GOING THE EXTRA MILE

BY STEPHEN ROMERO

t a race like the SCORE Baja 1000, it's a big deal for someone in Class 11 to simply finish within the allotted time of 33 hours. It's a challenge few will ever attempt as this class is also one of the most physically challenging. At the 48th Bud Light SCORE Baja 1000, a group of Class 11 racers knew by midway through the

course, that they would not finish within the allotted time. Yet, they continued on knowing that the fanfare of cheers and waving flags wouldn't be waiting for them at the end. As they described the journey through this experience, this determined group of racers, continued on the course to finish the 48th Bud Light SCORE Baja 1000 to prove to themselves that they could do it.

A GROUP
OF CLASS 11
TEAMS WERE
DETERMINED TO
UNOFFICIALLY
FINISH THE 48TH
BUD LIGHT SCORE
BAJA 1000





No one exemplifies this determination like Eric Solorzano. He's a fan favorite for Class 11 racers and is considered one of the elites in this class, who has won the legendary race in these stock VW Bugs.

Touted as the unofficial godfather of Class 11, Solorzano is a man that knows how to win the toughest desert race in the world in a car that's almost older than the race itself. He was one of the competitors at this year's SCORE Baja 1000 and participated in telling the story of how the people in this class have the will and determination to keep on going.

The first question that comes to mind is why a group of racers wants to take on the Baja 1000 in a classic VW? The attraction of Class 11 is that it is a throwback to the earliest days of Baja racing. Ask any of these racers, and they'll tell you it's for those individuals who love the traditional aspect to the sport, and the challenges that come along with it.

Like Solorzano, these are racers who embrace a code of ethics so endearing in today's competitive world of "win or go home trying" attitudes that they also gain lots of support and camaraderie for their grit and determination.

ON THE PODIUM

By the time Class 11 teams idled up to the starting grid at the 48th Bud Light SCORE Baja 1000 in Ensenada, Mexico, the fastest classes were already racing, carving up the course

and making the ruts bigger and the silt even deeper.

As the crowds looked on, Class 11 vehicles were launched one by one into the dusty void of the Baja Peninsula, tempting fate. This year's race took teams from Ensenada to the coast along Santa Rosalita and back again. In all, a total of 821.38-miles. To officially finish the race required averaging 25 miles-per-hour across a brutal desert that has already been torn up and abused by the other classes in front of them.

The Class 11 teams of Dennis Hollenbeck in the number 1121 Real Life Ministries car, Rene Rodriquez-Cops of the number 1101 car, Eric Solorzano in the 1111 car, Paul Nauleau in the number 1116 California Baja California Friendship Society,



RACING THE BAJA 1000. Brian Wallentine in the number 1113 Wallentine Motorsports car. David Bolles in the number 1129 car, and Jim Graham in the number 1107 Desert Dingo Racing vehicle, shot off the

podium with a vengeance.

finish the race.

Seven teams all with a goal to

OLD, AND WITH THE

HELP OF HIS PARENTS HE

FULFILLED A DREAM OF

Graham made the best of his position as the first to leave. In the first hours of the race, Class 11 teams were doing everything right by setting an awesome pace for themselves. Solorzano and Rodriguez-Cops were the early favorites, as both men had finished the SCORE Baja 1000 in previous years with official SCORE times.

Meanwhile, Hollenbeck in number 1121 VW emblazoned handprints from Real Life Ministries in Mexico chased down Nauleau, a 19-year-old college student who speaks three languages, and knows the Mexican desert as good as any native could. For a while, Class 11 played cat and mouse at speed until the course began to make them drop out one by one.

Graham and his team led early on with founder and driver Jim Graham, along with Romy Frederick and Jennifer Freerick who had to pull over near mile marker 30 due to fuel mixture problems. Graham said that he likely spent more time in Mexico prepping than learning the course. But that's racing. "As I say, if you can't be good, be quick," said Graham. The team ended up with the fuel mixture and wanted to run about 100 octane. Instead, they were mixing 111 and 92 octane together which according to Graham, ended up only putting 92 octane in the car off the start line. The result was that

pinging and overheating.

