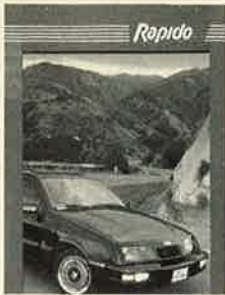


7.



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8.



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9.



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Stewart's 4Runner-bodied pre-runner has Ford V8, but one-seat race truck is all Toyota

to go inland a long way. We'll have to check a tide table ..."

All this at 50, 60, 70 mph, one-handed, dodging rocks and holes and the frequent cow, meanwhile pointing out where so-and-so hit a motorcycle and the place where Parnelli did this to somebody and won the race.

After 100 miles of this, it seems impossible that anyone could store so much in his memory. It's like knowing every turn from San Francisco to Los Angeles, except it changes from year to year. Yet there's always room for more.

"One year I went down there and found a way through," Stewart said, pointing out a beautiful empty beach, a half-mile short-cut in the trail. "I didn't want anybody to see my tracks, so I spun a lot of doughnuts in the sand," he mimed spinning the car round and round, hiding his trail. "When I got down there in the race, I couldn't find the way out. It cost me 10 minutes."

In two days, with stops for lunch, sight-seeing and photography, we covered about 350 miles of the Baja course. Some we couldn't find, and some Stewart had run the week before.

Ivan learned from everybody. He picked a writer's brains about fellow-racer Rod Hall's off-road driving school and how it might apply to Stewart's own career when he retires, perhaps in four years. He pumped Wurth, who is trained as a suspension engineer and used to work for Jack Roush, on the cornering potential of the pre-runner ("about 0.7 g," Wurth said). In efficient, if not textbook, border Spanish, he even questioned the help at Mike's Sky Ranch and a couple of vaqueros along the way.

The cowboys had burst out of head-high brush as we neared one of the pre-arranged gas stops. They were riding good horses, holing and swinging ropes as they chased, of all things, a small herd of donkeys.

"I wish I could speak better Spanish,"

Stewart mourned as they returned to look over the garishly painted Toyota. He got out and handed each of them a Coke.

"Los burros," he began. "Esta bien?" Then, to a bystander, "Why are they chasing the burros? Are they their burros, or are they trying to get rid of them?" He turned back to the Mexicans.

"Esta ... una problema, los burros?"

"Si," said one, beaming.

"No. No problema," said the other, just as delighted. Stewart frowned in frustration. "That's the kind of stuff I want to know."

Stewart's name isn't as well known as those of, say Richard Petty or A.J. Foyt, two approximate contemporaries whose accomplishments he has nearly equaled in the venue he's chosen. (Stewart has won 54 major off-road races, including Baja 500/Internacional 11 times, first in 1974, most recently this year—in the race we were pre-running with him.) But he doesn't go unnoticed, either. Driving down from San Diego at 4 on a Tuesday morning, we were shadowed by drivers who would pull alongside, read the lettering on the truck and then move their lips: "Ivan Stewart. Ironman."

In Mexico, there was another sample of his celebrity. He was nipping through recalcitrant traffic in the lurid pre-runner, not exactly adhering to its spirit, either. Suddenly a black-and-white sedan appeared by the driver's window.

"I need to talk to you," the cop shouted in unaccented English.

Stewart groaned. Mexican officials cooperate with the racers, but there are limits. Apparently he had found one. He began to pull over.

"No, no," the cop shouted. "Later, at your hotel. I am an admirer." He waved and accelerated away.

Stewart is the Ironman; he acted like it happens every day. But all the way to the city limits, he drove like Grandma Duck. ■