





**It All Started
with Bill Stroppe.**

Now Racer Nick Baldwin
Continues Our Nation's Tradition
of Giving Back to the Beloved
People of Baja.

Living the Golden Rule

STORY BY MARTY FIOLEHA PHOTOS BY BOYD JAYNES

In the film, *Dust to Glory*, heroic Malcolm Smith first uttered a truly genuine and long-standing desire shared by countless racers in the off-road community: "How can I give back to Baja some of the enjoyment that I've had?" The question was first addressed in the early 1970s by that groundbreaking pioneer, Bill Stroppe, who answered it by building a much-needed medical clinic in Rancho Santa Inez to serve the local residents for hundreds of miles around. In the past year, Trophy-Truck racer Nick Baldwin also heard the question in the gentle winds blowing off the Sea of Cortez.

Dana Brown's film introduced a previously unknown side of American off-road racers; not simply modern-day gladiators raping and pillaging the land and people of Baja, racers are made from more altruistic

Next up for the A-OK crew is the school's neglected playground. The extensive project will include the installation of a new pump and safety fence for the pool, bringing in an entirely new playground and extensive landscaping. They hope to this phase of their masterplan completed by the running of this year's Tecate SCORE Baja 1000 in November.



stuff. As Brown so elegantly narrated, “(The Baja 1000 is) an epic race witnessed mostly by cactus. No TV, no adoring crowds. Just the clarity of the moment—the clarity that can give a racer a greater appreciation of place and people—an awareness of the give and take, the Golden Rule.”

The inclusion of Smith's story of building an orphanage for the children of Valle De Trinidad was a critical subplot of the movie. The fact that Smith was the star of his father's motorcycle cult classic, *On Any Sunday* was just a happy sidebar. More important for the film-

makers was the message of Smith's unyielding drive to give back—a stark contrast to what potentially could have been interpreted as selfish Americans terrorizing Baja with reckless abandon.

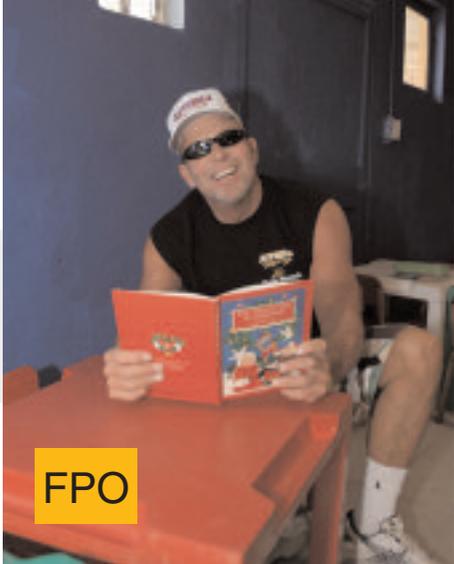
SMUGGLING HOPE

Veteran racers like Nick Baldwin understand the Golden Rule of Baja, and he has made giving back an integral part of his yearly runs at all three Tecate SCORE races, including the recent San Felipe 250. The former executive of a large and very successful vacation time-share business (his partner was fellow Riviera Racing Trophy-Truck driver Mark Post), Baldwin's charitable efforts join the ranks of Smith, SCORE president Sal Fish and others (see sidebar).

In 2005, Baldwin obeyed the Golden Rule. Together with more than 200 of his employees and friends, he collected and boxed over 3,000 items of food, clothes and baby supplies. His goal was to distribute basic necessities between the towns of Santo Tomas (south of Ensenada) and Ojos Negros, to the east. Both of these destinations are largely undeveloped villages, dotted with brown-eyed children who play on Baja's unpaved and overgrown backcountry roads amidst the dust that seems to cling to every building, road sign and vehicle.

Before that delivery could be made, however, Baldwin and his all-volunteer group faced the obstacle of crossing the border between the U.S. and Baja. On their first attempt, the Mexican border patrol denied passage to Baldwin's laden delivery truck. It's difficult to bring any items into Mexico, via Tijuana, without incurring an import tariff. The team then made countless trips in non-descript vans from California to the Coral Marina Hotel in Ensenada, smuggling in the contributions!

On the day of distribution, SCORE International president Sal Fish and his



Nick Baldwin, the man with the golden heart, enjoys a quiet moment in the newly finished schoolroom.

Mexican attorney Oscar Ramos joined Baldwin. It is a priority for SCORE to help enhance the image of American racers in Mexico, and Fish helped bring the delegates of both Santo Tomas and Ojos Negros to help hand out the donations to the poverty-stricken people of each town. The whirlwind day was capped off with a meeting with Ensenada's mayor.