Thinking ahead, Graham and his team brought octane booster to raise the octane level, but apparently it's pretty caustic and it dissolved the foam in their fuel cell, turning it to the consistency of mush. The team couldn't get the fuel lines, filters, pumps and carburetors clean enough to get the car running smoothly and eventually called it around 11 p.m. and towed the car out. "I never wanted to pack it up because that's admitting failure," said Graham. "The SCORE Baja 1000 is designed to break your spirit. You have to overcome that. We only called it when we knew we had no chance of making it across the finish line."

Although he called it way earlier than he ever imagined, Desert Dingo Racing is no stranger to adversity and plans to rebound from it. Graham said he will continue to chase his dreams, which started after watching Dana Brown's documentary, Dust to Glory. "



DAVID BOLLES AT THE START OF
THE RACE SIGNING AUTOGRAPHS
FOR THE YOUNG KIDS.

HOLLENBECK IS A BIG SUPPORTER
OF CHILDREN PROGRAMS AND
EDUCATION IN ENSENADA. THEY
TOOK ONE LAST RIDE BEFORE THE
START OF THE RACE





BAJA 1000.

I decided to start a Class 11 team in 2007 after watching Brown's documentary about Baja," Graham said. "I was thinking, how expensive could it be to race a VW Beetle?" The answer soon became obvious. "You learn to lie to yourself about how much it costs to race off-road."

SIX TO GO

The day wore on when David Bolles' luck finally ran out. After cresting a hill at mile marker 56,

his car hit something hard. "I landed on a super sharp rock at the top of a hill, and it punched a hole in the cylinder and the fluid was pouring out," Bolles said.

But instead of quitting as he stood looking at the damage, Bolles nursed the VW back to the highway, until the engine finally seized. "Our goal was to make it to the coast. We knew the first 70 miles would be difficult. But one little rock ruined our day. Up until then, it was the greatest day ever," said Bolles.

Although dejected, Bolles' team of friends from the past 35

years took it all in stride. Drivers Ron Thomas, Jeff Sherrill, Paul Eddy and navigators Kenny VerKuilen and Chris Schaaf gave it their all, but Baja won that day.

NIGHT FALLS ON CLASS 11 RACERS

Night had finally fallen in Mexico and by then, Solorzano, Hollenbeck, Nauleau, Wallentine, and Rodriquez-Cops were racing against time. Solorzano had taken a huge lead on the remaining field of drivers in the class. While charging to gain position, Hollenbeck's car broke a timing



WHIPS THEIR VW INTO A
CORNER. BAJA DESIGNS,
GLS SPRAY, BILSTEIN,
KW MACHINE WORKS,
PCI RACE RADIOS
AND MAXTRAX ARE A
FEW OF THE PROUD
SUPPORTERS OF THE
DENNIS HOLLENBECK'S
EFFORTS.

belt pulley, and they missed a checkpoint while trying to fix it and get back on the race course.

Further up the road, Rodriquez-Cops nearly flipped his car backward on a steep hill that everyone struggled to climb. From his vantage point after getting his car back on the course, Hollenbeck got a view of what transpired the rest of the way. "Solorzano was way out in front. I passed Nauleau at some point. Then he passed me and this continued all the way to mile marker 350," said Hollenbeck. "Near race marker 333 the team of Rodriquez-Cops called themselves out. It looked like a catastrophic front end failure."

With Rodriquez-Cops out of the race, Solorzano held the lead going into Laguna Chapala. Team Nauleau/CBCFS, was in second, followed by Hollenbeck/RLM de Mexico and Wallentine Motorsport's team. "I remember being with Solorzano at mile marker 390 near the deep silt, where he had stopped

dead in his tracks," said Nauleau, who took over the lead. "We had a good battle going on. But Solorzano eventually got in trouble when he tried to get through the silt with a damaged suspension." That took Solorzano officially out of the race, and the field was dwindling due to the deep ruts that were chewing up everyone that was left in Class 11. At this point, there were only three teams remaining in the race.

