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VIVA Broncos!

BY KURT STRECKER - ARIZONA & BRONCO DRIVER STAFF



As a young San Diego kid, I was immersed into the speed culture but I was too young and poor to build anything. The Army gave me the first experience into the world of off - roading. Back in the 60's... and as a young kid I was too stupid for words and felt indestructible. I jumped the trench line into the battlefields in a Honda Dream vehicle we took off the enemy. It was Vietnam 1967-1968. By the time I returned to the states - I had aged and the world of racing had evolved. No more 'Hair and Hound' desert racing, NORRA was now king. Ed Pearlman's, Baja 1000 was the new off road Indy 500. It called, no it screamed at me to come compete and so I did.

Now - over 50 years later those days in the desert and on the streets having fun in powerful metal horses are ' kinda' etched in the brain. Back then we played hard, partied harder, and ran at a break neck speed. So as some of the details may now fade into fuzzy - the stories and history are still worth reminiscing, and the pictures capture those moments in time.





Why Ford Bronco?

I remember as a kid seeing the first International Scout in a mechanical magazine. I was struck by the ability it had to take parts, panels, and the even the roof apart - it was so universal. The Jeep had no hard top back then, but the IH Scout was so adjustable to any life style. My best friend in high school had a CJ 5 with a 327 V8, I envied him so. It was fast, and he took me on major Jeep runs in the desert, Sierra al Jamal, Tahoe trails, etc.. I was hooked!

So when I came back from Vietnam, and thrust myself into college, all I had was a pedal power 10 speed, a loving wife that was a nurse, and no other aspirations but to finish school. After I got my under graduate degree I decided it was a good idea to go on to Law School. Needing extra cash for necessities - I had the luck to get on as a gardener at my wives hospital in El Cajon, California. Just happens the boss there was the local president of the Los Badadores Four - Wheel(4WD) drive club. He had an awesome Bronco and it just made me fall head over hills for the ability of that old thing.

So, I saved and bought a 1966 Ford bronco (hated that 10 speed). It was all uphill from there. Jeep runs, club runs, and

I went crazy for anything in the dirt. I was hooked. Now it was all about building smoking fast Broncos, running hard, and building anything that could help support that addiction. So long law school... Viva Broncos!

The Beginning

My wife Ginger, and I were fiberglass surf board junkies. Just before dropping out of Law School... I had bought that first Bronco. It was branded 'Hot Ginger'. Hot Ginger was a ford Color and with my wife's name being Ginger, 'Hot Ginger' name was a natural fit! We started making some fiberglass fender flares out of our surf shop in El Cajon. Ginger and I would hand form them. Soon they caught the attention of some of the other Bronco crazies of the day and the Stroppe shop wanted to carry them. Ginger and I would deliver them to his Signal Hill Stroppe Performance shop and then just follow Bill around for an entire day, listening, watching, and taking in everything I could learn.

As orders grew, Ginger was the true sales person, we started making more molds for bronco parts in a rented garage in El Cajon, California. Jay Livsey, of Livsey Boats, was near by and he was the first guy to do the hoods and fiberglass dashes. We all became fast friends, and he helped

me with rear fender flare molds which our newly created 'Viva Broncos' now produced about 30 sets of hand formed flares at a time. We loved to deliver the orders personally to Bill Stroppe, as he loved our quality and we loved his knowledge of off-road racing.

The Early Years

1969 thru 1975 was the real early years of Baja racing and now just a great Era gone by in the sport of off-road racing. When it came to Baja, in the early 70's it was all about pit support.

When we started, Baja was still divided into territories; Baja Sur and Baja Norte, with no laws, or no rules. I was supported by a group of local 4x4 clubs at the beginning. The pure logistics of fielding a team, pit crews, hauling the fuel, having extra parts, tires was as big a task or bigger than the race it's self. The selflessness of getting crews, friends, and even foes to work together...for free can provide a book of stories in itself. The crews based lower than 'El Arco in Mexico had to leave a week early to be in place. Driving their own vehicles, loaded with a ton of supplies while using their own gas. Also had to pack camping gear, fuel, and even food. Taking off work and being there for your Bronco to come into their pit area for a 10



minute stop in the middle of nowhere. Then endure a long rutted, dusty trip home missing the celebrations, the pageantry, the awards, the praise, the Mexican parties. Now these were the true heroes of Baja.

