

# “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





Olaf

Hajik





**Das o 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.**

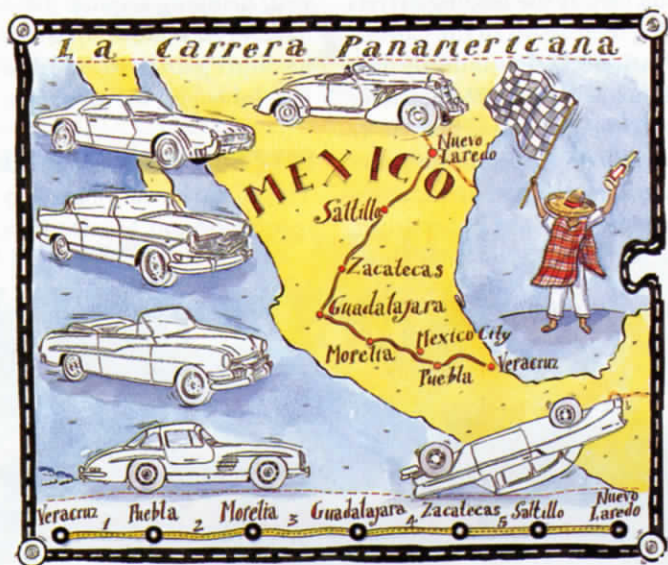


Over the course of the serpentine race through Mexico, there is many a hazard, from surging crowds of bystanders to hair-curling turns at high speeds to the distractions of the often beautiful countryside. And sometimes, just around a bend, lies the overturned heap of a rival's car.



place to piss, but they observed the spirit of the moment, graciously accepting tacos and bottles of beer, signing as many autographs as time allowed. Several signed the name A. J. Foyt. "It's short and everybody recognizes it," one driver explained. We found a table at a sidewalk café, out of the traffic, and the Express ordered his first Cuba libre of the day. Also his second and third. The rest of us sipped beer and bargained with kids selling cheap ballpoint pens personalized with names like Juan and Lupi. The drinks and the exuberance of the people revived the Express. "The parents of these kids were kids in the '50s," he reminded us. "You can see it in the eyes of the old women. They're reliving their great moment."

After five or six hours, the racers were back on the road, spread over many kilometers. La Carrera control cars and medical vans wove among the racers. Five units of the Policía Federal de Caminos, the Mexican highway patrol, rode shotgun, keeping civilian traffic at a safe distance and blocking it at checkpoints. All the good roads in Mexico are toll roads—too expensive for the average driver—which means secondary roads are regularly clogged with trucks, third-class buses, rattletraps and the occasional donkey cart. Secondary roads are infamous for their corkscrew turns and twists and for the spectacular distances a car can plunge if it misses one. We'd been trailing the race, the Kid getting all he could out of the van, the Express kibitzing and correcting him. So far we'd avoided disaster, though we came close when our van clipped the rear end of the million-dollar Mercedes roadster.



As we approached a line of vehicles poking along behind a bus full of peasants, pigs and chickens, the Express called out, "Pass the bastards!" The Kid hesitated. "Not so fast, Rodriguez!" I shouted from the backseat. But the Express insisted. "Here's the rule," he instructed his protégé. "When you're going twice the speed limit and see a curve sign, lift! Lift but don't brake. You should make it through the curve OK." The Kid was about to make his move when we were

saved by the appearance of a Policía Federal patrol car, lights flashing. The car was driven by an old friend, Julio Tovar, commandant of the highway patrol, who signaled for us to follow him around the jam.

A few kilometers up the road, patrolmen had blocked off a section of highway for a velocity run, and the cars were lining up in their starting positions. I walked along the row of cars and stopped to admire a snazzy yellow-on-red Mercedes. Its driver, Don Blackburn, told me he

had come to La Carrera as a crew member three years before and had become hopelessly hooked. He returned home, sold his farm in upstate New York and used the money to buy and rebuild a Mercedes. A year later, he crashed it on the high mountain pass near Tehuacán. "I was trying too hard," he said. "But it taught me a lesson. You have to finish each day. You can't drive this race at 100 percent. Too many unknowns. So you drive it at 90 percent." Blackburn has a linebacker's build, and his hair and beard are flecked with gray. I liked his attitude. When another driver asked him why his car had no brake lights, Blackburn replied with a straight face, "No reason to have something you don't use."