INTO THE BLACKNESS

The darkness blanketed the course, and what remained of the Class 11 racers where were Neauleau/CBCFS, Brian Wallentine/Wallentine Motorsports, and Hollenbeck's RLM de Mexico crew. These cars were flying faster than ever as the hours ticked



away. According to the team members, the pit stops had happened without any serious incidents and driver and codriver swaps went as planned, as each team had ample support. But the SCORE Baja 1000 had taken a toll on these racers and they had all missed several official checkpoints.

THE COURSE.

SUPPORT CREWS

The support crews for these teams make all the difference in a long race like the SCORE Baja 1000. Hollenbeck's team of drivers and co-drivers included Dave Forrest, Kevin Schlecht and Canadians Kailen Hill and Paul Hartl, along with Armando Salazar and Roberto Tapiz from Ensenada. "My strategy was to rotate the teams together as driver and co-driver," said Hollenbeck. The RLM de Mexico team also had lots of support from Pastor Sergio Lopez, Cherokee Chase

Communications of Ensenada, Andrew Penner, Tundra Chase, Mooch Racing of Canada, Logan Guthrie of Logan's Run Chase Truck from Murrieta, California. The chase crew was captained by Hollenbeck's wife Debbie and assisted by daughter Natalie, who just turned 16 years-old. Mario Sandez, Pam Schlecht, John and Christopher Vandenhaak pitched in where they could as Hollenbeck's second chase crew.

For Neauleau's Team CBCFS, these were also an energized crew of friends and family, all eager to get the job done. It included drivers Nate Tennis, Ryan Crook and co-drivers David O'Neill and Alejandro Arballo Rosas. Nauleau's father Jean-Luc served as the team's chase crew with Roger Crook and Sandy Schwab. Together they were known as the "Frenchies".

With such large teams and help, what was left of the Class 11 field had successfully finished the first half of the race. However, things never go as planned and turned into more disappointment soon afterward. According to Nauleau, his chase crew was on the way to a checkpoint when a rear wheel snapped off their support truck. As they desperately tried to fix it off the main highway, a drunk driver slammed into the back of their other chase vehicle that had shown up to assist them.

To add injury to insult, someone ran away with the team's spare fuel can, and when they chased him down, the crew got splashed in fuel as the person ran away into the darkness. When the Mexican Federal Police arrived there was a lot of confusion. They nearly arrested Nauleau and his crew if not for the intervention of teammate Alejandro Arballo Rosas. "My Spanish is ok, but not as great as Alejandro's," Nauleau said. "It could have ended much worse. We could have been crushed by the drunk driver, and on fire or in jail," he added. "In the end, all we lost was time, some fuel and a decent chase truck."



In the meantime, the Wallentine Motorsports crew had come together in Mexico and in the first hours everything looked good. They were on schedule. Brian Wallentine shared driving duties with Off-Road Motorsports Hall Of Fame Inductee Jerry Penhall and King Of The Hammer's racer Jason Shear. Teammates JT Taylor and Greg Cotrell also shared driving and co-driving duties. Others in this large team included Doug Nagy, Doug Jackson, Phil and Brian Etnyre, Blade Gillissen, Adam Espley, Cari Penhall, David Demoise and Nathan Retchless.

HALF WAY TO HISTORY

Near the half-way mark at the 48th Bud Light SCORE Baja

1000, the three remaining Class 11 teams continued to race at a steady pace. "There was never a moment where we were going to quit," said Wallentine. "It was too big of an event. It's almost an unwritten rule. If the car is still moving, you keep going until the car can't go any further."

The three teams continued to race into the night. In the early hours of Saturday morning, the realization that none of them would finish in under 33 hours had sunk in for everyone. It was a serious blow to their morale. The Class 11 finishers would not officially be recognized by SCORE. Yet, they did not quit. Instead, the remaining Class 11 teams and vehicles pushed through the obstacles even

though they were already more than 24 hours into the race.

