

The Famous Old Barstow To Vegas Desert Race

I finished this famous race twice, first in 1973 and again in 1974. The Sierra Club and the BLM then shut the race down to protect endangered turtles. I never saw one out there; and I never thought I would see footage like this again. However, a few guys got together to ride part of the old route, which gave me chills to watch and remember. There are two versions below, the longer one gives more detail, but the short one does a good job as well. My greatest memory was the first year, coming to the top of that 2,500' "hill" and looking over the edge at that steep 900' drop over rocky terrain! I hesitated; but I was in a race and there was no turning back! It was an emotional memory to watch all this footage; and remember I finished this 180-mile race across the Mojave desert twice, when I was 34 and 35!

Both these are good but the longer one was is the best!

Shorter version 15 minutes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-wwEwLrKXE>

Longer version 27 minutes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jODFoBZagyY>



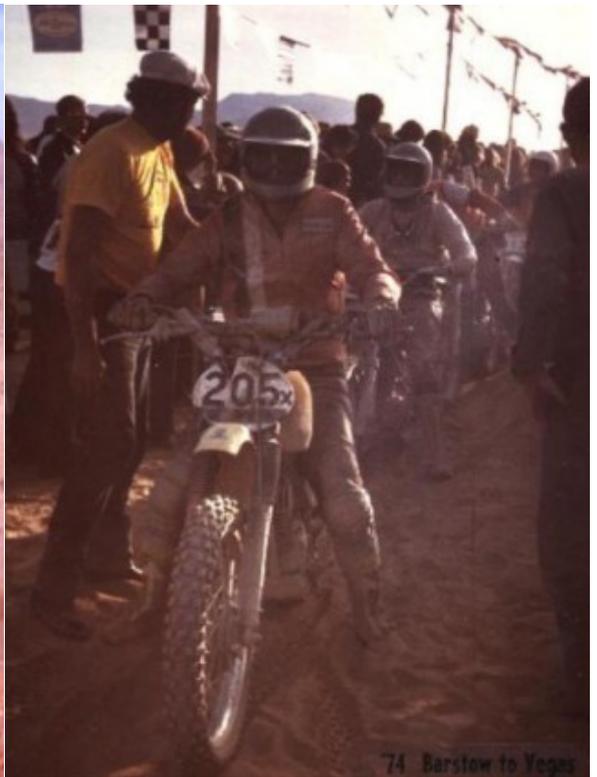
A partial shot of the Barstow to Vegas start! Thousands started; hundreds finished

I was impressed with much of the above BtoV videos, but let me be clear. I never saw any railroad tracks, or crossed bridges **over** I-15, or miles of what appeared to be well worn four-wheeler trails. The rock filled sandy hollows are flash flood creek beds and I did see those. What the videos miss is the vast majority of this 180-mile race was across open desert, weaving in and out of what we called pucker bushes, because if you hit one at speed your asshole would pucker as you endowed ass over tea kettle to the ground!

There were also large dry salt lakes that looked like a Bonneville opportunity for some high speed make up time. On my first run I learned the crust gives way instantly to the mud below. So, over the handle bars I went and it was hell dragging that front wheel out of the sucking mire. Answer! Go around those inviting smooth looking places and stay with the pucker bushes.

At some point the route also went into the mountains. Remember this race was always run in late November on Thanksgiving weekend. On my first run in 1973, it was snowing like hell up there and cold too; and we were all just dressed for a hot run on a desert. By the time I got to State line I was so dehydrated and Hypoglycemic, I was suffering some strange confusion and visions. I will never forget I somehow imagined seeing a black four mast schooner cross my field of vision, just before I got to the pit stop!

