

coaches

Baja Ballester

By MIKE MARINO
Emerald Sports Editor

Coaches are a much-stereotyped lot.

Most people don't seriously consider what coaches do away from their sports. In fact, given the chance most people might point to Vince Lombardi's "live, think and sleep football" statement and leave it at that. It is logical to some, after all, that people who make their living in recreation find that work and play is one in the same.

Hardly. To accept that point of view would be to accept the notion that an accountant would spend his or her weekend accounting, or a lawyer spending weekends trying cases, and so on. Wake up, America. Coaches are people.

Which is why it would be silly to assume that Oregon gymnastics coach Bill Ballester would spend his time grappling with rings and high bars or yelling instructions at a green freshman. No, sir. Like on a football field, basketball court or even golf course, one can be expected to take only so much.

But Ballester hasn't followed the pursuits of some of his fellow coaches. He hasn't chosen macramé, painting or Thursday night poker, nothing so mundane. Instead, it's a sport that most of us consider off-beat — and many of us consider out-and-out nuts: off-road racing.

But, mind you, Ballester is no nut. On a motorcycle or in a car — by off-road standards, two completely different worlds, and he's tried both — he's darn good at what he does. In that way, his life in the dirt varies little from his life inside a gym, intensity-speaking. Guessing from the gymnastics results — Oregon has consistently been one of the top teams in the country since Ballester's arrival in 1972 — you'd have to guess that he's a pretty mean cat in the desert. And you'd be right.

The reasons are pretty clear.

Competitive people usually go all-out in everything they do, gymnastics, off-road racing, or tidlywinks. Ballester is no exception. "In some ways it's an extension of the competitiveness of gymnastics," he said. But as a coach — and not having com-

things."

Because he's so competitive, though, this off-road business isn't like weekend bowling or fishing with Grandpa. It's serious stuff. It would have to be, at any rate, for anyone to tackle the ultimate challenge of the sport of off-road rac-

of people (\$300), and even then the rest are mostly shop riders that are paid by a company or manufacturer to race."

Ballester is no factory-sponsored pro. But in his seven years of motorcycle racing, he's reached a high level of compe-

not for gymnastics, mind you, but for racing — speaks for that — you don't get any younger out in the desert. But a year-and-a-half ago fate and the racing rules people decided to give the old folks a fighting chance: they created a 38-and-over class that makes it a lot easier and more competitive for the elder set.

"And as much as I love to race bikes, I just couldn't have continued trying to keep up with the younger racers in the open classes," he admitted. "But this old-timers class makes it fun and gives me a chance to win the thing." Don't get the idea that he won't. Racing against the "kids," in the Baja 500's of 1976 and 1977, Ballester finished 17th and 18th respectively. That's a lot of miles through lots of desert.

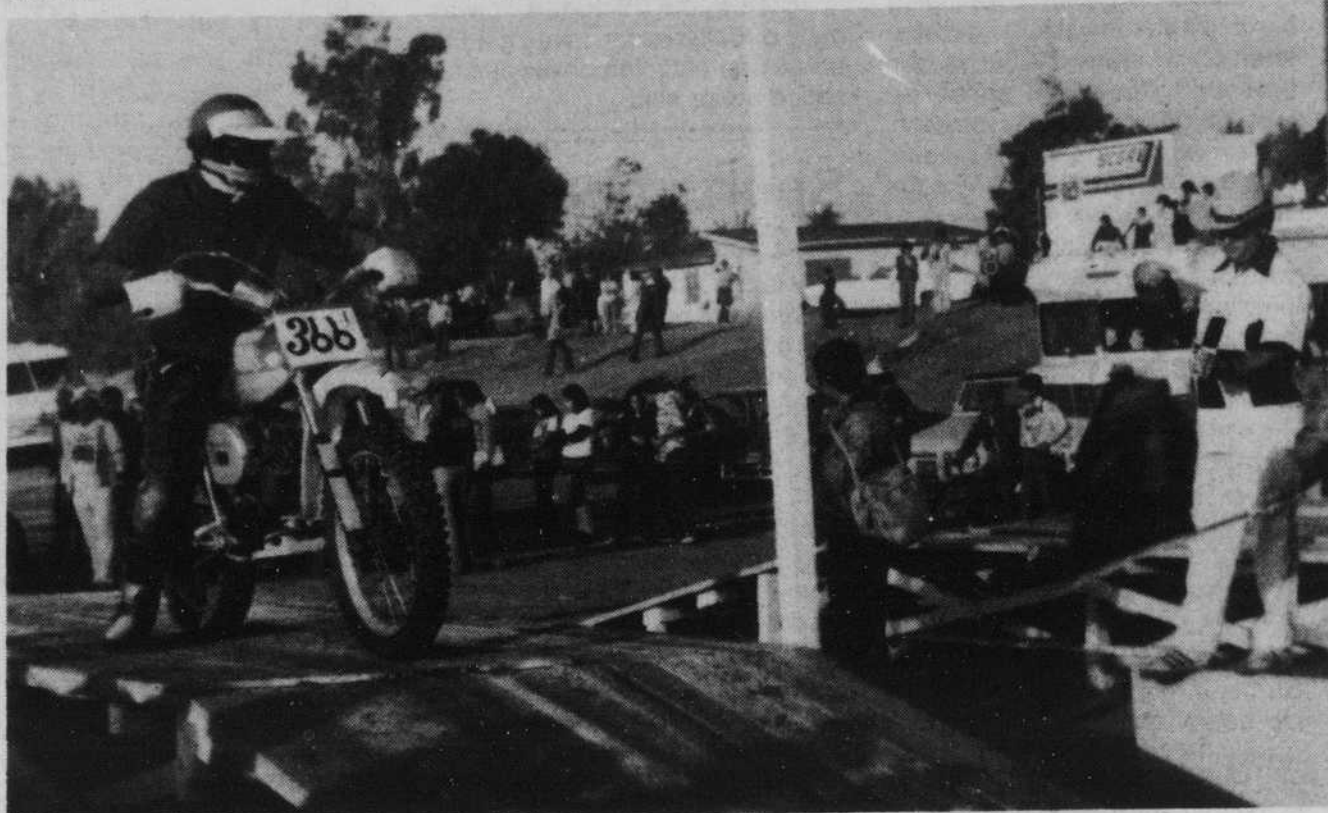
"There's really nothing out there," he said. "I mean there's cactus, sagebrush and desert, but that's about it. If you break down, you're miles from nowhere."

