

A one-man desert storm

Ivan 'the Ironman' Stewart lives up to his nickname during Baja pre-run

By Cory Farley



CORY FARLEY PHOTOS

Ivan Stewart has earned his 'Ironman' nickname by being among the few to do the rugged Baja 1000 off-road race without a co-driver

Somewhere between Quien Sabe and Ojos Negros, it appeared that Ivan Stewart's dream might come true.

In the dream, which he has after nearly every off-road race, the multi-time HDRA/SCORE desert racing champion is in mid-air. Jumps make for dramatic photos, but after 19 years of off-road racing, Stewart's got more flight time than some private pilots. It no longer makes his pulse race.

"Then I look out the front and there's this big boulder," he had explained earlier in the day. "I'm gonna hit it. There's nothing I can do to miss it." And then, as they say, he wakes up.

That wasn't precisely the picture here, but close enough. Stewart's "Toyota" (more about that later) pre-run truck was

midway through an uphill left-hand turn. The turn was not too rocky, not too treacherously marbled. You might take it at 30 mph in your weekend brushbuster.

I had glanced at the speedometer as Stewart hooked a wheel over the bank for traction. It bounced between 60 and 70. Beyond it, out the left window, a dropoff plunged into a grassy valley 100 feet below.

It was about 9 a.m., but we had been hammering around Mexico for hours, pre-running the 480-mile Baja Internacional course. Stewart had not yet scared me, though he could. If I'd been driving, we both would have been terrified. But Ivan's relaxed attitude and wide-ranging conversation indicated that he wasn't extending himself, or so I hoped.

Still, we were cooking right along. I had

been watching his hands and feet, hoping for a Secret Off-Road Driving Tip to pass along. Here it is: He uses the steering wheel and the three pedals, but a lot faster than most of us.

A lot more smoothly, too—so smoothly that I was surprised to look up and see a boulder the size of a branch office getting bigger out my side window.

Well, here it is, I thought. I wonder how hard we're going to hit.

I was so caught up in computing our trajectory that I missed most of what happened next. There was some engine noise, rum-pop-pop, rum-pop, in I think two bursts. Stewart's right hand, which almost never touches the steering wheel, came up briefly and pulled it down. The front of the car caught the rear—that's how it felt—and somehow the truck was stable, square on the road, three