

inches from the bank and coming off the corner like a Top Fuel dragster.

It was one of those depressing moments that comes when you see a pro do something you thought you had down cold. Eventually I'll convince myself again that I'm a driver, but at that moment I knew the truth: If I spent my whole life trying, I couldn't do what Ivan Stewart did almost with one hand, almost without thinking, in that corner.

And the effect on the Ironman? Did he wipe his brow? Did he take it easy for awhile? Did the man even have the decency to roll his eyes?

No. He shifted up to third and nailed it. "That corner did the same thing to me last week," he said. "I'll get that sumbitch yet."

Racing in Mexico, like just about everything else, is different than it used to be. Twenty years ago you bolted on a set of headers, tossed some camping gear in the back and headed south. When the truck broke, you slept by the wreckage until somebody came along or you thought of a way to fix it.

The stories are legend, if mostly apocryphal. It's true that a team once removed opposing pistons and connecting rods to turn a V8 that sounded like a gravel crusher into a V6 that limped home.

I have it on solid authority that Parnelli Jones, in his first Bronco funny truck, actually did demand that Bill Stroppe lie across the hood and pour gasoline into the carburetor until they could reach a new fuel pump, and by the way, hang on, because if I see anybody I'm going to pass them. Stroppe's reply is lost to history.

But myth suffuses reality. Somebody may once have ridden home from a wreck in a turtle truck, as the oft-told story insists. But if everyone reputed to have done so actually did, there would have had to be more trucks hauling turtles out of the Baja Peninsula in the '70s than there were Volkswagens on the Santa Monica Freeway.

What changed off-road racing is what changes everything: Money. It's useless to fret over whether it's good or bad; it just is. They don't run Indianapolis in homebuilts anymore, either, and there are no moonshine tanks in the backs of NASCAR stockers.

Take, as a good example, Stewart's pre-run truck, the one pictured on these pages. Looks like a Toyota 4Runner, a product of his major sponsor, right?

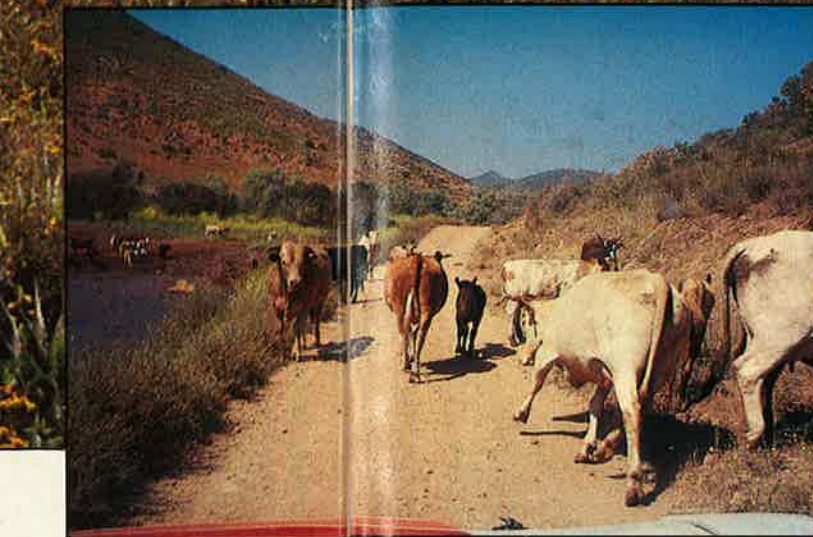
Wait'll you hear. The frame is Ford Ranger. A stout roll cage braced to the corners keeps it from folding into origami under the stress. Bilstein shocks cluster like bananas at each wheel. It's sawed off to Toyota length, then 4Runner sheet metal (and some plastic) is stretched like tight Levi's over a Ford V8 of impressive low-end oomph, and no shortage of top, either.

The result is a 300-horsepower, 3900-pound prime mover. It will climb anything and never breaks. But the pre-run vehicle is

a long way from his all-Toyota race truck, which some have described as the world's first GTP truck. Stewart speaks almost disparagingly of the pre-runner ("Well, it's real reliable"), but it will flat go down the road just the same, even when "road" is as loosely defined as it is here.

Part of the reason is Stewart himself, known as Ironman because he is tougher than a bucket of roofing nails. He was one of the first, and remains one of the few, to solo the Baja race.

It started when he was running dune buggies back in the early '70s, and there was a trophy, called the Ironman Trophy, offered to anyone who could win Baja single-



Ivan Stewart (left) has to display his physical and mental skills at every turn, since he doesn't know if he'll find a boulder, a bovine or even some vaqueros around the next bend

handed. After Stewart won it three times, the trophy was retired; he's been the Ironman ever since.

Ironically, when Stewart moved from buggies to trucks (first driving for Ford), he had a co-driver for a couple of years, though only once did the co-driver actually get behind the wheel—and that year Stewart finished second in the Nevada race in which the co-driver drove.