Before the days of pavement, if you broke down and had to be retrieved it could mean days of work. Trucks, trailers, winching, and dragging to get a broken Bronco aboard, just trying to haul it out to the paved road. Those are the real pioneers. Over the years Viva Broncos had many of these guys and gals ...it was trust, respect, and horsepower.

Before SCORE it was NORRA, no communications and no real organized support. I actually saw guys that raced NORRA stopped and camped for the night? You had only 36 hours to finish...and then winning was less important other than just finishing.

After each race we would have a killer party back at the shop. We would swap photos, hand out gifts that we got from sponsors, or divide winnings...if their were any. The Baja miles were all about the experience and the memories.

Pre-running was next progression in expanding a chance for bettering a race

time in Baja. Growing up on the border in San Diego, we had an early advantage to the rest of the field. Prerunning was a snap as we had run most of those roads surfing in the mid 60's. Hell we took most of the Baja in an old 53 Ford F-100 so when it came to racing we knew the ropes. Our pre runner Econoline Ford window van was as near a racer as we could build. Full cage, 4 tailor made seats, and 2 dirt bikes in back. It had a built 351, C6 auto, extra water tanks and much more. We would swap off riding the motor bikes ahead to look for killer spots...and feel the ground out. Lake Chapalla was the worst as it was it's mostly sand, with a rock base. If you were going to get there racing at night, you could not see thru the silt and better have a secret trail..

One year we had to spend two days with a goat herd and pepper farmer fixing that 4x4 van, at papa Fernandez. Oh those were the days!

Next came Mapping. We used paper scrolls that we would plot the course on - as we pre-ran. Each would have notes and compass points, noted water, villages, dangers, and anything we thought could make the race safer, faster, and give us an advantage.

The Legends

Having been early in Baja, Ed Pearlman was the first big and a real mentor. Bill Stroppe was of course 'The King', P.J. (Pernelli Jones) and Bill Rush were seriously the baddest ass drivers in the race ...these were the heroes. Other major Bronco racers were Gale Pike, Rod Hall, Willie Stroppe, John Baker James Duff were the real field. Lonnie Woods from Rough Country in his blazer and Sherman Balsh with his killer Jeep threw out great competition. The rest of us just padded the purse.

Then there were the celebrities and money men. James Garner and Steve McQueen were the real movie legends that could actually handle a Bronco. Then there was the class of lesser known rich dudes that would hire us kids to baby sit them and hold their hand as they learned to race down the road. And of course lets not forget - George Plimpton, a class act crazy writer doing baja with us out of control juveniles.

There was also Dick Malone, father of Mark Malone of NFL Fame. Drucker was Gary Bentonhauser's crew chief for NASCAR. He introduced us to horsepower. He built a bronco roadster in the LA mesa for Dick that was the baddest street, sand



drag bronco ever built. He built a NASCAR boss 302 with an online 4 barrel that went into that yellow screamer. I wish mark Malone would share those old pictures. When Dick died, Mark inherited the Bronco and sold it to a guy in San diego. That bucking beast needs to be on a pedestal next to Big Oly.

There was an original bond of brotherhood racers that formed the MAGNIFICENT 7 Team racers. I was one of the original MAG 7 Team racers. Note: all the hall of fame drivers that started here.