**AND YOU HAVE TO BE CERTIFIABLE TO RACE THERE.**





By late afternoon, the first cars had cruised into Puebla, the handsome Spanish-colonial city where Mexican patriots beat back French invaders on *cinco de mayo*, 1862. This was where we'd stop for the night. Local police escorted the drivers to the plaza, where thousands of delirious spectators formed two walls leading to the finish line. There wasn't a parking space within twenty kilometers, so the Express ordered the Kid to park on the sidewalk. "Don't worry," he said. "During La Carrera, I personally own Mexico."

We watched from a sidewalk café as the leading drivers crawled from their cars, ducking their heads so the Corona girls could slip medals around their necks. It was nearly dark now, time for the drivers to retire to their designated hotels for the night, time to reflect on how far we'd come and how far we still had to go. I felt tired but surprisingly braced at the end of my first full day of the Mexican road race. Blackburn accepted his medal, then hurried off to work on his car. His codriver, Jimmy Chamberlain, a spike-haired rock drummer from

\$40,000. Pretty steep for a 36-year-old family man. I asked what his wife thought about his racing addiction. "I told her before we got married that I raced in Mexico every year," he explained in a dead-earnest voice. "And that I plan to *keep racing* in Mexico until I die. So get used to it! She worried at first, but I convinced her that this is safer than driving to work."

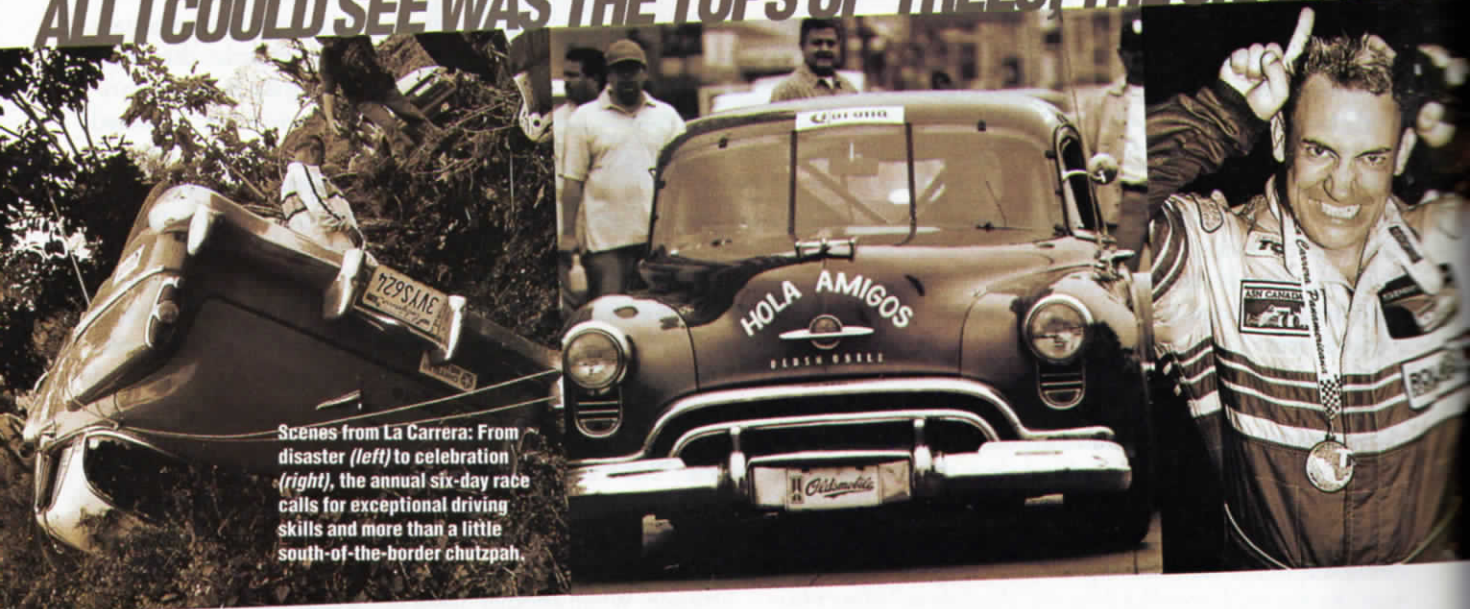
"I admire your zeal," I said, "but what's the payback?"

