

“DRIVE IT LIKE YOU STOLE IT”

I knew I was in trouble when they asked me to post my blood type on the outside of the souped-up, stripped-down 1941 Ford I would copilot. For six days of heat and dust, 1,800 miles of twisting Mexican terrain and countless tequilas, I was about to join some very rich, very crazed gringos in the scariest, most pointless of all road races **BY GARY CARTWRIGHT**

THE WAITER BROUGHT ANOTHER ROUND OF TEQUILA for the drivers and a Cuba libre for the man known as the Chihuahua Express, who sucked it down the way a distance runner devours oxygen, draining it in a gulp and slamming the glass on the table with a cackle so maniacal the marimba player dropped his sticks. We were seated at a sidewalk café on the zocalo in Veracruz, Mexico, on the eve of the eleventh running of La Carrera Panamericana, the grueling six-day, 1,800-mile Mexican road race. The Chihuahua Express was expounding on the race's uniqueness, its challenge, its egalitarianism, its *Mexicanness*. As happens with all his narratives, this one traveled full circle until it returned to the only subject that really holds his full attention—himself. For a moment, he lost his train of thought. Then his eyes flickered under his moist glasses, his long face broke into a toothy Cheshire-cat grin, and he leaned dangerously back in his chair and began to paraphrase the reply Ambrose Bierce allegedly offered

Pancho Villa when Pancho asked the old gringo why he had joined the Mexican Revolution.

“If you hear of me stuffing my Hudson Hornet into some Mexican stone wall or high-siding a cliff south of Tehuacán,” the Chihuahua Express extolled in his whiskey-soaked Wolfman Jack baritone, “please know it is a better way to depart this life than falling down the cellar stairs. To be a gringo in Mexico—ah, that is euthanasia!”

The name Chihuahua Express would not appear on his driver's license, though I doubt he even has one. Officially, he is Loyal George Truesdale III, American coordinator of La Carrera. The original La Carrera ran from 1950 until it was suspended in 1954, and Truesdale helped revive it in 1988. His *nombre del camino* derives from the name on the Hudson Hornet he drove that year. Though he was born in Roseburg, Oregon, and has lived in Los Angeles for more than thirty years, Truesdale is as Mexican as diesel smoke and chili

Illustration by Olaf Hajek



Dos a tres for the road: Alcohol, as much as gasoline, fueled many of the competitors in the race across Mexico.

I WONDERED IF I WANTED TO FOLLOW THESE TWO

peppers, having raced his motorcycle a couple of times down the Baja and served three months of a ten-year prison sentence in Veracruz for what he calls “commodity relocation.” His business card identifies him as, among other things, a specialist in bootlegging, smuggling, orgies and singing beautiful ballads. His exact role in La Carrera is difficult to assess. At 58, Truesdale has given up racing, but race officials and the other drivers seem to enjoy his stories and tolerate his presence, or at least accept it as they accept all the other inevitable realities of road racing in Mexico.

The Express traveled this year with the race’s official coterie in a Ford Explorer piloted by his companion, apprentice and caretaker, Chris Gemes, a.k.a. the Zacatecas Kid. The Kid, who will turn 40 in a few months, started working at the Express’s motorcycle shop on the Sunset Strip in 1973, when he was still a student at Hollywood High School. They’ve been a team ever since, textbook examples of codependency. The Kid can go shooter for shooter with any tequila drinker in Mexico and still function in the morning. The Express, I suspect, has lost a step or two, but you wouldn’t know it this night. Watching them at work, I remembered my own days as a marathon drinker and disciple of moment-to-moment reality, and I experienced that familiar dread of wasted days and wasted nights. I didn’t question my own capacity as a party beast—I’ve mastered the pace—but I wondered if I wanted to follow these two characters across Mexico and into all the foul, repugnant, desperate dives the assignment called for. Maybe it would have been wiser to report the spectacle from a safe distance. But that was precisely the dread: that no distance was safe enough.