"It all turned out to be a pretty big deal. I was just trying to do some little thing and have some fun," Baldwin explained with a touch of emotion. "That night, all of us, Sal and Oscar included, looked at each other and felt...different. For the whole crew, that experience was really cool, man; we must have touched the lives of 500 kids that morning. We went home and did a video, and I gave a copy to everyone that helped. We all felt really, really good about it."

ACTS OF KINDNESS

On a pre-run for last season's San Felipe race, Baldwin was eating at the city's famed Rice and Beans restaurant with owner and long-time friend Martin Romo. During their



The smiles of these two says it all. Their handcrafted "thank you" art includes red 99s, the number that Baldwin runs on his Trophy-Truck.

RIGHT: The A-Ok Wrecking crew of Brian Nix (left), Baldwin and San Felipe's Martin Romo have vowed to continue their work with *Jardin de Niños* well into the foreseeable future.

BELOW RIGHT: For Baldwin and his hardworking group of volunteers, the payoff of all their hard work is the love and gratitude of the San Felipe children. As Baldwin says, "there isn't anything more satisfying than helping these kids."



conversation, Romo revealed he was a volunteer English teacher at the local kindergarten—a small, dirt-floored San Felipe schoolhouse carrying the decidedly optimistic (at least by American standards) name of *Jardin de Niños* or, "Garden for the Children." The school abuts the town's famous Melacon, a picturesque beachside boulevard. San Felipe's engaging, tropical lifestyle makes it is easy for vacationers to overlook the daily struggle faced by local families to provide food and shelter for their children. Often times they must defer education and the promise of a better future for the

sake of survival. Romo's dedication to helping the young children of San Felipe learn another language—giving them hope for the future—moved Baldwin.

Upon his return to the U.S., Baldwin purchased a huge supply of books, videos and games to help his generous friend. The racer filled up the back of a Riviera

Racing chase truck, and headed back to San Felipe.

"They take me into this tiny room, all lined with these tiny little chairs," recalls Baldwin. "There was no floor. There was no ceiling. The whole thing was studded with these old two-by-fours, but there were no walls. It just kind of broke my heart."

Before leaving the school, Baldwin had the school children of San Felipe make him a promise. "So, I take Spanish lessons every week; I told them in my broken Spanish that I was coming back



A HISTORY OF GIVING



Throughout the last 40 years of racing in Baja, Americans have given of their time, resources and generous nature. Be it on a big scale or with the quiet dignity of private donations, the give and take of Baja has a long legacy within the racing community. Some of the most famous of these examples of the Golden Rule include:

HEALTH CLINIC AT RANCHO SANTA INEZ

In his typical fashion, Bill Stroppe was one of racing's pioneers in helping the people of Baja. For the first years of the Mexican 1000, one of the most important stops on the peninsula was the airstrip and small motel of Rancho Santa Inez, located near Catavina. The remote location was the first main pit stop of the race, a site made famous by Jim McKay and Wide World of Sports in their coverage of the 1968 event.

The matriarch of Rancho Santa Inez was Josephina Zuniga, who welcomed the racers with the warmth and kindness for which Baja is known. Rancho Santa

Inez was vital to the locals too, as the airstrip represented the only access to this remote part of Baja.

Stroppe, touched by Josephina's efforts to maintain the ranch despite the tough conditions, recognized the locals' need for medical care. Together with Parnelli Jones and other volunteers, Stroppe built a complete medical clinic next to the airstrip, and rebuilt an old ambulance to transport the sick and injured. While the clinic is no longer operational, the building is still standing—a lasting monument to the kindness of Stroppe and Jones.

TECATE SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF

Thanks to his record-breaking wins at the Baja 500 (and Toyota's effective public relations), Ivan "Ironman" Stewart is as popular south of the border as he is in the U.S. Baja helped forge his reputation, and he too wanted to give something back to the people of the peninsula.

More than a decade ago, Stewart and his wife Linda discovered Rancho Sordo Mudo, a small school serving deaf chil-

dren located near Tecate, just a short drive from the border. The school is run by Luke and Annie Everett, an American couple, answering a crucial need for the deaf children of Tijuana and Ensenada.

Each October for the past 11 years, the Stewarts have hosted an on-road charity motorcycle ride to help raise funds. The invitation-only ride starts near San Diego and includes a lunch reception at the school. It is usually attended by many off-road legends including Parnelli Jones and Walker Evans. According to Ivan, the effort normally raises between \$10,000 to \$15,000 per year.

EL OASIS ORPHANAGE IN VALLE DE TRINIDAD

In a charity effort made famous in *Dust to Glory's* heart-wrenching segment, *Hogar de Ninos el Oasis* is home to orphan children from all over northern Baja. Since 1999, off-road legend Malcolm Smith, his wife Joyce and their children have made the commitment to expand this once-tiny children's shelter located in Valle de Trinidad—a major stop

and that they needed to learn English to help them for the future. I was in this little dirty room with sweat just rolling off my face, but all I saw was the faces of these little kids that were just the cutest things. I promised to come back."

