preparation, being the guy who supervises Yamaha's long distance off-road effort that has conquered all major Baja events in the past two years.

It was in 1970 that Yamaha burst onto the Baja scene when Mike Patrick and Phil Bowers took a DT Yamaha 360 to the overall motorcycle win in a scorching 18 hours and 31 minutes . . . over two hours ahead of the old record!

By this time, European riders had been taking an interest in Baja, particularly the Swedes from the Husqvarna factory. Former motocross rider Gunnar Nilsson had won the 500cc class with J.N. Roberts in 1969 and he repeated this effort with Malcolm Smith in 1971.

A year later, Nilsson again wore the winner's laurels, this time sharing the honours with his compatriot, Rolf Tibblin . . . the former 250 and 500cc World Motocross Champion.

A year later saw the last complete run down the peninsula for six years with the race again being won by the Husqvarna of Mitch Mayes and A.C. Bakken. Poor Mayes was later tragically paralyzed in a desert racing crash.

By 1974, Baja racing had become big business and the local Mexican state government of the region decided to "relieve NORRA of the burden of running the events"! (By this time there was a 500-mile event as well as the 1000.)

However, the 1974 500-miler was a complete organisational disaster and the 1974 Baja 1000 never even took place.

Ed Pearlman had had enough of the politics and remained out of the picture, so instead of NORRA for 1975, came SCORE (Southern California Off-Road Enthusiasts) . . . a group headed by Mickey Thompson, a flamboyant entrepreneur, ex-drag racer, Land Speed Record aspirant, off-road racer and Indy-car entrant.

The Mexican government has been content to leave things in the capable hands of this group ever since.

Unfortunately, politics still play a great part in the running of the event. Baja California is divided into two states, north and south, and the politicians of Baja California Norte see definite advantages in having the race start and finish in Ensenada, capital of their state. This means that all of the money spent by the racers, their crews, their sponsors and the spectators stays in the northern state rather than being split with the more thinly-populated southern region. Keeping the race in the north also makes it an easier event to stage in terms of sheer logistics.

Now two races are run which go from the Pacific Coast, to the Gulf, and back

Team Yamaha rider, Larry Roeseler, leading the Baja 1000

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again. The Baja Internacionale is a 400-mile event in the heat of summer, while the longer, tougher 1000 describes a bigger coast-to-coast loop in November each year. Over 80 percent of each course is away from any paved roads.

This format has taken away some of the glamour of the old point-to-point race but don't be misled. It still covers some of the most barren wilderness in the world and each year search parties have to rescue "weekend riders" who get lost in the area of the race course, and on occasions even the expert search crews are too late to save unfortunate and usually unprepared riders from death by heat exhaustion and dehydration.

Even the conditioned riders who race in Baja run this risk, as was tragically illustrated in 1978 when a rider died of heat prostration in the 126-degree desert temperatures.

The romance of the "point to point" run from Ensenada in the north to La Paz in the south is not lost forever. Where the Baja 1000 is run depends to a great deal on which politicians can lobby most strongly in Mexico City. In 1979, for example, the race went "all the way" and could well do so again . . . especially with the new highway bringing more populace and more trade and tourist dollars to the southern province.

Wherever the race goes, the stories of "happenings" during its length are incredible. Like the rider who crashed and found himself face to face with a very surprised and very annoyed rattlesnake on landing! Or the rider who centre-punched a wandering cow while doing over 70mph on the asphalt road in the darkness . . . the bike was totally written-off but both rider and cow were unhurt!

Or, best of all, the rider who took a wrong turn off of the course and found himself in a marijuana plantation, complete with dirt airstrip out in the middle of nowhere. He pulled to a halt to ponder his whereabouts and a pickup truck full of menacing-looking Mexicans screeched to a halt alongside him. The occupants of the truck told him to "vamos" in terms that easily transcended the language barrier and hastened him on his way with a shotgun blast over his head!

What type of riders are prepared to accept these and the other hazards of Baja, as well as the normal risks of racing? Though many of them are adept at other forms of motorcycle sport, such as motocross, most come from the ranks of the California desert racers. They are as specialised in their skills as the plants which have adapted themselves to live in this barren land of extremes.

Team Yamaha rider Larry Roeseler is the undisputed "King of Baja" these days, and he describes what it takes to go fast in the desert.