"The payback is Mexico," he said, draining his tequila. "The people, the villages, the way of life, meeting people like you, drinking tequila. This is the greatest life a man can have!" The smile of total satisfaction on Ward's face told me he didn't plan to die in Mexico or anywhere else. *What the hell*, I thought, *let's drink to it*.

#### DAY TWO: PUEBLA TO MORELIA

This would be the longest day, and the worst. It required navigating around Mexico City, the world's most congested,

## ALL I COULD SEE WAS THE TOPS OF TREES, THE SHADOWS



Scenes from La Carrera: From disaster (left) to celebration (right), the annual six-day race calls for exceptional driving skills and more than a little south-of-the-border chutzpah.

Chicago who'd taken a break from playing with the Smashing Pumpkins, joined us for a few belts. So did Rusty Ward, a young hot-rodder from my hometown, Austin, Texas. The Express was in fine form that first night. Chasing his Cuba libres with shots of tequila, he told a story about a trip to Mexico to recruit the legendary Carroll Shelby to drive in the 1988 revival. The Express and two friends ended up in a motel with some hookers. One of the friends, a drunk named Willie, passed out. "We don't have any condoms," the Express cackled, "so we dip our peckers in the bottle of tequila. Now, Willie's an alcoholic, so when he wakes up the next morning, he needs a drink, and naturally he grabs the tequila and takes a swig... Ol' Willie died a couple of years later, and I've always wondered if that had anything to do with it."

The tequila kept coming. Ward told me he had a wife, a 3-year-old son and another kid on the way. This was his fifth year at La Carrera but his first as a driver. The '51 Studebaker he rebuilt and brought to Mexico had cost him about

polluted and duplicitous metropolis. Even on Sundays, it's a traffic nightmare. Drivers always get lost. The trick is to hail a taxi and follow it, but no single cabdriver can find his way across Mexico City. "This is a five-cab town," one La Carrera veteran told us. Crews hate it, too. Working a tractor-trailer through these dark, narrow streets is something like swallowing your tongue.

The racers were routed south of downtown, over jagged mountains and crowded, twisted highways. We took a shortcut through the center of the city and immediately got lost. The Express dismissed the suggestion of hailing a cab, preferring to navigate by watching the flight patterns of arriving jets. Just after noon, we caught up with La Carrera at a service break near Toluca. This time there were no bands, Corona girls or adoring fans, just a filthy truck depot where drivers and crew rendezvoused to assess damage. Every two or three minutes, another car came sputtering and smoking down the ramp. Someone had placed a crate of hamburgers and soft drinks in an open area so the drivers could at least take



nourishment for the long afternoon run, but the box was empty before half the drivers arrived. I looked around at the squalor and experienced one of those chills you get at two in the morning when you're wide-awake, knowing you will relive a million regrets before you see the sun again. It was clear now why they call this race the great leveler.

Heidi Hetzer, the 62-year-old owner of Berlin's largest Opel dealership, was on her knees, a flashlight between her teeth, inspecting the rim of a rear wheel on her Corvette. It was twisted like a pretzel. "Sometimes you go a little too fast, and this is what happens," she said with a shrug. As a teenager, Hetzer worked in her father's motorcycle shop in Berlin, listening to his tales of road rallies in Africa. She's been in races all over the world, but La Carrera is her favorite. "This is pure racing," she beamed, brushing back her matted straw-blond hair.

beautiful women. Drivers joked that he keeps three or four racers on standby in case the one he's driving breaks down. He laughed and admitted, "Well, I did bring three cars to La Carrera two years ago. This is the only place in the world where you can drive 180 to 190 miles an hour and do it on secondary roads. So if a car breaks, why not have a spare?"

A dozen or more cars were still under repair as Rusty Ward pulled away from the depot, whooping the siren on his Studebaker. He was followed closely by the Tropical Gangsters in their gleaming black Chevy with its yellow checkerboard top. This was one of the best cars and one of the most popular teams in the race. You'd see them together at night, in the dining room or bar, dressed in matching black shirts. The four owners took turns behind the wheel—Merrick Pratt was driving this leg, with Brian McNally riding copilot. The men live

## OF BUZZARDS' WINGS, THE DISAPPEARING SPEEDOMETER.



Bill Shanahan's glorious Corvette had also been crippled in the morning run. The 58-year-old president of Colgate-Palmolive was shaken but not injured, and his car was not badly damaged, though the delay could cost him penalty points. As his crew worked under the hood, the six-foot-four corporate executive stalked about, lit a cigarette and peeled his cream-color racing suit to the waist, exposing his white, hairy chest. His hair was as tangled as a damp mop, and his Ray-Bans needed Windex. As hard as it was for me to imagine Shanahan wearing a business suit and seated behind a desk at his office at 50th and Park, how much harder it must have been for his board of directors to imagine their man stuck in some rat's-ass truck depot on some diesel-fouled Mexican highway.