Before the prerunning weekend was over Baldwin had Romo oversee the installation of a proper floor for the school. Intent on doing more, he began forming what he calls his "A-OK Wrecking Crew." A-OK is an acronym for "Acts of Kindness," and the wrecking crew is a group of his construction cronies led by contractor Brian Nix. When Nix and the crew visited the school to measure the room for new construction, they too were caught up in the spirit of giving.

In the weeks preceding this year's San Felipe 250, Baldwin, Nix and five other volunteers loaded three trucks with dry-wall, paint, roofing and lumber. With Baldwin picking up the entire tab for construction, ("I'm the financial guy, not a builder," he joked), Nix, Romo and their team completely gutted the inside of the classroom and built new walls, a ceiling and new roof—all finished with a fresh coat of paint.

For Baldwin, the payoff came just after

the construction was complete. The city was celebrating its version of Mardi Gras, and he and the crew were on the Melacon with thousands of locals. Out of the crowd came one of the mothers whose children were touched by the Trophy-Truck driver's generosity; "So we are downtown in the middle of this giant party when I hear this woman shouting, 'Nick! Nick!' She brought over her kids, and pointed to her little girl. All of us knelt down to hear her. That little girl looked at me and said in broken English, 'Hello, my name is Lupita. I live in San Felipe. I go to *Jardin de Ninos*. Thank you for all your help.' Here was this little girl who lived up her promise to me when I made a promise to her and her schoolmates. All of us almost started balling our eyes out on the spot."

Declining outside help or the intrusion of the media, the A-OK crew is now renovating the rest of the school property. While the extensive renovation will be completed in phases, Baldwin hopes to make significant headway by this year's Tecate SCORE Baja 1000.

Among those who know him, Nick Baldwin is a walking paradox. On the outside, the racing veteran, who scored

his first major victory last season by winning the Best-In-The-Desert Las Vegas to Reno race overall, has a gruff voice and the body of a retired body-builder—earned by a 4th degree black belt in karate—and his tanned, weathered face only reinforces the tough guy persona. On the inside, however, the guy is all heart, and he admits the experience of giving back changed his life in a very positive way. His recent good fortune in selling a portion of his business has made him a wealthy man with even more time to devote to his new passion. He relates, "See, I don't really care about my money or my time, I just really want to make those kids happy. It's all about the people of Baja, they are the nicest people I've ever met in my life. They have a beautiful spirit, and they just need a little help.

"You know, this sport is full of great people that love Baja as much as I do," Baldwin continues, issuing this challenge to fellow racers: "pick your own project in some town that we run in, and just do something. It can be a little thing or a big thing or they can help me with contributions... It's not about me, it's about those beautiful people of Baja." 

in many Baja 500 and Baja 1000 races.

By tapping into the generosity of both two wheel and four wheel Baja enthusiasts, the Smiths have been able to expand *El Oasis* to house more than 50 children. They have also achieved a great deal of construction and housing improvements including donating more than \$50,000 in general operating funding, installing 2.5 miles of underground irrigation, building a basketball court and providing over 100 new bunk beds and furniture. Future plans call for the building of an afterschool educational center and library.

Recently, the Baja 1000 racers of the annual Wide Open Baja Challenge raised an additional \$43,000 in contributions. With the help of SCORE, racers added another \$10,000 at the Baja 500 drawing, an effort to build Chase House, at *El Oasis* in memory of Chase Feldkamp, the son of Class 1 racer Buddy and grandson of Baja legend Bud Feldkamp.

SCORE INTERNATIONAL

For decades, out of the public spotlight, Sal Fish and SCORE International have cooperated with local Baja officials, ranch-

ers and the Mexican government to maintain the balance between running the events and the meeting the needs of local residents. Of course, these efforts, both large and small, benefit those residents; however, community members also enjoy the enormous economic boost that races bring to local

hotels, gas stations, restaurants and innumerable taco stands.

For Fish, two efforts at giving back were the most memorable: the first was in the 1980s when Pennzoil backed the "Greening of Baja" project, planting thousands of pine tree seedlings in the famed Pine Forest. Another fond memory for Fish was when he picked up a donated ambulance from the East Coast and



Ivan Stewart (left) joins Rancho Sordo Mudo's Luke Everett (to his right) along with off-road legends Walker Evans and Pamelli Jones at Stewart's annual motorcycle ride.

drove it all the way to San Juanico.

Word has it that a group of fireman from California are donating "jaws of life" equipment to a needy Baja fire department as part of their rookie Class 11 effort at this year's 1000. As Fish shares, "I can't believe how proud I am of the entire SCORE family of racers. It's incredible how generous and kind they all can be."