We had three main pit stops and one alternate along the way, my fiancée Jonnie was driving our car and trailer to Vegas, and the race route at those pit stop locations was not far off Interstate 15. She had to hike in with the gas can, water and the sugar pills we were all advised to take! At locations along the route there were also photographers who took pictures and later found you by your plate number and offered copies for a small fee. They were also at the finish line. I have posted four photos of me here, two from '73 and two from '74. Both races were the hardest physical thing I have ever done!!! Way beyond the USMC 150-mile, five-day march from 29 Palms back to Camp Pendleton when I was just 21. In '73 my plate# was 225; in 1974 it was 205. I think you can see from these photos what the real course was like -- open desert not four-wheel trails; and the finish line was just a place of exhaustion!



The below was from the monthly news letter for the employees and clients of the advertising agency I worked for. KM&G was the headquarters in Pittsburgh, PA. I worked for Botsford-Ketchum (BK), in the Los Angeles branch of the San Francisco company KM&G had acquired in 1969. Ketchum is now global and just goes under the name Ketchum Inc. This short article was also picked up by Advertising Age!



Man vs. Nature: Bob is challenged by rugged terrain.

**“People in Los Angeles are crazy . . .
People in Advertising are crazy . . .
People who ride motorcycles are crazy . . .”**

All meaningless generalizations—right? But what about a guy like Bob Rohrer, Account Executive for BK Los Angeles (on Yamaha, of course).

Bob spends almost every weekend hauling out his Yamaha YZ250 and racing motocross. He recently took first place in his class in the SCORE/AC-Delco World Championship Off-Road Race at Riverside International Raceway. A few weeks later he finished the famed Barstow to Vegas desert race which runs for about 180 trackless miles across the Mojave Desert (non-stop, except for refueling). In this race, 2922 riders started and only 1475 finished. Bob came in 588.

Bob doesn't really spend ALL his free time riding his motorcycle. During the week, after work, he is busy preparing his bike for the weekend. Now, is that crazy?

Pittsburgh . . .

Sometimes it's difficult to express affection in words. Sometimes it's easier to show it in deed. So the Alpha Group took up a collection toward this end to show Bob Carter (the group's Creative Director) how they felt about him. Result: They bricked up his office door.

