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September 2010

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THE ESSENCE OF POINTING p.96

STAN DOG

at the BORDER

By Tom Leweck

The Ensenada Race's decision to bar Randy Reynolds and his R33 catamarans spawned a competing event and split the potential fleet. Can these two Southern California races find a way to coexist?

*South of the border, down Mexico way,
That's where I fell in love, when the stars above came out to play.
And now as I wander, my thoughts ever stray
South of the border, down Mexico way.*

Singer/cowboy Gene Autry sang those lyrics in the '40s hit movie *Down Mexico Way*. It was a time when picturesque Mexican towns on the Baja California peninsula provided a convenient, fun, and always

interesting getaway for many American tourists.

It was only a few years later that the founding members of the Newport Ocean Sailing Association (NOSA) organized a 125-mile ocean race

from Newport Beach, Calif., to Ensenada, Mexico. The initial race in 1948 attracted 117 boats, and the event quickly escalated to become the "world's largest international yacht race," hitting its zenith in 1983 with 675 entries.

"NOSA takes pride in the fact that our race has served to extend the hand of friendship across the border," said NOSA Commodore Doug Jones.

PAT REYNOLDS



"It's been a win-win for the two cities, the two states, and the two countries."

But times change, and not all of the changes have been good for Mexico. In recent years, drug trafficking has become such a serious problem that Mexican President Felipe Calderon has found it necessary to dispatch the Mexican Army to fight the drug cartels. Since 2006, according to many news sources, at least 23,000 people

have been killed in those battles.

Not surprisingly, the escalating violence has negatively impacted Mexican tourism. NOSA's Newport to Ensenada Race has suffered, too.

Is Ensenada safe for tourists these days? The thousands of people who visit there each month on a continuing parade of Southern California-based cruise ships would seem to say it is. But a big part of the Ensenada

Race has been friends and family driving south to meet the racers for a weekend getaway. Plus, not every sailor returns on the boat. And getting to and from Ensenada by car may be another matter.

The Baja California border town of Tijuana, just north of Ensenada, has been plagued by such violence that tourism there has totally disappeared. Still, many people claim that

if you can avoid Tijuana—if you stay on the toll road between the border and Ensenada—there is no danger.

“It’s perfectly safe,” says NOSA marketing professional Ralph Rodheim. “The perception that all of Mexico is a war zone is so inaccurate. My wife goes down by herself. If there were even a 1-percent chance of a problem, I would not go down to Ensenada. While crime and violence [in Mexico] are very real problems, those problems do not exist in the areas used and traveled by Ensenada racers and their families.”

Oscar Kawanishi, the director of the bureau of tourism in Ensenada, is quick to point out that the city itself has not had any problems or safety issues. According to Kawanishi, tourism in Ensenada is actually picking up.

However, one thing is for certain: the number of entries in the Newport to Ensenada Race has been spiraling downward, from 468 in 2004 to 391 in 2008 to just 217 last April. Jones feels strongly that the primary reason is the poor economy. However, he acknowledges that Mexico’s reputation isn’t helping.

There is, however, another important reason why the Ensenada Race has shrunk by 174 entries in the last two years: the introduction of a competing point-to-point race that has taken place on the same weekend, starting from the same spot and following a similar course. Instead of finishing in Mexico, however, the Border Run ends in San Diego—60 miles short of Ensenada—eliminating the need for passports and long lines at the border ... as well as the potential danger of traveling south of the border.

In 2009, 112 boats entered the inaugural Border Run. This year, the race attracted 182 entries.

Why would anyone organize a race to go head-to-head against the Newport to Ensenada Race, which has been a Southern California icon for 63 years? The answer is simple: because NOSA denied his boat entry into their event.

Randy Reynolds builds sailboats and loves racing them. He created the Reynolds 33 catamaran, which *Sailing World* named as a 2006 Boat of the Year

Ensenada, Mexico, is safe, say local tourism officials and Newport to Ensenada Race organizers (above, tossing out hats during the 2010 awards party). However, Mexico’s violent reputation has caused sailors to consider an alternative.



award winner in the Best Multihull category.

“Whether you’re out racing around the cans on Tuesday nights, sailing in that 50-mile local event, or even just going on an overnight with the family to the islands, the R33

will make you smile,” wrote judge Chuck Allen in our January/February 2006 issue. “I’m not sure if I would race from San Francisco to Kaneohe on one, but I think most other events would be a blast.”

Not long after receiving the BOTY award, two R33s capsized while racing in Southern California. Safety concerns prompted the Ocean Racing Catamaran Association (ORCA) to decertify the R33 from their events.

Rather than stop racing, Reynolds formed XS Racing. Under this banner, R33s continued to race, without further incident, in major regattas, including both the 2007 and the 2008 Ensenada Races. Still, the NOSA Board of Directors had concerns about the safety of the R33. After some serious soul searching, they voted to deny them entry into their 2009 race.

“We were worried that, at night, some 10 miles offshore, is not the time to have certain kinds of boats out there,” says Jones. “An accident would only add another reason for people to be worried about racing at night on the ocean blue.”

“Frustration” was the word used by Reynolds to describe his emotions when he learned of NOSA’s decision. “I wanted to be in that race,” he says, “plus I had two R33s chartered for the event.”