Despite thundershowers, harbingers of a storm brewing in the Gulf of Mexico, the zocalo vibrated this evening with local characters and prerace euphoria. This plaza is internationally infamous, one of those havens for expatriates, fugitives and spies Graham Greene used to write about. It is ringed by stately palms and cobbled with layers of tropical intrigue and the ghosts of four centuries: Not far from here, Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés first planted his bloody boot on the continent. Drivers from Germany, Great Britain, France, Holland, the United States and Mexico gathered under umbrellas, fortifying themselves for the next day’s time trials. A crew member of the Mercedes team from Stuttgart crouched

low to photograph a clown on a high wire, exposing the message on the back of his T-shirt, one that would serve as the theme of the insane week: DRIVE IT LIKE YOU STOLE IT. These drinker-drivers didn’t look like racers; they looked like New York cabbies. They looked disparate and disfranchised, a bunch of poor bastards in steerage, bewildered that their green cards had been eaten by rats. They looked like they didn’t speak my language.

I had made arrangements to ride in the Explorer van with the Chihuahua Express and the Zacatecas Kid, a prospect that was causing me second thoughts. As the evening drunkenly progressed, I turned to the *GQ* photographer and said, “Not so fast, Rodriguez.” It’s the punch line of my favorite joke: Looking for a gentle way to break the news that one of his men has suffered a family tragedy, a first sergeant barks out this order: “OK, everybody whose mama didn’t die last night take one step forward.... *Not so fast, Rodriguez!*”

In the days to come, “Not so fast, Rodriguez” would become our mantra.

FRIDAY: THE TIME TRIALS

The Kid approached me in the lobby, his California-dragster face bright with innocence. He was alone: Presumably, the Chihuahua Express was sleeping off last night’s damage. “Would you like an insider’s perspective of the time trials?” the Kid inquired. Too late I sensed this was a trick question. Though the tone of his voice conjured images of vapor-crazed pistons so out of control they drowned out screams of death, the question caught me by surprise, and I found myself agreeing—or at least not forcibly disagreeing. Next thing I knew, I was being fitted out in racing togs—a heavy fireproof driver’s suit, boots, gloves, hood and helmet. Apparently, I had volunteered to copilot for Johnny Reid, a 70-year-old retired civil servant from Oklahoma City whose racing name is Culo Malo—“badass.”

“What’s your blood type?” the Kid asked. “We need to paint it on the side of Johnny’s car.” I’d seen the letters under the drivers’ names on the car doors, the A’s, B’s, O’s and AB’s, but had only now made the connection between those cryptic notations and my own bodily fluid. I wanted to flee but didn’t.

Twenty minutes later, encased like a larva in my airtight racing suit, I was standing under the hotel canopy in a rainstorm, waiting for Reid and his crew. Johnny Reid’s 1941



Two for the ditch: Rusty Ward, right, and codriver provide their own horsepower.



CHARACTERS INTO THE FOUL DIVES THAT LAY AHEAD.

Ford was the oldest car in the race, and he was the second-oldest driver. A portly man with liver spots and thinning gray hair, he wore a red racing suit and resembled a moth-eaten Santa Claus. Reid's original codriver had decided to go to Hollywood and be a movie star, so he was stuck with me. "Codriver" was a ceremonial title with Reid: All he needed was a navigator to follow the route book, keep him on course and warn of approaching curves and road hazards. That I couldn't read a Texaco road map, much less La Carrera's complicated route book, did not faze him. "You'll have the time of your life!" he assured as I fiddled with the maze of buckles and harnesses attached to the cramped copilot's seat. "This is the most exciting event in the world. Look at the hairs on my arm; they're *bristling* like crazy!" Mine too, I noted glumly.