- 444 Hansen & Bishop
- 450 Quade & Utsey
- 462 Bakken & Harden
- 107 Sauers & Mears
- 114 Jackman & Howarth
- 130 Joe Francis
- 150 Jerry McMurry
- 306 Strecker & Lajeunesse
- 10 White & Phiffier
- 700 Weiland & Clause
- 706 McGriff & Fredrickson
- 713 Conner & Hettinger
- 609 Ball & Carpenter
- 716 Hickey & Romani
- 717 Prince & Marshall
- ____ Jimmy Jones

I was just a crazy, young naive idiot that painted bare breasted girls on my front fenders - which lost me tons of sponsor support. Back then I just didn't care. It was all about building smoking fast Broncos, running hard, and bumping anyone in front of me. I guess being a free spirited kid in the 70's help crash my legendary status among the early Baja stars.

VIVA Broncos growing a real Business

I drove my 'Hot Ginger' Bronco in races and was getting traction for some of it's parts, accessories, and even requests for bronco builds. I ended up delivering parts to Stroppe and other early Bronco parts houses. We came out with front flares, hoods, and other cool new products. Duffy even bought a few and Viva Broncos was on it's feet and starting to roll. At the time - Duffy, had this sand buster bronco in the late 60's, he would come and just blow everyone away. He had started a Bronco business and I just got the spark from him! Bill Stroppe was the marketing guy that made the market, But DUFFY was the real Bronco dude!

I started selling parts and racing cages so it was all important that 'Hot Ginger' competed in races. I remember and credit

the guys that started Viva Broncos. First, was Jeff Johnson, from Border Parts, that came about early and made the brand thru his brilliant fabrication skills. Then after Jeff, it was Steve Spircoff who joined us and it continued with a growing list of great fabricators. These were the guys that made most of Viva Broncos a possibility. I love those guys. They built it, I raced and broke it, they fixed it and made a better product. We sold the products.

On top of Bronco Builds - Viva also built other class 3, class 8 and Class 7 compition vehicles. At the peak in 1974 thru 1976 we would build about 10 per month.

Baja, was the next step. Baja was a big investment. You have to build the Bronco to sustain the 1000 mile torture. Then the pre running and the pits management. 1000 miles means 6 pits and lots of favors from lots of friends. Class Three NORRA, then Class three Score was the ultimate experience for a poor kid from San Diego. Stroppe sucked up most of the early sponsors, but we managed to get a few. Art Carr, Center City Ford, Bilstein, BFG, Unique Metals, and more. After fielding 4 or 5 Broncos, and a host of other auto brand entries, Viva Broncos was gaining momentum.



I wanted the winners circle so bad! I just drove my Hot Ginger race Bronco out of it limits and over it's head. I broke stuff Evel Knievel could not break. But, after each and every race we analyzed and progressed into being an even better bronco power shop in southern California.

Harry the horse Lozano, was the guy that created the Viva Blue, paint theme. Midnight blue with gold metal flake. Harry, was the man. He painted Dave Deals, 34 coupe, he did the sunbeam dragster with all the balloons from sunbeam bread (NHRA National Champion in it's day). He ended up painting about 35 Viva bronco roadsters.

Wow what an accumulation of memories!

The First Viva Bronco Catalog

Note that the entire Viva Bronco parts catalog was hand drawn by Dave Deal, "Big Deal". This was the guy that drew the Armoral Viking and cartoon magazine. I had built him a 36 Ford Coupe for doing all the art. All our fine graphics were done by the world famous, Lyle Fisk. Not the early cartoon stuff BUT the classy - 1976 Bilstein Pace car for Baja and later the Viva bronco gold flake quarter panel art.

The Trials & Tribulations of Racing Baja - Stories from the Drivers seat

Memory lane isn't as gracious as the winners circle. I built 2 world championship trucks that other drivers rode to that reward, and me, I continued breaking and destroying equipment! When the engine rev's, and the smell of aviation fuel got in me, it was Katie bar the door.

My only saving grace is that on a good day no one could run me down. At the Parker Dam 500 in 1973, Mickey Thompson and me had a come to Jesus moment on the California side. He in his class 8 Chevy truck and me in my Bronco. My old Ford chased him down driving on and over the edge, and passed him in a rock field at the end of a pole line road. He stuck his hand out and gave me a big thumbs up...