Ten feet away, another crew worked on another Corvette, this one driven by one of the richest men in Mexico, playboy Federico Zambrano. According to the Express, when the peso took a hit four years ago, his ruling-class family lost \$2 billion—that's dollars, not pesos. They still have about \$3.5 billion. The patriarch, Don Zambrano, prefers horses and owns about sixty of them, but Federico's tastes run to fast cars and

and work in New York, San Francisco, Miami and Philadelphia's Main Line, but their connection is Newport, where they own summer homes. "These guys know how to go fast and when to go fast," said an admiring Eduardo Leon, La Carrera's director general, who cofounded the current La Carrera with the Express.

Leon needed a ride to Morelia and decided to drive our van. He'd test-driven a Volkswagen that morning, terrifying the VW representative, who locked the keys in the car rather than risk another kilometer. This meant our lives would be in Leon's hands as we crossed the most difficult and deadly stretch in the race, a mountaintop roller coaster called Mil Cumbres. I had eagerly awaited this stretch of the race, assuming I'd be merely a spectator, but now I was less enthralled by the prospect. Leon is infamous for his heavy foot and *laissez-faire* attitude toward speed limits and road signs.

We took the back road to Morelia, through sweeping green valleys terraced by banks of mountains blurred by blue shadows. The road leading up to Mil Cumbres winds through villages and up mountainsides. A few kilometers west of Hidalgo, around a sharp curve, we spotted the Tropical

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Gangsters—upside down in a ditch! Pratt was OK, but McNally had a concussion and was royally pissed at Pratt. “He was driving too aggressively for his experience,” McNally told us on the way to the medical station. “He hit Shanahan coming through that last village. I sensed something was

about to happen and put on my helmet just before the crash.” McNally predicted that the Chevy was out of the race, but the Express examined the car and said, “Nah, that’s an easy whack.”

By midafternoon we reached the starting line of the velocity run down Mil Cum-

bres. The stretch of road sat in a thick pine forest at the top of the world, above the clouds, above pollution, above any consideration except how to get down again, how to survive a dizzying series of switchbacks that would come faster than gasps. To the skilled driver, there are only two runs wor-



thy of serious attention, this one and a heart stopper near Zacatecas called La Bufa. "The other 1,780 miles of the race are just to get to these two places," Don Blackburn said. He was in first place now, ahead of the Mexican Falcon. He didn't know yet that the third-place Tropical Gangsters had wrecked. The Falcon and the Chevy were faster than his Mercedes, but Blackburn was relying on his driving skill. They'd hit their checkpoints on time, Blackburn at the wheel and Jimmy Chamberlain computing kilometers and difficulties of curves. Blackburn compensated for his lack of horsepower by keeping the car between 4,000 and 6,500 rpm. "That's where it makes all its horsepower," he said. "That's how to carry speed."

Hundreds of people were camped beside the road, barbecuing, picnicking, spending a grand day waiting for the wrecks. One medical van went ahead of the racers, and another would join us halfway through the run. By the time we started down Mil Cumbres, the course was peppered with broken cars. Veering around a neck-snapping curve, we saw a large group of excited people and then a familiar face—Rusty Ward. He had hit some loose gravel coming out of the curve and went over the side: His car lay twenty feet down the barranca, wedged against some trees. A family of Mexicans had come to his rescue, however. Ward gave us his happy warrior's grin and waved with a bottle of tequila. Our trip down was something I'll never forget, though I wish I could. Leon hardly took his foot off the accelerator. "The whole thing is balance," he said, shifting his weight in the seat as though to demonstrate. "If you touch the brakes, you're dead."

Morelia is smaller than Puebla but more eclectic, more Mexican. Bullet holes from the revolution pockmark its brown stone walls. In the mob of people gathered in the plaza, I found Bill Tilden, Johnny Reid's current codriver. But Tilden hadn't seen Reid all day. Neither had his crew. One driver remembered seeing Reid at a tollgate down the road: Reid had borrowed seventy pesos from the guy. I ducked into a bar to use the men's room, and there was Reid—zipping the fly on his driver's suit, a Zapata-style sombrero on his head, two medals dangling from his neck. "No copilot, no route book, no pesos, no clock," he roared, slapping me on the back. "Am I some kind of driver or what?"