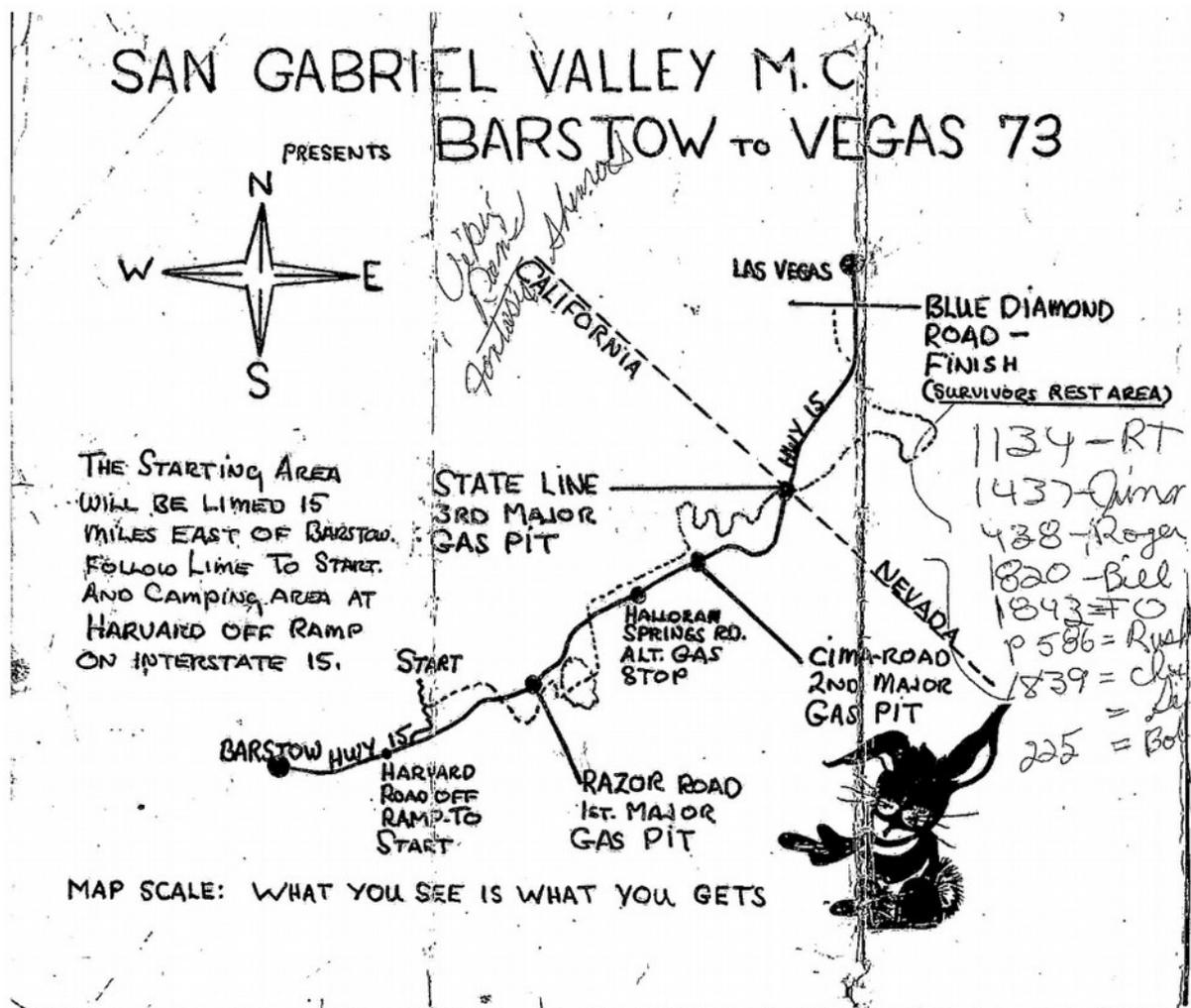
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Editor: Sharon Simeral
Advisor: Bob Vogel



For my first big desert race, my client Dick Thomas, the Yamaha Advertising Manager, asked me to be the organizer for the Yamaha group. See below for my memo to Dick. I was not really keen on this as I had enough to think about for my own planning.