About 20 miles down the road I was on my top in a ditch, Mickey cruises by and the same hand comes out, thumbs up! I learned a lesson right then...finish, finish finish. This is not a drag race it's an endurance race silly.

Mickey came by my shop in Lakeside one day. He was a real character. Just

kicking tires. We chatted and laughed at some old racing stories. He even invited me to his shop. I took him up on that. In the rafters was stored his 4 engine Bonneville monster drag cars. His place was like a museum of modern racing times. There Mickey told me to, "...build products to sell, racing is just a format to test". Those were some very wise words. I wanted to kiss his hand!

One year I was deep into Baja racing the 1000 and came screaming into my pits at midnight near El Arco about the halfway point. My side pipes are glowing and the motor is rev'ed, taking on gas and the guys were checking oil, tires, and other mechanics. Some reporter comes running up and grabs my side screens, jumps onto my glowing exhaust and yells, "how's it going?" I'm actually leading the race and in an instant the exhaust dump bends to the ground and engine starts growing a fit!

I unbuckle, crawl out spitting fire! The jack leg reporter runs for the hills. The pit crew was working fast and furiously trying to bend the exhaust dump back up to get me going. In the heat of the battle, rage, and chaos a portly gentle man comes up and says, "...your our man how would you like to drive a International scout?" Well as



expected I unloaded on him in more ways the one. "Scouts are sleds - couldn't make one run with a Hemi and a magic carpet!" Turns out that gentleman was the main IH engineer, and it wasn't until the awards ceremony (a podium we were not on) that I realized once again - I killed a great potential sponsorship!

In Mexico, Viva Broncos had developed quite a local following. Once, in the Ensenada 250 Race, near the beach, we had plotted our best and fastest attach to wrap around a watermelon patch and an old farmers house. First time by we followed the pennants around the patch, second time around we saw that the path had been cut right through the field and the house's porch over hang was gone off the old farmers shack. That was not cool. So, we came back next month with our 4x4 club, and helped rebuild his old farm place. He treated us to some of the best chilli's and watermelons I had ever ate. He also treated us to some farm grown home-made wine. Of course we all got stupid, hollowed at the moon and felt grand... until the next morning. Old time Baja!

I can remember the time racing a Baja 500 hitting a cow in the night out of Valley De Trinidad. We clipped him in the rears and spun him around so that the horn caught in the rear roll cage. Drug that cow for about 100 yards until he dropped off.

Once up near Mike's Sky Ranch I hit a stream so hard that trout blew out on the bank.

I was racing Sherman for the check point in one Baja and passed him only to flip the Bronco right in the gate of the barbed wire fence check point. There I am upside down and guys are yelling for me to get out. I yelled back, "roll me over," and they did. I ended up dragging barbed wire for miles.

In the old days you would have to get a chit deposited into an Oly Beer can taped to your roll cage to prove your vehicle had made all check points. Those were the simple days.

The dusts of Lake Chapala, the cactus forests, the beach by mag bay, the dry lakes at full speed, the aching to see a pit in the middle of the night, the burning of your right foot against the hot floor pan, the ever awareness of a strange sounds and smells coming from the motor, the views of sunsets and desert - things most people never get to experience. The setting up a rooster tail of dust going down a long straight dirt lane, the sheer pleasure of being at any speed and kicking up your heels is to be a pleasurable experience always etched in the memory to enjoy! Near the end of one of the Baja 500's, after 500 miles of dust, dirt, damage and fighting it out trying to gain positions, I came up on

the last 7 miles where the course came onto the pavement heading to the finish line. I was just back of one of the legendary Stroppe Broncos, which I had started side by side at the start of the race. I pushed old 'Hot Ginger' for all she had toward the finish. The finish area was a paved road cut about 5 miles out of Encenda. Most racers finishing would come flying up but slow down at a checkpoint just outside the finish line and get a photo and a free Oly beer. People were lined up along the road sitting in lawn chairs and enjoying the festival style occasion. Now about 3 miles from the finish I am on that Stroppe Broncos bumper hard.