Says Larry, "It takes a lot of time to develop the right combination and attitude to go fast down there. Particularly as we are going much faster than we

Larry Roeseler tucks in at over 100mph down a Baja dirt road!

used to. I remember in my early desert days, when I finally started to get going pretty quickly. Even then, flat out in fourth gear was about as fast as I dared go. I could only "see" about 40 feet in front of me. Then I began using my vision like radar, constantly scanning further and further ahead, as well as remaining completely aware of the terrain ten or twenty feet ahead of my front wheel. It's a kind of 'sixth sense' which only comes after a whole lot of riding out there. Nowadays, I'm comfortable running wide-open in fifth gear across terrain that I've never seen before."

(Editor's note: On Roeseler's latest YZ465 Yamaha with high Baja gearing, that's about 115mph!)

The secret, says Larry, is to maintain a level of concentration that allows you to ride right up on the narrow edge between the aggression needed to go fast and the caution necessary to finish such a long race.

A rider has to maintain a high level of concentration for four to five hours at a time. Slacking off and just riding to finish as fast as you can is no good . . . even if you are the best. There are half a dozen super-teams in Baja racing and if all of them complete a race without any troubles, there is often less than two minutes' margin after hundreds of miles! For this reason, even fast pit stops are a "must." There were 15 gas stops in the last Baja 1000; taking 30 seconds too long at each of those could lose a rider the race.

In 1980, Roeseler teamed with Jack Johnson to win the Baja 1000 for the third year in succession. It was the fourth time in five years that he had won, and he was leading the 1977 event when he had a head-on collision with a Volkswagen mini-bus heading the wrong way on the course. They met on a blind rise on a narrow, two-rut dirt road and nothing was more inevitable than the ensuing collision! Luckily, Larry was thrown clear and not seriously injured.

Larry also won the shorter but equally-tough Baja Internacionale four times. He first won it on a 250cc Harley Davidson (only time a 250 has won a Baja race outright) with Bruce Ogilvie in 1975, won again for Husqvarna in 1976 and 1977, and then teamed with Ogilvie once more to win for Yamaha this year.

They averaged over 60 miles per hour for the 400 miles, including ten pit stops, and were so far ahead of the expected schedule that they crossed the finish line before officials had erected the finishing banner!

To put Roeseler and his teammates' ability into true perspective, one only has to go further down the results list in the 1980 Baja 1000.

The winning time of Roeseler and Johnson was 19 minutes ahead of the second-place finishers and four and a half hours in front of the leading European riders, French Yamaha pilots Yvan Cadoret and Michel Merel, who were seventh in their class.

Over SEVEN hours behind was the 900cc ISDT BMW twin of German factory enduro riders Herbert Scheck and Tom Sachenbacker . . . a deficit that Scheck found hard to believe.

The point is that any well-prepared, competent off-road rider can finish a Baja 1000 . . . but it takes a true specialist to win.

At the speeds of today's races, pre-running the course at least two or three times before the event is an absolute necessity. Then the rider must try and file away the danger spots in his mind.

Pre-running has its own particular hazards as it is easier to stray from the course when the raceday markings are not in position.

Frenchman Patrick Drobecq found this out to his cost during a pre-run of the 1980 Baja 1000. He took a wrong turn and, in fading light, rode straight into a barbed wire fence that had been strung across the desert to contain some local peasant's cattle. One strand of wire caught him under the helmet and ripped open his throat. Luckily, he was able to make it into San Felipe, some 50 miles distant, where—with Drobecq on the point of collapse—doctors closed the wound with 15 stitches!

Meticulous preparation and rapport between rider and tuner is highly important to anyone wishing to win Baja races. Especially in these days when 12 inches of suspension travel allows riders to go so quickly over the roughest terrain. That benefit can quickly evaporate if the suspension is not correctly set, however, and the amount of travel can become a distinct disadvantage.

Team Yamaha's Baja crew chief, Bill Bell, is a long-time desert enthusiast and a fast rider himself. He knows what is needed and is able to build bikes to cope with the toughest extremes of terrain and weather. Since he moved to Team Yamaha in 1980, the team has dominated off-road racing, winning all of the SCORE events (in the California and Ari-

zona deserts as well as Baja) and taking Manufacturer of the Year honours.

Bell chooses experienced U.S. desert racers for the Yamaha squad because they are used to the high cross-country speeds and to the need to be easy on their equipment.

"Nothing breaks a bike quicker than an insensitive rider in Baja-type conditions," says Bill.

During his last year with Honda, Bell headed a well-funded assault on the 1000 and the riders were doing well until, one by one, all of the Hondas broke the same part . . . the sender unit of the transistor ignition.

"It was the heat that caused it," said Bill, "but it took the particular conditions of Baja to point out the fault. Nowhere else do you run a bike that fast, that long, and in that kind of heat."