Determined to finish,
Nauleau's Team CBCFS was
running away from the rest of
the other teams with the lead.
They had cleared one check -int
officially, and things seemed to
be getting easier. With 320 miles
remaining, teammates Crook
and O'Neill got into the vehicle
and drove to mile marker 665.
"We were feeling the pressure
of Hollenbeck who was about
20 miles behind us and gaining
fast," said Nauleau.

At mile marker 677 another driver change occurred with Nauleau getting in the passenger seat and Nate Tennis now behind the wheel. Soon after, they lost control of car and barrel rolled twice before

landing on the driver's side door. It knocked them senseless. After regaining their composure, Tennis and Nauleau kicked out the remnants of the windshield and by some miracle got the wheels back on the ground and continued on the course and were making up for lost time.

By then, Hollenbeck had gained the lead once again, and he wasn't about to give it up. Just as things were going well for Hollenbeck and his team, a spring plate broke. "We ended up about 40 minutes or so behind Team CBCFS from that incident," Hollenbeck recalled. "We knew the official SCORE race was over, but not our race. Not Class 11!"

Hollenbeck and team RLM de Mexico ended up getting back on the course and were running without brakes. "A wild ride that's for sure," Hollenbeck said. So brakes or not, they were determined to finish this year.

Somehow in the madness, Wallentine and his team found themselves in the lead ahead of Hollenbeck. Wallentine's team made it to the second and third checkpoint before officially timing out due to suspension problems. "I was not going to quit," Wallentine said. The team set out to fix the car and were determined to get it back onto the course.

FINISH AT PRE-DAWN

Sometime before dawn, all three teams closed in on the finish line injured but able. Wallentine's team had two blown out front shocks, broken leaf springs, and were riding on the limit stops. The engine and trans were great, and the rear suspension was still in perfect condition.

Nauleau and team CBCSF were still reeling from their rollover accident, and Hollenbeck/ RLM de Mexico had more problems but also managed to continue on. At mile marker 750, team CBCSF changed driving positions with Nauleau behind the wheel and Tennis serving as his co-driver. That's when a front driver's side shock broke through the shock tower. Nauleau's bad luck had returned. Even with this mishap, Nauleau continued on. "We knew we could get to the finish line around 3:20 a.m.," said Nauleau.

A RACE WITHIN A RACE

While any chance of an official SCORE finish was lost, it was pure will that kept these Class 11 drivers going. These teams and drivers wanted to complete what they started back in Ensenada.

Nauleau could see the dim lights of the town ahead, and while he imagined crowds of onlookers, the reality of what he saw was hard to swallow. No one was there, except their remaining crew, members of Team RLM de Mexico, and two wayward photographers that hadn't gone home yet. It was eerily quiet. But they loved it. Bloodshot eyes and all.

As Nauleau/CBCFS celebrated at the finish with the few onlookers, Hollenbeck, and his RLM de Mexico team pulled across the finish line. Emotions erupted. All of these racers thought the moment was euphoric. Shortly thereafter, the Wallentine team managed to finish.

For them, Class 11 had conquered the 48th Bud Light SCORE Baja 1000 and had beat the odds.

Hollenbeck summed it up this way, "I can't say it's all about the course or the car. We made a lot of poor decisions out there. We are a young team and we are learning stuff. Some people come down and say I've had it. I'll never do this again. Then we see people like Eric and Paul and we look forward to the next event. One cool thing is going through town and driving into Ensenada, through the streets I drive through daily. It was unbelievable. There were no ribbons, trophies, or scores. No nothing. Except friends and family watching. We didn't officially finish the race, but we made it to the finish line!"

While the official SCORE record books will reflect zero finishers in Class 11 for 2015. Some remember the "race within a race." Unofficially, Nauleau's CBCFS in the number 1116 car finished first, followed by Hollenbeck in the RLM de Mexico number 1121 car, and the number 1113 car of Wallentine Motorsports. But for these racers, the order isn't as important as simply finishing the race. These teams, Nauleau, Hollenbeck, and Ballentine, raced with the heart of champions and demonstrate what it takes to compete in SCORE SJ.