I'm pushing, honking, and standing in the seat. Soon we are side by side going back and fourth. Now approaching about mid-night - most of the spectators who had been partying began to stir as they now not only saw one set of headlights, but two sets of headlights coming full bore heading between their narrow gauntlet for the finish line. The Broncos went thru the lights at about mach 6, chairs flying, people scrambling, dust everywhere - and I crossed the line ahead for 3rd place. What a race! I just cruized into Ensenada, and to the pits, took the helmets off and kept my 'La Cucaracha' horns blasting. That was the best Baja moment of racing - I ever had..



VIVA BAJA!

The Turning Point

The Score 76 Baja 500, drawing was at my VIVA BRONCO SHOP in Lakeside, CA. Sal Fish, Mickey Thompson, Ivan Stewart, Rod Hall, Mears boys, The Mag 7, were all there. This was the first drawing for numbers, south of the prime time lights of big LA!! The drawing before was generally at Mickey Thompson's place.

Sal Fish created this possibility and put his stamp of approval on it so the little guys could be also be recognized in the growing sport of off road racing. This was truly a turning point in Viva Broncos recognition and was the start of the growth and inclusion of Baja Racing. From our laid back surfer days, to wheeling with jeepers, moving up to dune buggies and dirt bikes, us bronco boys are now on center stage. We were drawing the very important placement and starting positions for the grandest race at the old confines of Viva Broncos.

Finally, with a little more reason in the head and a kick in the rears for understanding more of the professionalism for the sport - VIVA Broncos was getting some of the credibility that was long over due. Viva Bronco's got to build a Bronco as

the 1976 International Score pace car for Bilstein Corporation.

It had hand painted graphic by the famous Lyle Fisk. A Boss 302 V8, NASCAR inline four barrel with a T&C 4 speed top loader, I could smoke all four tires in low range.. she had spun aluminum inner fenders, one of the first ultra cool 4 core radiator cooling. Special built fender well headers by Hooker. It was truly some of our best work. 456 gears, full floater, spool locked, 31 spline. That was in 1976 back when it was hard to do. Geise - made the full floater NASCAR rear end, Adams & Smith built the engine and it dynode 405 to the ground back then. It had Tru Trac tires that could just spin the rubber off and included air bags all around. Of course the highlight was the sponsor products - Bilstein 60 Mil. hyme jointed, bus shocks all around.

I took the Bilstein exec's for a pre-run for about 40 miles down the course. After they caught their collective breath - they new this was the horse that they had envisioned when we began. Bilstein used the bronco for Score promo's for a long while. Man I sure would like to have the beast back. Sure miss ol' Lyle Fisk... What a true car art legion.

VIVA Broncos had arrived. Maybe it took longer than many of the other Bronco pioneers to get news worthy headlines and a pat on the back at-a-boy from the world, but we came blazing across the years in our own out of control break neck manner. From a long haired kid surfing the waves - to a credible Bronco builder with the parts, the horses, the hardware, and all the historical accolades that came with. Like a fine wine - somethings just get better with age...wisdom, knowledge and a history of trial and error can also help.

A sad end to the early Viva Days!