The logistics of setting up pits for a Baja event are also incredible. In the 1980 Baja 1000, Bill had to organise 16 separate pits, which each took care of four or five Yamaha riders. There was a quick-fill gas can for each rider at each stop, plus 18 spare front wheels and 24 spare rear wheels for the 250cc and 465cc bikes, as well as half a dozen front and rear spares for the 125cc class entries!

Evidence of the thought and planning in preparing a Baja bike can be gained from the fact that Roeseler's 1981 Baja Internacionale winner had a special set of wheels which were slotted in for the tarmac sections that started and finished the race. These wheels were fitted with treaded 'wet-weather' road race tyres and Roeseler reckons that they allowed him to build up a five-minute lead over the competition on the road stages!

Finally, one of the biggest hazards of Baja are the spectators, the villagers and other road users. Luckily, most have learned to keep well out of the way when the racers come through, and incidents involving pedestrians are thankfully very rare.

Riders, however, still throttle back a little when they see groups of children by the roadside, and not just because they don't want to run the chicos down. Usually a group of children, especially with expectant looks on their faces, means that the kids have prepared a "surprise" for the rider. More often than not, a small ditch or a pile of rocks and sand which they hope will launch bike and rider (not necessarily as a single unit) into near-orbit!

Baja racing is tough and demanding and penalties for mistakes are severe. And while civilisation is gradually coming to the region, it still remains one of the most challenging areas in the world in which to race a motorcycle.

LARRY ROESELER — KING OF BAJA

Acknowledged as the fastest American off-road racer is Team Yamaha's Larry Roeseler, a young man with a wealth of racing experience.

Now 24, Roeseler began riding at the age of 5, straddling a minibike powered by a Briggs & Stratton lawnmower engine. Larry's father, Earl, was an enthusiastic racer who had even competed with Larry's grandfather in sidecar ice racing in the state of Minnesota.

Two years after Larry started riding, he began competing in observed trials events and that was where he earned his first trophy, still riding the Briggs & Stratton.

After racing some other types of events, Larry and his father turned to enduros in the Southern California desert. "We competed as a father and son team so that he could keep an eye on me," recalled Larry. In 1969 they finished the grueling two-day, 500-mile Greenhorn Enduro. They finished the '70 'Horn as well, and 13-year-old Larry's score was par with such American enduro legends as John Penton.

In the early '70s, Roeseler started competing in the notoriously tough 100cc Trailbike class of AMA District 37, where his seasonal finishing position went from 189 to 20 to 4 by 1972. He finished second the following year, then won the Trailbike championship the next two years in a row.

Roeseler switched to the 250 class in D-37 in 1975 and responded to the new challenge by winning the number one plate.

Although Larry had ridden in major off-road races before, including several with his father, 1975 was the start of something bigger. He teamed with Bruce Ogilvie to win the Baja 500, and then placed second in the Baja 1000 riding with Howard Utsey. Roeseler's career neared high gear the following year as Larry posted wins in the Parker 400, Las Vegas 400, Baja 500 and Baja 1000—at the ripe old age of 19.

Nineteen seventy-seven saw repeat wins in the Parker, Las Vegas and Baja 500 events. Larry was leading the Baja 1000 when a Volkswagen van, going the wrong way on the course, struck his bike and forced him off the course and out of the race.

That was the last time Roeseler DIDN'T win the Baja 1000 which he's won the last three years. In 1979 the course ran a tough 985 miles from one tip of the Baja peninsula to the other, and Roeseler and partner Jack Johnson covered the distance in less than 20 hours to win the race by over an hour!

Roeseler hasn't limited himself to the deserts of the Southwest. In 1978 he qualified for and rode the prestigious International Six Day Trials, often referred to as the Olympics of motorcycling, and won a Gold Medal on Swedish soil. When the event was held the following year in West Germany, Roeseler returned for another Gold Medal and turned in the best score of any American rider. Perhaps the most dramatic moment of the event for American spectators occurred during the final motocross heat of the final day, when Larry caught two European superstars of the sport, passed them and won going away. Most of the 10,000 spectators lining the circuit, including the 100 or so U.S. spectators, simply went crazy with enthusiasm at Roeseler's speed.

Roeseler's most recent ISDT appearance was the 1980 event in France where he took an IT465 prototype to another Gold Medal, sixth in the 500 class, and again topped all American scorers.

Larry Roeseler in a different environment. Winning a Gold Medal at the 1980 ISDT in Brioude, France.