



## To Be Called "Racer"

It's the highest honor, and the Baja 1000 finds them.

by Ryan McGee

In motorsports, there is one word above all others that exemplifies what our twisted metal, burning rubber, death-defying pursuit is all about. The term is never used lightly and bestowed upon only those who have earned the right to wear it.

Racer.

A true racer doesn't have to win Sprint Cups or F1 world titles. He or she just needs to have that oil-covered aura about them. Anybody can win while driving top shelf equipment, but a racer gets a little something extra out of even the slowest jalopy on the lot.



Desert Dingo's

Could this car possibly survive 1000 miles of Baja terrain?

They race because they love it and from Daytona to Indianapolis to every seedy little short track in between, real racers are what make this sport so fun to cover. Now let me give you an example of the kind of people that I'm talking about.

Every November, a few thousand people and a couple of hundred machines descend on the Baja Peninsula of Mexico to participate in a little race you may have heard of—the Baja 1000. This year's event was held this past weekend.

The teams that grab all the attention are the ones with corporate backing, guys like Robby Gordon and his Monster Energy/Toyo Tires Chevy CK 1500. Robby's rides are hand-crafted by desert vehicle artisans in North Carolina and California, crack engineers who can somehow make Gordon's Trophy Truck glide over the rocks and drops as smooth as if it was your grandma's Buick LeSabre en route to the liquor store.

Gordon is The Man, a three-time Baja 1000 champ and a living desert legend. But even RG will tell you that what makes the Baja so special are the racers who come south of the border with no sponsorship money and no fleet of support vehicles and staffers. It's just them, their buddies, and a racecar, truck, or motorcycle that they built in their home garage.

Which brings us to the Desert Dingos...racers every one.

Desert Dingo Racing is made up of 16 self-described "Silicon Valley professionals" who became so inspired by a viewing of the documentary film "Dust2Glory" that they decided to try and race in the world's most famous off-road event.

It gets better.

After some investigation they discovered the Class 11 division of the 1000, which is reserved for drivers of near-stock older generation Volkswagen Beetles. Yes, just like Herbie.

So Desert Dingo Racing was formed and the team commenced to building a 1969 Love Bug capable of lasting 1,000 miles of hurtling over rock, dirt, sand, cactus, dead animals and booby traps (the locals think it's hilarious) at upwards of 30 mph...which doesn't sound scary, but feels like Mach 2 when you've been doing a more violent version of the Merton Hanks chicken neck dance for 24 straight hours.

"Those guys are nuts," admits Gordon with a laugh. "But it is pretty bad-ass, too."

The Dingos and their ride arrived in Rosarita, Mexico early last week and set up an impromptu pre-race prep area they dubbed The Barnyard because they shared it with two horses, three chickens and four dogs. But as they wrenched and greased their Beetle 100 feet from the Pacific surf, no one seemed to mind.



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This is Robby Gordon's ride back in 1990. Cars have to be equipped for the worst.

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"Someone found a radio station called The Walrus that plays hits of the '70's and '80's over and over again," Dingo co-driver and PR man Jim "RJ" Graham emailed me from The Barnyard. "Everyone is singing Rick Springfield's 'Jessie's Girl'. Everyone is off key."

What do you expect from a bunch of folks who sport nicknames such as Skid, sCary (his real name is Cary), Crusty, Bus Boy, Octabootee, Blue Cross (he's the medic) and, of course, Mad Max.

Eventually the team made its way down the coast to the starting line in Ensenada, stopping along the way to wallpaper every little town with cards promoting the team's official cause and the logo slapped on its door—World Diabetes Day, which fell on November 14th.

"We also handed out World Diabetes Day crayon packs to all the kids," Graham said. "So I have learned how to say 'I'm really sorry about all this' to the adults."

Graham could be a standup comedian, but when it comes to the team's cause, he and his teammates are dead serious. Two team members have been diagnosed with Type II diabetes and nearly everyone else has a close friend or family member who lives with the disease. When they arrived in Ensenada they were met by Federacion Mexicana de Diabetes who helped them hand out fliers and drum up support. Unfortunately some other locals were also waiting. They broke into the Dingos' HQ and stole a couple of tool boxes and a few papers that Graham calls "an identity theft starter kit".

Finally, only Friday afternoon, the race began and the Dingo Beetle number 1102 hammered its way into the desert. Drivers Seth Schrenzel (aka Blue Cross) and Scott Anderson blew into first place in their class, albeit briefly, and things were going as well as they can for a bunch of guys in a forty-year old street car in conditions slightly worse than they are on Mars.

They got stuck in the silt twice early, wove their way through a pine forest, and bounced their way toward La Rumorosa, a truly evil set of downhill switchbacks that ate trucks for lunch all week, let alone Bugs. 1102 got stuck again but



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**Built for comfort. Sorta.**

caught a break when some fans towed them out with their Jeeps, but after a driver switch, the Beetle sideswiped a tree and bent a tie rod. From there, the old car ground to a slow halt and the entire team went to work beneath the light of a crescent moon.

Finally, at 2:10 AM, Graham radioed to a godlike lookout they call the Weatherman.

*"Weatherman, this is 1102 Chase reporting 1102 out of the race with a blown transmission."*

*"1102 out with a blown transmission. Roger that."*

Sunday morning they loaded up 1102 and headed home, but first they were stopped at a "checkpoint" that was manned by a teenage soldier with a machine gun. A couple of souvenir cards and a 12-pack of Coke later, they were allowed to pass. Twelve hours later, 1102 was up in blocks in Silicon Valley and the Dingos were sipping cold ones and knocking off the dust.

Says Graham: "We'll be needing a couple of new fenders, a rebuilt transmission, a short throw reverse lock out shifter and some other bits and bobs, but we should be back in business in short order."

Damn right they will. Racers to the end.