The rain started just after dark. Within a half hour, the parking area where the

mechanics dealt with the day's carnage was ankle-deep in water, forcing most of them inside. Blackburn and his mechanic ignored the flood, however, removing and inspecting the tires and changing the Mercedes's fluids as they did every evening. That night they also changed the spark plugs. No one could remember a day when so many cars had wrecked or failed. At the nightly meeting, Eduardo Leon unloaded on the drivers, threatening the unimaginable: The Policía Federal de Caminos would stop cars that grossly ex-

ceeded the speed limits. Ward's accident was understandable because it had happened on a velocity run, in a dense forest. But there was no excuse for accidents or aggressive driving in transit stages. "Going 125 miles an hour in transit stages is stupid," he said, glancing in the direction of the Tropical Gangsters.

## A few kilometers west of Hidalgo, around a sharp curve, we spotted the Tropical Gangsters—upside down in a ditch! Pratt was OK, but McNally had a concussion and was royally pissed at Pratt.

I remembered our own ride down Mil Cumbres and wondered if Leon sleeps well at night.

### DAY THREE: MORELIA TO GUADALAJARA

A lot of pissed-off drivers this morning. An accident on a street in Morelia killed two locals (La Carrera's medical team saved two others) and created a traffic jam that snarled about twenty race drivers. Though none were to blame for the accident or the delay, they were penalized anyway for the lost time. Most American drivers were already steamed at the intransigence of Mexican race officials, who seemed to be moving the goalposts. "This is just a private party for Mexican drivers," complained David Bell, who was there to maintain the vintage car he had restored, a 1950 Ford driven by Dallas investment banker John Jung. "They let the gringos in only to pay the bills. It's like going to a party and nobody will tell you where the bathroom is."

The drivers had been up for hours and were starting their engines when the Express pranced down the hotel steps, a cigarette dangling from his lips, an Air Cav hat

cow that died three days ago," he told me. Upon reaching the Guadalajara city limits, drivers were led to the plaza by local police through five o'clock traffic—at speeds appropriate for the Daytona 500. Though they were doing close to seventy, the cops urged the drivers to go faster, and people on the street set up the chant "Go! Go!" We got separated from the convoy, but the Express flagged down a motorcycle cop, who turned on his siren, gave us a personal escort, then blocked traffic so the Express could stop for a six-pack of Superior.

"In Europe police arrest you for going too fast," American racer Carl Schneider marveled later at the bar. "In Mexico you can't drive fast enough to suit them." That's the real attraction of the Mexican road race, the anarchy of driving 180 miles an hour on roads barely suitable for mules and goats. Bob Hahn, a mechanic for a Dutch-American team, observed, "This is the last real road race in the world. After a crash in Le Mans killed all those spectators in 1955, everyone stopped road racing. Only the Mexicans could revive it. In this country, what's a life worth?" Schneider spent years accumulating a fortune with automobile dealerships in California and Florida before he discovered La Carrera in 1994. It changed his life. Instead of selling cars, he tried to kill himself in them. He has also driven in Monte Carlo and in 1997's forty-five-day Beijing-to-Paris race. A few days after arriving safely in Paris, he flew to Mexico and drove an Oldsmobile



called the Red Bull to first in its class at La Carrera. This year he drove the Gray Bull, a hotter version—or at least it was until a Guadalajara woman plowed into him on the street and put the car temporarily out of commission. "I'll tell you something," Schneider said, ordering another round, "driving an Olds in Mexico is child's play compared to driving a Packard convertible from Beijing to Paris. You think these roads are bad? They don't even have roads in Mongolia and Tibet."

## DAY FOUR: GUADALAJARA TO ZACATECAS

An hour before the cars arrived, the children of Tepatlán were waiting in the plaza, immaculate in their school blazers and white pants and skirts. These kids weren't just cute; they were as beautiful as European movie stars. Some had fair skin and blue eyes, reflecting the bloodline of the French soldiers who had settled here after the defeat of the emperor Maximilian. Traditionally, when Mexican men seek a wife, the search begins in Tepatlán. A

been upside down the day before or the day before that had rejoined the competition, including the Tropical Gangsters' Chevy and Rusty Ward's Studebaker. "I built it; I figured I could damn well rebuild it," Ward told us.