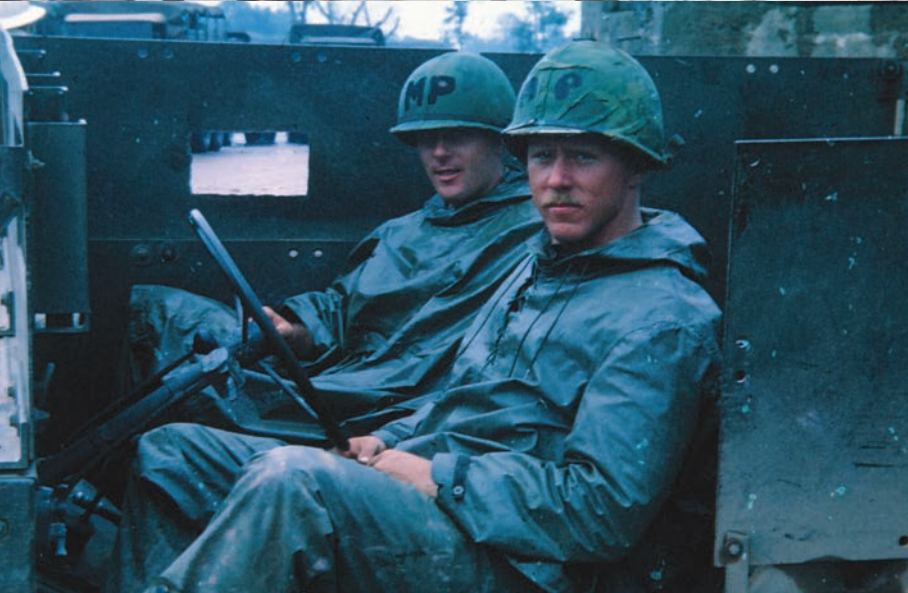
The end came quick and unexpected. We were filming a TV commercial in Alpine, CA. with our whole line of Viva Broncos. Harry, "the horse" Lazono, was our painter. From Sunbeam, Dragster, balloon paint job fame. He begged to take our 1976 Ford Bronco roadster home from the photo shoot - sadly and tragically he killed himself rolling it on a bad curve. We languished for another year thru long litigation but ultimately I was toast! That was the end of Viva Broncos...for the time.

Over the Years!

I moved to Colorado Springs, and managed a huge pre delivery center for Ford. It got me involved in creating image vehicles



Good people, good suds, & good music helped make the hot day bearable



again such as; Denver Bronco Broncos, USAF Thunderbird t-birds, and tons of other aftermarket creations. I did the Silver Bullet Bronco II's, then came Vans America, which created one of first van conversion companies to be recognized by NADA using what I had learned in the early days from Bill Stroppe about Ford bailment agreements and producing vehicles for dealer distribution. I eventually sold my share and helped created AutoStyle & Promotions which went on to produce live events such as water sports festivals, Monster Truck races and Sports Boat & RV shows. Those exciting years and various ventures slowly faded on and I ended up moving to the weather friendly town of Phoenix, Arizona.

The resurrection of Viva Broncos

A few years ago I felt it was time to start playing with the old Broncos again. The rolling chassis I was building some one offered to buy for stupid money when I was only half way completed. So, I bought another 1972 Ford Bronco and started

again. This one I had the body lowered 2" and again the market was hot and the demand was high for the iconic old Broncos. With people beginning to ask about other products and more chassis it was time to resurrect the 'Viva Bronco' brand.

With my Bronco passion renewed and talents from our daughter Kristin to help run a manufacturing business - Viva Broncos is back! With the growth of social media, Viva Broncos history has gained a lot of interest. Most want to chat about the old days in Baja, some want parts knowledge, but the great majority just want to show off their rendition of an early Ford Bronco. At 72 I just want to keep my hand in the heritage, thats why young innovative Strecker blood is needed to help make the show go on. They understand the internet. They understand modern technology. My big claim to fame was getting affordable Bronco roadsters with the iconic Viva Broncos art in the hands of maniac's like me to go tear up the desert. I'm older, wiser, and experienced now but I

still love breaking stuff... which makes me the perfect product test pilot.

On top of our Bronco after market products - Viva Broncos is currently building hot fast EB series two chassis. Today horsepower is cheap! This new baby has a 302V8 SB, pushing 435 horses with Fox Fire C4, driveline that I could only have dreamed of 45 years ago. I grew up over the last 50 years taming those steel horses rolling off the line in Detroit. I understand the after market product trend. No more cookie cutter, cake decoration Broncos, but real thought provoking unique to each owner masterpieces. Keeping the Bronco the classic, affordable, and great ultimate utility vehicle that Ford had envisioned over 50 years ago.

VIVA Ford Broncos!

Visit VivaBroncos.com for their available Bronco products, rolling chassis, historical photos, and more....



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VIVA BRONCO

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BRONCO DRIVER