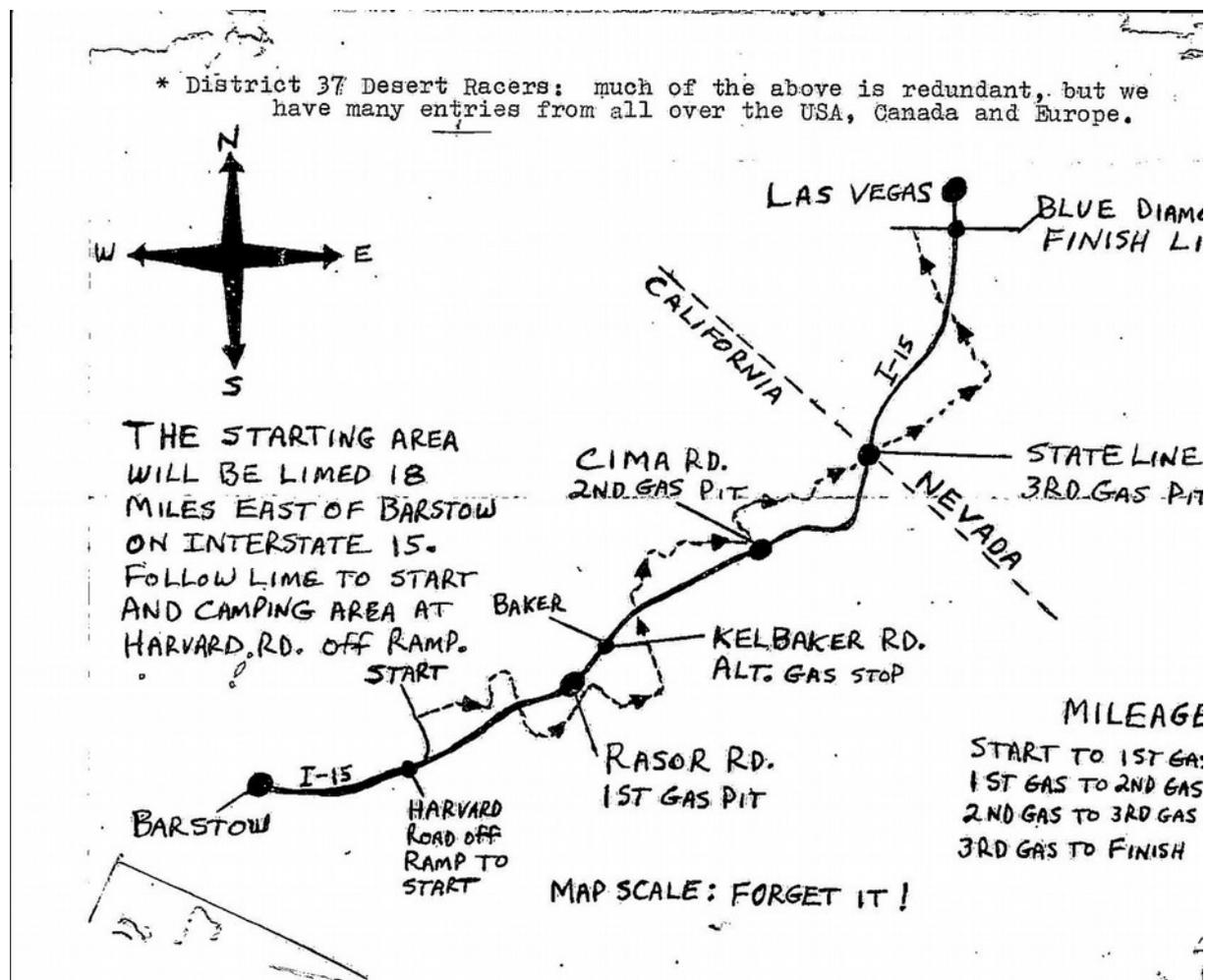
But he was the Client! Of the Yamaha group, Roger Riddel and I were the only two that finished. I had another group of friends in the race, and when I got to State line, they were already there. When they started hollering at me "Hey, where have you been?" I initially thought they were all there ahead of me but no, they had all dropped out back at one of the early pit stops, and were just waiting there in their motorhome to see me come through and holding up cold beers to tease me. I had scribbled their plate #'s on the map so Jonnie would know which were our friends. I don't remember now but I think they all quit by Gas pit #1 at Razor Road!

The start had been a real bitch! I will never forget the sound when the command over the PA was "Gentlemen, start your engines"! Imagine nearly 3,000 bikes all firing up at once. A shotgun was the signal to head for the bomb, which was a pile of burning tires a mile or so away. So now we have 3,000 racers all headed for one spot where the course began. From then on, the way you knew where to go for the next 179 miles, were just little pieces of plastic tape tied to bushes and trees. You had to keep your eyes out for the tape or you could get lost once the crowd started to spread out. But I can say it was one hell of a congestion at that bomb! See the start photo above. This was a motocross start on **steroids**, and a lot of guys did not even make the bomb!



Below is the 1974 B-to-V Map – Pretty much the same course. My late USMC friend George Witchell and his girlfriend joined Jonnie and me. They drove to Vegas, I raced! I knew the drill this year and placed higher in the finishing numbers. One sad thing. I guy I had raced with several times, and who had been the winner in 1973, was still missing even when I got to the finish. Rescue crews had been sent out and they found Mitch Mayes, the great champion, immobilized in the desert. He had hit a pucker bush at high speed, and in going over the handlebars to the ground, the crash had broken his neck in the worst way, he was then a Quadriplegic!!

