



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