It was a sauna inside the stripped-down Ford. I reached for the window handle and it came off in my hand. "I forgot to tell you," he added cheerfully. "The windows don't open." Hardly anything worked on the old heap, except its extraordinarily powerful engine. There was no gas gauge: Before the day ended, we would run out of fuel on a Mexican back road in a driving rain. Nor was there a communications system: Reid's navigator—me, on this morning—had to shout over the racket of engine and road or use hand signals. "I operate on the cheap," Reid said needlessly.

La Carrera is the great leveler of road races. There is no prize money, only some cheesy trophies. You have to be a little crazy to drive in Mexico, and you have to be certifiable to race. All the vehicles are vintage (1964 or earlier) European or American sports or touring cars, a parade of Hudsons, Studebakers, Packards, Porsches and Oldsmobiles so old your grandmother might have lost her cherry in the backseat. Race officials create classes of competition to fit nearly every situation. Thus a quintessential have-not like Johnny Reid has as good a chance of winning in his class, the Turismo Production, as the president of Colgate-Palmolive, Bill Shanahan, does in his sleek 390-horsepower Corvette in the Historic C class. The Historic "competition" class was added this year for three suspiciously hot racers: a black '58 Chevy owned by a group of fun-loving swells from Newport, Rhode Island, who called themselves the Tropical Gangsters; a '58 Mercedes coupe owned by 52-year-old Los Angeles TV-commercial director Don Blackburn; and a Falcon owned by a team from Mexico City. "Competition,"

the Express instructed me, "is a nice word for 'cheaters'—cars modified up to and a little over the line."

Like everything else in Mexico, the rules for La Carrera cars are subject to the contingencies of the moment. Replacement parts, for example, must conform to original factory configurations, but drivers have been known to counterfeit documents to prove a certain speed-enhancing auto part was available the year their cars rolled off the assembly line. In one elaborate ruse, a suspected custom-made camshaft carried the export serial number of an Australian tractor—and indeed a search revealed a few of the camshafts were produced in Australia in support of the conspiracy. Nothing remained of the '41 Ford that Reid had purchased six years earlier for \$100, except for the shell and a few latches and handles. The engine was from a '79 Ford truck, the rear end from a Lincoln and the front end from a Camaro. Reid spent less than \$4,000 on his race car. By comparison, several cars in this year's race were valued at more than a million dollars, including a mint-condition Mercedes roadster and a Lancia that was one serial number removed from an identical Lancia that legendary Argentine racer Juan Fangio piloted to victory in the 1953 La Carrera. Many of the cars are reincarnations of junk heaps, discovered in somebody's garage, chicken house or weed field. The Tropical Gangsters found their Chevy in a farmyard in North Carolina. "A lot of these cars are serious hot rods, capable of speeds up to 190 miles an hour," explained David Bell, who lives near Dallas and restores vintage cars for a living.

The first leg of our time trial went badly; I looked away from the route book for a few seconds and failed to notice our exit on the *autopista*. "I think I fucked up!" I shouted. "Oh, you *think* so!" Reid yelled, then began to chuckle, one finger on the wheel and the road disappearing under us at a terrifying 165 kilometers an hour. He then began to whistle a tune—I thought it was something from *Oklahoma!* but over the thundering of the road, it could have been a honky-tonk song or even a funeral dirge. "You're right!" he yelled at last. "You fucked up!" The next exit was nearly fifty kilometers away, and a continuous concrete divider prevented a U-turn. A few minutes later, however, Reid spotted a five-foot opening in the divider and hit the brakes, sending the Ford into a convulsive 180. His eyes turned icy gray, backlit by specks of flame. The idiot was going to wedge his race car through the opening.

"You can't get through that tiny fucker!" I warned, my voice shrill with fear. "Hee hee hee," he replied, stomping on the accelerator. "This is what it's all about!" He squeezed through.