The route to Zacatecas climbed through one of the most scenic parts of Mexico, soft, rolling hills, valleys of wildflowers and dappled sunlight. Many villages had the same prosperous look as Tepatlán. In Yahualica the Express sent a boy to buy a six-pack of beer and tried unsuccessfully to buy the Nazi-style helmet off a passing motorcyclist. The Express was putting on his game face for the big night in every driver's favorite stop.

In colonial days, Zacatecas was the richest silver-producing city in the world, and the wealth shows in its self-willed uniqueness, its architecture and its sense of scale. It could be an artists' colony in Northern California. The rock facade of the cathedral seems to have been created by those Oriental masters who carve bird-

La Carrera. A hand reached out to fill our mescal cups for the seventh or eighth time, and a voice warned, "Don't drink more than three or you'll go mad."

The last thing I remembered was drinking in some tiny cantina in the early hours of the morning, in the company of six or seven drivers and the commandant of the Policía Federal de Caminos. Somebody was beating a jungle rhythm on my brainpan. Over the bedlam, I heard Jimmy Chamberlain explain that driving a race car is like playing the drums. "There's a physical connection that's very heady, very psychic," Chamberlain ranted. "An inch of movement can make a great corner or a great song." Make it or break it, I assumed.

## DAY FIVE: ZACATECAS TO SALTILLO

Out of the mountains and onto the high desert plains, the race took on a different pitch. The road was as straight as a hangman's rope, the pace flat out. Nothing between us and the horizon except cacti and sagebrush; nothing between here and the border but the Mexican rat lands and some giant cumulus clouds shaped like a tyrannosaur. "This is the best part of the race," the Express assured us. "You don't crash on a straight highway." He played a CD we'd heard a hundred times by then, Johnny Rodriguez singing "Run for the Border," the tale of a gringo who drinks too much Mexican wine, finds himself in the wrong bed and is soon running naked through the streets of Laredo—running for his life, pursued by José, a jealous husband with a knife. We couldn't help but laugh as we sung along with the chorus:

*Better run for the border  
José, he is a dangerous man  
Better find a place to hide  
On the other side  
Of the Rio Grande*

Near a sign that marked the tropic of Cancer, we waved to Hetzer and her son, Dylan, standing forlornly beside their stalled Corvette. Its fuel pump had finally given out. Every twenty or thirty kilometers, we passed another breakdown. The Mexican Falcon that had been running head-to-head with Don Blackburn appeared done in as mechanics pushed it onto a trailer. A French team swaddled the hood of its Alfa Romeo in duct tape. The Red Bull and the Gray Bull were both on trailers, and another Packard had bitten the dust. The Kid, by contrast, zoomed by a Policía Federal patrol car at twice the le-

## By the time we started down Mil Cumbres, the course was peppered with broken cars. Veering around one curve, we saw a group of excited people and then a familiar face—Rusty Ward.

tequila-company town, the village is clean and freshly painted, with hardly a trace of the abject poverty we'd seen in other villages. On the road into town, we passed housewives in designer jogging suits.

A cordon of police locked arms as the racers geared down, restraining the crowd about the plaza. A mariachi band struck up "Guadalajara," and the masses surged forward, exploding in a mighty cheer, dangerously reaching out to touch the passing cars. Climbing from her Corvette, Heidi Hetzer knelt to talk with a group of adoring children, a Teutonic duchess in her red racing suit. Today's wardrobe included a soft red-leather helmet, the kind the Red Baron wore. Bill Shanahan's crew climbed to the roof of their trailer and scattered candy to swarms of children. For nearly an hour, drivers signed autographs and handed out picture postcards of their cars. They were having as much fun as the kids. Of the seventy-nine cars that had left Veracruz four days earlier, maybe fifty were still running. Miraculously, several that had

cages out of ivory. Ten kilometers from the city, we caught sight of Cerro de la Bufa, the rugged hilltop fortress that towers above the village, captured by Pancho Villa in one of the bloodiest battles of the revolution. The Kid slipped some get-crazy Mexican music into the CD player, and the Express sang out, "Tell 'em the Chihuahua Express and the Zacatecas Kid are back in town!"