I saw Mitch a couple of times after this. He had opened a motorcycle dealership in the high desert. The last time I saw him was in 1979. I was then with Harley Davidson and on a street ride from LA to San Francisco. It was a hard visit to make having known him when he was the greatest! I'm very glad I made it a point to stop and say Hi! And he knew I had known him when...



12 30 a.m. (P.M.) Date 11/21/73
to Thomas from B. Rohrer

Botsford Ketchum Inc.

3435 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 700, Los Angeles, California 90010, Telephone (213) 385-4011, Cable: BOTSKINT.

TO: Dick Thomas DATE: 11/21/73

FROM: Bob Rohrer SUBJECT: BARSTOW TO VEGAS

I will be leaving Friday morning for Barstow and plan to be there sometime around noon. I am staying at the Holiday Inn of Barstow located at 1500 East Main Street, Barstow, CA 92311. The telephone number is 714/256-6891.

I will stay in my room at the Holiday Inn until 2PM, at which time I plan on going out to the start area. It is therefore requested that all gas for our pits be delivered to me at the Holiday Inn before 2PM. I will return to the Holiday Inn at around 5PM at which time the pit crews can pick up this gasoline if they have not already done so at 2PM.

SUGGESTIONS

Each rider should have four gas cans clearly identified:

Rider

Gas Can Markings

Roger Riddel

Ron Knapp

Chuck Smith

Dick Thomas

Bob Rohrer

White plastic can, one strip of duct tape around can, red letter "R" all 4 sides.

Rider

Identification

Roger Riddel

Ron Knapp

Chuck Smith

Dick Thomas

Bob Rohrer

#225X, Yellow jersey, yellow leathers, silver helmet, 250MX

San Francisco Los Angeles Seattle New York Washington Pittsburgh Houston Tokyo London

copy for Dick
[re]ceived to Thomas From B. Roth
12:02 a.m. / p.m. () Date 11/21/73

Dick Thomas
11/21/73
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When the gas and oil is divided up at the Holiday Inn, one can should go to each pit crew. Since the rider instructions explicitly state that pit 1 access is limited, and that in fact the CHP will close access to this pit at 9AM, pit crew 1 should plan to go directly to the Razor Road pit 1 Friday night to establish the most advantageous pit location.

BR/c

cc: Ron Knapp
Jim Evans
Tom Smith
Jack Casey
Roger Riddel
Chuck Smith

Handwritten signature: J. Roth

Scanning this old article was really tedious. Without cutting up my original I could not find a way to get it all in without copying the top and bottom, It's all here but the Motorsports Weekly article photo and the article copy have been separated to utilize the space:

MOTORSPORTS WEEKLY — PAGE 3



BARSTOW, CALIF., Nov. 24 — Half of 3,200 riders in the annual Barstow to Vegas race took off at 8:30 a.m. and the rest at 9. To say it was worse than downtown Los Angeles at rush hour would be an understatement. (Dennis Greene Photo)

Barstow To Vegas Race Attracts 3,200 Riders

By Steven Parker

LAS VEGAS, NEV., Nov. 24 — From a spot in the Southern California desert to the adult Disneyland of Las Vegas is a long way to come on a motorcycle, but over 3,200 riders gave it a try during the San Gabriel Valley Motorcycle Club's annual Barstow to Vegas race.

The course that was plotted was said to be the hardest in the history of the run, a fact that was attested to by the relatively small amount of finishers.

The 40 members of the club that plotted the course threw in a full-fledged, card-carrying mountain, innumerable dry riverbeds and washes and lots of other things that were meant to keep the riders a little more than occupied for the duration of this race, one of the longest on the Continental United States.