Rather than lose those charter fees, Reynolds decided to stage his own race from Newport Beach on the same day.

“We thought our little *fun run* might attract perhaps 20 multihulls,” says Reynolds. “Maybe 15 beach cats and five larger multihulls that either did not want to, or could not race with ORCA to Ensenada.” To allow the competitors to experience the excitement of sailing with the big Ensenada fleet, he scheduled his start for the same time and planted his starting line about a mile away from that of NOSA’s.

While Reynolds’ initial focus was on multihulls, the event only gained serious traction when monohull sailors got wind of it. A significant number of the early entries came from people Reynolds describes as “used-to-be” Ensenada racers.

Reynolds went to great lengths to eliminate as many barriers to entry as possible. The Border Run does not require skippers to belong to a yacht club or to PHRF. Boats without valid PHRF ratings sail in the XS Racing Mono Classes with handicaps assigned by Reynolds. And if a boat doesn’t have sail numbers, it’s OK to make some with duct tape. “All we really need is some way to identify boats at the finish line,” Reynolds says. The Border Run does not even require owners to pay the entry fee until just before the race.

Border Run competitors can choose either the 70-mile course that goes directly from Newport Beach to San Diego, or a 91-mile option that adds the North Coronado Island as a turning mark.

“They make it very easy to race,” says

Farr 40 owner David Voss, a veteran of some 10 Ensenada Races. "Just fill out a simple online entry form, and you're good to go. I think they've invented a better mouse trap."

NOSA officials were very upset that the 2009 Border Run started on the same date as their Ensenada race. So, Reynolds agreed to move his 2010 start from Friday to Saturday. This concession probably turned out to be a plus for the Border Run. Although the racers missed mingling with the Ensenada fleet, a Saturday start meant crews could put in a full week of work. "That change may be the reason we got the 70-foot sleds to our event this year," Reynolds says. "It's hard for a big crew of 12 to 14 people to all get Friday off."

"This is an international race," Rodheim says. "You are sailing from one country to another. It gives boaters the opportunity to get experience with and get excited about ocean racing."

NOSA officials are very 'bullish' about the future of the Newport to Ensenada Race, calling attention to their level of professionalism. Jones is confident the enthusiasm displayed by this year's participants will encourage others at their respective yacht clubs to join the fun in 2011. "Unless Mexico implodes," he says, "I can guarantee we will have an increase in entries next year."

There is even greater optimism in the headquarters of the Border Run. "Our vision is to do what the Italians are doing in Trieste, where they get 1,800 to

expressed interest in eliminating the conflict, something that is strongly supported by a number of the racers.


"I've been enjoying the Ensenada Race since the late '50s and look forward to it every year," says Dennis Conner, who steered his Farr 60 *Stars & Stripes* to second in Ensenada's Maxi Class this year. "It's an interesting and challenging race. But the Border Run is a good race, as well. Finishing in San Diego, instead of Ensenada, with the problems in Mexico right now, certainly has appeal as well. If I could, I would do both."

Doug Baker, who holds the elapsed-time course records for both races, agrees. Baker set the current Ensenada elapsed-time record in 2009 with his Alan Andrews-designed *Magnitude 80*. This year, Baker chartered the Reichel/Pugh 77 *Akela* and entered the Border Run because more of the Southern California big boats had signed up there.

"I've done 35 Ensenada races," Baker says, "and I love the experience. I love the racecourse, and I love the tradition. But we also enjoyed the Border Run. There's no denying that they are both good races. It's really too bad that they overlap."

Baker and Conner, and anyone else who's a fan of both races, may get their wish next year. It appears that this prolonged story of conflict will have a happy ending. After a series of discussions between Reynolds and NOSA, it appears the two races will run on separate weekends in 2011. A late Easter essentially blocked off the last weekend in April—traditionally the Ensenada Race has been on this weekend so it can also serve as a feeder race for San Diego YC's Yachting Cup, which is the first weekend in May—so both races had to find alternate dates. NOSA has scheduled the start of their Newport to Ensenada Race for Friday, April 15, and Reynolds has agreed to stage the Border Run a week earlier, on April 9, provided he can convince other Southern California race organizers to clear the date for him as they've done for the Ensenada Race. So far, that seems to be working out very nicely.

And it also looks like Reynolds will again be able to race his beloved R33 to Ensenada. He's worked out his issues with the ORCA, and the R33 has been welcomed back—sailing in their new Extreme Class with either a mandatory EPIRB or satellite phone.



"We thought our little *fun run* might attract 15 beach cats and five larger multihulls that did not want to or could not race to Ensenada."

—Border Run founder Randy Reynolds, creator of the R33 catamaran (above)

Jones agrees that the Border Run is easier to do than the longer Ensenada Race, but stresses that shouldn't be the priority. In the Newport to Ensenada Race program he wrote: "We race this race not because it is the easiest, but because when we have completed this race, we feel as though we have completed an adventure."

2,200 boats at a regatta," Reynolds says. "It's a numbers game for us now. We want to get first-time racers and also old-timers who don't race anymore. We'd even like to include windsurfers and kitesurfers."

Having both events on the same weekend will not help either group achieve its goals. Both of the race organizers have