After dark we joined a torchlight parade that began at the plaza and caroused through the streets of the old city. The procession was led by a brass-and-drum band and trailed by a burro saddled with a cask of mescal, the fiery nectar of the blue agave. Angels in peasant smocks draped small pottery cups around our necks and kept them filled with mescal. Villagers crowded in doorways, and prostitutes leaned from a balcony, throwing kisses and rose petals. Inspired by the mescal, the drivers frolicked like Pan. Ward did some kind of ritualistic dance with Elizabeth Franks, a Dallas banker driving her sixth



## **"Drive It Like You Stole It"**

gal speed limit. I cried out, "Not so fast..." but my words were carried away by the wind. Producing his stopwatch, the Express calculated we were averaging 102.2 miles an hour.

"What's the hurry?" I inquired. "We're not racing anyone."

"How do we know?" the Express asked, his *Through the Looking Glass* grin ready to shatter.

"How indeed?" I agreed. After a week in Mexico, I had adopted the Ambrose Bierce philosophy. Whatever befell us, it was better than falling down the cellar steps.

Saltito looked and smelled like toxic waste. It's definitely not your party town—not that anyone was in the mood to party. The mood in the parking area behind the hotel that night was one of grim determi-

the mountain runs, where skill was the premium."

Long after midnight, I could still hear the revving of engines from my hotel room.

### **DAY SIX: RUNNING FOR THE BORDER**

At breakfast I learned Blackburn had filed a protest, charging the Falcon with a serious rules violation. Hoisting a car onto a trailer for repairs outside a designated service area was possible grounds for disqualification. If La Carrera officials allowed the protest, the Mexican team would be penalized at least six minutes, giving the Mercedes a chance at first place. As American coordinator, the Express spoke in support of the protest. Later he told us, "I got the Mexicans to agree that Blackburn was right. He's got a

**There was Reid, a Zapata-style sombrero on his head, two medals dangling from his neck. "No copilot, no route book, no pesos, no clock," he roared. "Am I some kind of driver or what!"**

nation. Make it to the border, that's all. RUN WHAT YOU BRUNG—TOW WHAT YOU BLOW, read the message on the back of a T-shirt worn by one of the Germans. I spotted Jim Arnold, the driver who had wrecked during time trials, slumped beside his Chrysler. Though still technically in the race, the car looked as if it had finished dead last in a demolition derby: left front fender gone, rear end crushed, body scabbed with countless bumps and dents. "This is the tireddest I've ever been in my life," Arnold groaned. "I put \$35,000 in this car. My plan was to sell it after this race, but who'll buy it now? My only chance is to cross the finish line."

Blackburn was installing a new radiator. Though he had a good day, his Mercedes had dropped from first to second, he told me. "The Falcon was able to make up a lot of difference on that straight highway," he explained. "Unless it breaks down, there's no way I can catch it." I started to tell him the Falcon *had* broken down, but decided they must have got it running again. Blackburn was lost in thought. "I don't know what I could have done differently," he said, shaking his head. "I ran an almost perfect race. No breakdowns, no penalty points. This was the best car in the race on

lock on first place. Technically, the Falcon should be disqualified, but they're so far ahead of the Tropical Gangsters that we're giving them a second."

A stream of migrating monarch butterflies a mile wide gave the final run to Nuevo Laredo, where the race ended, a surrealistic edge and perhaps contributed to a few more wrecks. On a canyon road that paralleled the Rio Grande, Arnold's ill-fated Chrysler went over the side. And yet sixty-nine cars somehow made it across the finish line. Others would perhaps not make it home before the millennium, but at least no racer had been killed or seriously injured. Johnny Reid finished a respectable thirty-first overall. Two cars that had been declared dead, the Tropical Gangsters' Chevy and Rusty Ward's Studebaker, had managed to finish thirty-fourth and thirty-sixth, respectively. Incredibly, the race officials reversed themselves and disallowed Blackburn's protest. Then they apparently reversed themselves again. When all the dust settled, the officials decided the two cars were in different categories, thus allowing each to come in first in its own class.

The Chihuahua Express and the Zatecas Kid slipped away to nearby Boystown and purportedly ran naked through



# “Drive It Like You Stole It”

the streets. I heard the Express was up bright and early the following morning, however, a model of efficiency, making sure cars traveled safely to the transporter in Laredo, Texas. Another La Carrera Panamericana was history, and the Express hadn't crashed into a Mexican stone wall

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or fallen down the cellar stairs. I imagine he was happy to have made it back alive. I know I sure as hell was. ●

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*Gary Cartwright wrote about the secessionist-minded League of the South in the November issue. He lives in Austin.*