Five minutes later, we were at the proper exit and back in the race. I was beginning to understand that Reid hadn't come all this way merely to win, though winning would have frosted the cake; he was here to race and to have a grand time. He whistled and waved and beeped his horn at the spectators who lined the road. The rain had slacked to a steady drizzle, and the road was as slick as polished glass. Approaching a village, we spotted an orange Chrysler upside down in a ditch. The driver, Jim Arnold, a potbellied 67-year-old from Hemet, California, sat beside the road, holding his head. Reid beeped and waved. We'd long ago lost contact with his support van. I couldn't help wondering how a driver so congenitally unflummoxable as Reid had gotten the nickname Culo Malo.

The answer was not long in coming. A few kilometers past the village, we stopped at a checkpoint. What followed was a velocity stage of the race, a fourteen-kilometer stretch in which all traffic had been cleared and drivers could race flat out. Drivers live for velocity runs. The other parts of the race—the transition stages through urban areas, and the limited stages, in which they are expected to maintain a specified average speed and cross the finish line within thirty seconds of a given time—are merely diversions among velocity runs.

"Better get into that crash helmet!" Reid shouted. A second later, the green flag dropped and he stomped the accelerator. Before I could react, the g force pinned me against the seat and catapulted my helmet into the great hereafter. Happy as an oyster, Reid negotiated a series of curves, swerves and potholes large enough to drown livestock. All I could see was the tops of trees, the shadows of buzzards' wings, the vanishing needle of the speedometer and the bristling nose hairs of Culo Malo.

So this was what it was like inside one of the race cars. Now I knew. When I got back to the hotel—if I got back to the hotel—I told myself, I'd bail out. My blood type was my own business.

DAY ONE: VERACRUZ TO PUEBLA


Villagers have waited all year for this. Old men with machetes and sacks of pineapples; women in shawls carrying babies;

schoolkids with scrubbed faces, positioned according to height, waving tiny Mexican flags; the mayor, the professor, the priest, the whores, lined three-deep on both sides of the road. As the first garishly painted cars came growling and gearing down, the villagers exploded in something resembling the sound of a train wreck. The drivers acknowledged the adoration, and some threw candy to the kids.

Having abandoned Reid's car for the relative safety of our overloaded van, I could take a more philosophical view of things. The Kid was behind the wheel, and the Express was riding copilot, chain-smoking Camels, barking orders, offering commentary. The route was taking us through jungles so dense that two drivers who left Nuevo Laredo last week at the same moment and arrived in Veracruz two days later, just fifteen minutes apart, never saw each other along the way. The jungle is networked with thousands of kilometers of foot trails, used for centuries by the Olmec and the Totonac. The people we met at the roadside stops were shy and friendly, and children inspected us from behind sacks of grain, their smiles lighting the dark surroundings. After a few hours, we began a long, relentless climb into the volcanic Sierra Madre Oriental, which includes some of the country's highest points. In the distance, we could see the 17,000-foot snowcapped peak of Popocatepetl, which hasn't erupted since 1862 but is constantly bubbling and rumbling and making its threat apparent. The coastal rains were behind us, but clouds shrouded high mountain passes, a milky fog so thick at times that the Kid couldn't see the hood ornament, much less the next curve. We learned that one of the drivers, a 60-year-old Mexican, had missed a curve earlier in the race and sailed off a cliff. We assumed he was dead, but later heard he had escaped with a few broken ribs.

In the early afternoon, the drivers stopped for the traditional forty-five-minute service break in the town of Tehuacán, where they were immediately swallowed and carried away by a tidal wave of people. The crush and cacophony overwhelmed the senses—brass bands, bathing beauties wearing Corona beer banners across their ample balconies, clowns, balloons, hundreds of children with pencils and autograph pads. The kids danced at the feet of the drivers, tugging their pant legs for attention. The drivers wanted to find a

YOU HAVE TO BE A LITTLE CRAZY TO DRIVE IN MEXICO.



Over the course of the serpentine race through Mexico, there is many a hazard, from surging crowds of bystanders to hair-curling turns at high speeds to the distractions of the often beautiful countryside. And sometimes, just around a bend, lies the overturned heap of a rival's car.