The basic philosophy behind desert racing, is of course not to stop. But fate and the world of mechanics don't always agree. In the Baja 1,000 last November, for example, Ballester's car — until recently owned jointly by he and a partner — broke down. "We were just there, in the desert," Ballester recalled. "There was nothing around, so we sat for 25 hours and built fires. You have 'stuck stubs' that you can give to people if they happen to pass by you, but basically you're there until the patrol comes out after the race and finds you."

It wasn't a terribly pleasant experience. While the desert may mimic a pizza oven by day, it's more like a freezer at night, ergo the fires. "We just got plain cold," he said. "The kid who was with me (Ballester's partner's 21-year old son) flat out crashed, and I got colder. All I had on was my racing suit, and it got down to about 40. It was pretty chilly."

Ballester and his partner made sure of one thing, though, something that all veterans of the sport heed. "You never leave your rig, that's one thing that you learn. Walking around, you can just get dehydrated and die — it's that bad."

It's no picnic, this Baja. If one thing doesn't get you, another thing might — speed. Traveling at up to 100 miles on any terrain is dangerous enough, but throw in the desert and you've got potential trouble. "In the 1,000 we saw one guy that had gotten killed," Ballester recalled grimly. "In this slow section a bunch of Mexicans were yelling 'dead, dead,' but I could see him and the guy in the car was sitting upright and the car wasn't damaged. He didn't seem dead. (Cont. on page 5B)



Here, Ballester waits for the start of the 1976 Baja 500 in Ensenada, Mexico. He finished 17th overall in this race.

peted since college at Southern Illinois — it's the athletes who are doing the competing. "It gives me something that I can do myself," Ballester added. "Racing the bike or in the car gives me a chance to be competitive."

More importantly, it's a diversion, a chance to get away from side horses, iron crosses and dismounts — not to mention the duties he incurs as the Assistant to the Dean of Student Administrative Services. "This is the only thing I do that keeps me not occupied with gymnastics all the time. It's the only thing that gets my mind off that and the rest of the

ing: the Baja. And Ballester has gone Mexico way three times now, and each time he has gone to the cactus with the same philosophy.

"In the Baja, you don't go out thinking you're going to win," he said. "You just want to finish it. The Baja is the biggest, most challenging race in the world — just to do it is thrill enough."

Fun-seekers beware — the Baja isn't for the typical chump who wants to get a bang out of driving his Blazer on a bunch of dirt roads. "You don't do it if you're not serious," Ballester warned. "The entry fee alone scares a lot

tency for a 41-year old, an age that seems ancient next to the 20- to 25-year olds that frequent the sport nowadays. "In most off-road racing on bikes, you have your novices, amateurs and experts," he said. "I've come up through the ranks in that. Two years ago, I was the number two amateur in Oregon — and the guy that was number one had never beaten me, he was just more consistent."

"And at the end of the season I caught him in total points but my bike broke down and I didn't finish the race."

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