

coaches

Baja

(Cont. from
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just stalled, but later we learned that he had hit a tree head-on. And he had just gotten in to the car; a Class A racer from Texas.

Ballester has had a few bumps and bruises, although nothing nearly so bad. "Some people have a built in safety mechanism, and I think I do," he said. "I've gone down hard, though. In the 1,000, I was going down the road in the car and all of a sudden the road narrowed. I took out a fence post and crushed part of the car's body, but it didn't hurt. I just wasn't as pretty as when we started out."

Avoiding the mishaps is the beckoning call of the Baja. But skill is most important to answer it. "You have to read terrain, and have the ability to concentrate," Ballester said. "Every inch of the course is different, and you have to keep your mind on everything. The challenge is keeping that concentration for the whole race."

Ballester has raced bikes for a much longer time than cars — but in cars, he's equally successful (like an 8th place finish in the two-seater class of the Coors Firecracker 250 last July) and he owes it to his trials on the two-wheeler. Anyone can see that it requires much more control on a cycle than in a car, but one helps the other. "Knowledge of the desert is the important thing, and the success I've had in the car is simply because I learned on the bike."

He's raced two cars in his shorter four-wheel career, both of the two-seat, unlimited-engine type. His most recent buggy, a "Hi-jumper" class called Dos Amigos, carried his team to the finish in the Coors race in Barstow, Calif.

Things looked bright along those lines until a recent money squabble arose between Ballester and his racing partner, forcing a split between the two. And in the meantime, while he decides how much his half of the car is worth,



Last November, Ballester (driving here) and his partner entered their car in the Baja 1,000, but did not finish. The same car had earlier won

the Coors Firecracker 250.

Ballester realizes that his car racing career might be over, unless certain things happen. First, he must hunt for a sponsor, someone to back a car (like a dealership), or someone who owns a car that needs a partner. And if the latter is the case, only an experienced partner would make things worthwhile.

"If I could disregard the variables, then I'd pick cars if I had a choice. But in the cars there's always someone who can mess things up for you," he said. It's far from conceit: Ballester simply likes to take things into his own hands. "We were leading the 1,000 when my partner took over," he said. "We broke down after 20 minutes."

But bikes, that's another ball-

game. "Baja made its reputation in cars, sure, but for me bikes are a little more fun, in that I don't have to depend on anybody else, and it's a little more personalized type of a thing. A bike is more likely to go the distance, too, and there's more rider skill involved."

The bikes themselves are pretty well even as far as speed goes. Right now, Ballester sports a white Husqvarna, the make which he'll not hesitate to tell you has dominated the off-road scene for a while. And it's an automatic, which helps. "It's just like cheating," he grinned. "You don't have to worry about shifting at all, and it really has an advantage in loose sand, where it seeks its own gear and doesn't spin out."

Prominently placed next to the

Husqvarna in the Ballester garage is a smaller red Honda, property of eight-year-old Billy and a signal that the whole Ballester clan is involved in the sport.

"We do it as a family," Ballester smiled. "Last year in the Baja we spent two weeks down there before the race, and then two weeks after getting ready for another race (the Firecracker). We bring our motor home along and have a lot of fun."

One thing, though, has recently kept Ballester from his "diversion": the arm injury he suffered during the season trying to catch one of his gymnasts. But last weekend a trip to Eastern Oregon and rides with his son showed Ballester that perhaps his arm is farther along in recovery than he

thought. "It felt pretty good last weekend," he said. "If it stays that way I might enter the Old-Timers class in the Baja and just go at a slow pace — just to finish."

The next 500 is set for June 7-8, and while time permits, which it often doesn't, Ballester may jump at the opportunity. "If I want to be super competitive then I'd race 10 or 12 times a year," he said. "My jobs keep me from competing any more than three or four — but they come first. If racing interfered with my coaching, then of course I would stop."

But right now it doesn't. And when he can, Bill Ballester will keep taking time out to have fun — and prove that coaches can do that just as well as anyone else. Maybe better.

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