Because of the fuel shortage, political problems in the area and a rash of other events, this Barstow-Vegas run was rumored to have been the last. Thus, the rider turnout was extremely heavy, and, to coin a phrase, a good time was had by all.

The riders and spectators who turned out on that Saturday morning (some put the figure as high as 35,000) to witness or participate in the start of the race were greeted by the below freezing temperatures and fantastically clear and beautiful sky of the Southern California desert, about 10 miles out of the rest stop known as Barstow.

Many of the racers and friends had a difficult time finding the starting line, but after searching the hills and lowlands and getting out of the ever deepening sand that led nowhere, most of the people were able to make it to sign up and the line by the time the event was going to get underway.

The riders left in two waves, one at 8:30 and the second at 9 a.m. The line spread for at least a mile over the Mojave, with spectators lining both sides of the course for as far as the eye could see. As helicopters hovered overhead, dodging the light planes that showed up to take a look, the flag atop a truck near one end of the course dropped and 1,600 desert racers kicked up and took off.

Within 10 seconds, the dust was too thick to see through, and the majority of spectators took off to either pit for their racer at the first gas stop or merely to cruise to Vegas and wait for the end of it all.

Over the rough ground, through the soft sand, under freeway overpasses they charged,

and at the second gas stop Mitch Mayes blasted into the pits in the lead, with Jim Fishbeck hot in pursuit. Fishbeck took the lead as Mayes fueled, and it was clear that the race was between these two hotshoes. The rest of the pack was running more than 10 minutes behind these two leaders.

At the third and last gas stop, at the state line between Nevada and California, Mayes on the Husky was again in the lead with a 45-second space between himself and Fishbeck. Now running in a solid third about 9 minutes behind the leaders was Scott Harden on a 250 Husqvarna.

Fifteen minutes behind him the rest of the pack started to trickle in. The riders gassed up, and as flagmen stopped traffic on a small portion of paved road off the freeway, they headed off on the last 41-mile stretch into Vegas.

Watching Mayes racing just off the freeway, he was blasting through the desert at speeds upwards of 80 mph, easily passing the majority of cars that rode the pavement just a few yards away.

At 12:15 p.m., 3 hours and 45 minutes after he started the race, Mitch Mayes entered the winners area, located across from a lovely Union 76 Truck Stop outside of Las Vegas. Just 12 seconds later, Jim Fishbeck,

Jr., on a 400 CZ, blasted over the line for a well deserved second place. Scott Harden took third, his 250 Husky putting up a strong case against the 400 of Mayes. 17 minutes separated first and third, and 25 minutes separated third and fourth.

Dave Cheney on a 360 Yamaha was fourth, and Wayne Cook on a 250 Honda Elsinore came in fifth. Favorite A.C. Baaken astride a 400 Husky as was leader Mayes, copped sixth place, with Bill Statts on a four-stroke 350 Honda taking the seventh position. The rest of the pack pulled in at all times during the day and night. One fellow finished 2 hours and 15 minutes after the leader. He came in 162nd.

The night in Vegas was one of good times, with the majority of families of bikers hitting all the clubs and generally getting in the way of the better dressed usual Vegas set. It was worth the race just to see a dirty Yamaha 360 sitting in the back of a filthy pickup, with the owner checking into Caesars Palace.

The morning after, driving to Los Angeles, at least 1,000 pickups and campers waited for word about the fate of their riders. There were injuries during the racing, a lot of breakdowns and rumors, and the families and friends could only wait for their hero to show up out of the desert after a cold night of rain and snow.

It should happen again next year with the same crew. The Barstow to Vegas run is one of the best in the nation.



BARSTOW, CALIF., Nov. 24 — Eventual second place finisher Jim Fishbeck makes final gas stop near California-Nevada state line in Barstow-Vegas race. (Dennis Greene Photo)



LAS VEGAS, NEV., Nov. 24 — Mitch Mayes rode a 400cc Husky to first place in the Barstow-Vegas race. (Dennis Greene Photo)