That was a long time ago. Since 1983, Stewart has been Toyota's man in the desert. That's meant support, chase vehicles, helicopters, people to put the pieces back together when he breaks them off.

Toyota even hired him a trainer. Three days a week, Stewart works on flexibility and strength, to reinforce the muscles around the

spinal discs he tore up in a crash two years ago. The regimen keeps him fresh in the long races, he says. That he looks like he's had a character actor's head grafted onto the body of a teen-age surfer is a side issue.

Don't forget this, though: When all the pampering is done, the Ironman gets in the car. At an age—46—when many men moan about doing 200 miles on the freeway, he can whip anybody alive over the roughest terrain four-wheeled vehicles can traverse. He will prove it again the week after this pre-run, beating all the cars and all but the three fastest motorcycles in the race.

When Toyota had Precision Preparation build its latest off-road truck, it ordered up a single-seater: forget help in driving, Stewart's race truck doesn't even make pro-



vision for help in navigating. One reason he can do that is the quality of his pre-runs, and what he takes away from them.

Once you leave the border, much of Baja California is still pretty wild. Jim Wurth of Yokohama Tires, also along on this ride, compared it to the United States a century ago. There are vast tracts of open land separating meager ranchos, a few cows, some wooden shacks, an occasional small town.

Southern California must have been like this before they trashed it. What passes for a road could be a sand wash that floods in the rainy season, a ledge on a sidehill, a faint track over rock. A lot of it is simply the easiest gap between two things you can't drive over.

Stewart's knowledge of it is Britannic, as in the mother of all encyclopedias. He can roar for hours past thousands of identical clumps of sagebrush or willow, near hundreds of outcroppings of pink rock, scaring up rabbits and raising dust, touching 70, 80 mph in spots where you would granny along in your Macho Mover wishing for ground clearance. Then, for no apparent reason, he will toss out the anchor and haul the fevered Toyota almost to a stop.

"Got to watch it here," he will say. Five



seconds later the road will burst through a clump of brush and go sharp left.

Back on the gas, hammering along at 50 mph over stream-bed sand, a couple of feet between banks four feet high, brush washing over the hood like surf. Then—no reason, no warning—he'll downshift from third to first, hard on the brakes, take a hopelessly wrong apex on an obvious fast right-hander ... and bound up a crumbled spot in the wall, the only place for half a mile where the truck can climb out of the gully.

A few miles further on, he repeats the process, passing some mental landmark and hitting the binders again, moving to the left on a road barely wide enough to have two sides. Sure enough, an isolated rock, big as a jukebox and all but hidden by brush, slides by. It is scratched and marked with paint; oil stains surround its base.

"I've been down here so much," Stewart said, "that I almost always know where I am. You could put me down anywhere and I think I could find my way out."

Not 10 minutes later, we were lost. There was reason, though. California's growth is shared by northern Mexico, and a wide, smooth new dirt road had been cut through

the pine forest. Stewart soon realized it—if he didn't know the road, it must be new—and worked his way over a net of gradually smaller trails until he was back in the trackless land he recognizes.

Racing has been good to Ivan Stewart, who hasn't forgotten that he used to build fences for a living. Ironically, one of his big jobs was the barrier between California and Tijuana. His fence has been replaced by a much more imposing one, but he mused as he passed the spot in the predawn darkness that he once set posts where now he drives a truck with his name painted on the side.

For the pre-run, Stewart had a minimal entourage: a writer, Wurth representing Yokohama, and a crew of three in two backup trucks, which race along the highway to

meet him with gas and tools where the course crosses the road. At night, they stay in feloniously priced \$100-a-night rooms in Ensenada, and eat, in the hotel restaurant, what may be the worst value-for-dollar food in the hemisphere.

On race day, though, the attention picks up. Yokohama, bent on being everybody's tire company, sends rubber down in carloads. Precision Preparation, the race shop that holds the Toyota contract and employs Stewart, shows up with everything from a portable machine shop to a helicopter.

That last is a valuable luxury. The crew can't help Stewart directly, but they can offer guidance.

"When we used to run down here, we'd come to these forks and we wouldn't know where to go," Stewart said at one point where a road dissolved into five unmarked options. "We'd stop and try to figure it out. It cost us a lot of time."

What happened, they finally realized, was a local vehicle would get stuck on the road, and everyone who came behind would go around. Then someone would get stuck in the new road, and people would go around him.

Eventually everyone would get yanked out, but they'd leave behind a network of route options at every difficult spot. A helicopter can pick the open lane.

On his own, though, Stewart remembers dozens of them. He keeps up a running narrative as he drives.

"If we take the left here, we save distance but it's rough. This way"—WHAM as the truck bounds over a ditch that could hold a refrigerator—"we can run faster. Now, if the tide's out when we get here, we can go along the beach. If it's in, we have