

Naperville, Illinois

8/24/97 The Curtain Rises:

They're gathered here tonight, these riders, from cities as far away as Hanover, Germany and places as strange as southern California, at the Hilton Hotel for the start of the father of the mother of all motorcycle endurance contests, the biannual Iron Butt Rally. Resurrected from the ashes in 1991 by Iron Butt Association president Mike Kneebone, this is the premier event of its kind in the world. If you don't believe that, ask one of the 300 riders who was fruitlessly wait-listed for a place on the starting grid.

The starters have paid a \$750 entry fee for the opportunity to have their heads kicked in by the merciless gods of chance, weather, and fatigue. If the past is prologue --- and on the Iron Butt it always is --- then they'll be running through temperature ranges of almost one hundred degrees, altitude changes of 10,000 feet, and six time zones. The winner will average better than 1,000 miles/day for eleven straight days. No ordinary motorcyclist will ever experience such a ride.

But these people are far from ordinary. Take two of them, for example: Tom Loegering and Eddie James. At the banquet that concluded the 1995 contest, Loegering and James stood in first and second place, the tight-knit community of hard riders vanquished at their feet. Within a week both had been disqualified for rules violations, a decision by then-rallymaster Steve Chalmers which has reverberated through the long-distance riding community nearly to this day. Stepping in like Mighty Mouse to save the day was Mr. Kneebone, a fellow who modestly describes himself as "the nicest guy who ever lived." With a diplomatic touch that Metternich or Henry Kissinger could have applauded, Kneebone invited both Loegering and James to appear at the rider's meeting today, to stand up, to confess their sins, and to be absolved, if possible, by their fellow communicants.

For James this was for all practical purposes a non-issue. He had been calling Kneebone for two years, begging to be allowed to enter this year's event. If Mike wanted him to come to Chicago to repent in public, then come to Chicago he would do. Besides, James' number had been picked serendipitously from the wait list. He had nothing to lose but the humiliation that was certain to be heaped upon him by anyone with a tongue to lash.

Eddie's sentence was short and swift: Kneebone required him to stand up at the rider's meeting, admit what he had done wrong in 1995, state the reasons why no rider should ever follow in his footsteps, and accept the scarlet letter that would brand him for a long, long time. Eddie did it, for the moment the utter soul of humility. And if you have ever met Eddie James, you will know that humility is not one of his stronger character traits. Then again, humility is something in short supply among these riders. They know they're good. And they are.

For Loegering it was a closer call. Mike had told him months earlier that grandmothers with a history of triple-bypass surgery were more likely to start the event than would he. Even with no chance to enter the event, Tom did appear at the rider's meeting this afternoon, recite his own prior sins, and give the contestants a warning about side-stepping rules that not one of them should ever forget. It was a wistful moment --- a man who'd come to Chicago with no chance to run the rally, who knew that his earlier actions had created a furor that had not subsided for two years, and who recognized that nothing he said would change people's perception of him by the width of an atom --- this small lecture by such an inoffensive and mild-mannered man who exhibits such grimly and single-minded competitive qualities.

In my view Loegering showed more character today than I've seen in a lot of my friends who've faced far less arduous circumstances than Tom has ever endured. When someone writes the story of the greatest Iron Butt rallies of all time, Loegering's name will feature prominently in most of them, including the one he didn't run in 1997.

Loegering's sin in 1995 involved a conspiracy to alter the identity of a rally towel, and here I use the prosecutor's terminology. Without going into this much further, the details of which are contained on the Iron Butt Association's web page, I merely suggest that the simple towel, or "toalla" for the benefit of our Spanish-speaking readers, became overnight one of the most hotly-debated and fiercely-contested issues of recent Iron Butt memory. When the towels were handed out at the banquet tonight with all of the catastrophic admonitions that have followed in the wake of the Loegering incident, one rider questioned whether it might be possible to have one surgically implanted upon his hip. At least that's what I thought I heard him say. "Do whatever you have to do," Kneebone said. "Just don't lose that towel."

When the festivities were over, I ambled back to the administrator's suite in the hotel. About ten people were huddled in the cramped space, talking animatedly. Mike said, "Sit down. We have our first problem. DeVern Gerber has already lost his towel."

Time. Roads. Weather. Numbing fatigue. It's the essential Iron Butt.

And towels. Those too.

Bob Higdon