

Chicago IL

9.5.97 The Circle Closes

We started the trophy awards with the last finishing rider, Manny Sameiro.

He'd smashed his Suzuki Stratocruiser in Maine, bought another bike for a ten thousand point penalty, and finished the rally on a 500cc Honda Shadow.

Every time he'd try to get off the bike at a gas stop, the scabs on his knees would crack open. He's not walking quite right even now, but one day he will. Scabs heal. We honored his deed of switching bikes and taking a penalty that guarantees a finish at the bottom of the pile by calling his effort "pulling a Manny."



"What a country," Sameiro says. "Only in America can you get a trophy for coming in last."

The second lowest placing rider, Dwight Hagemann, also pulled a Manny on the last leg, but because Manny had pulled a Manny first, Dwight had to take the ten thousand point hit without even the benefit of having his miscue called "pulling a Dwight." Then the Langs came in, though not together. Fritz took another enormous late penalty on the final leg, but that was better than the miss that Phyllis' took, one which she alleged was caused by Fritz' hopeless sense of direction, an allegation that Fritz was smart enough not to deny. But after DNFs on the previous two Iron Butts, they both finished, a cause for much clapping of hands at the banquet.

Dennis Cunningham jammed his sidecar into 51st place. No one has ever ridden a hack before in the Butt. After seeing how battered he looked as he shoved his rig into the parking lot at Laurel BMW in suburban Chicago, no one may ever try again. But the look on his son's face was enough to make it worthwhile for the beaten rider. The boy showed up at checkpoints in California and Illinois sporting a T-shirt that said "Go Dennis Go!" He should be proud of his old man tonight: Dennis went, and in style.

Grandmotherly Ardys Kellerman came in 42nd. The Iron Butt two years ago put her in a hospital. It didn't this year. Age doth not wither her, nor custom spoil her infinite desire to crank out miles, so to speak.

Martin Hildebrandt took 41st place, grabbing a bunch of bonuses on the final leg despite my specific directions to the contrary. I might as well have tried to instruct an avalanche to roll uphill. Elsie Smith, whose 50th birthday present to herself was an entry into the '97 IBR, quietly crept into 28th place overall, having gained position on each leg. She's the pride and joy of the BMW Bikers of Metropolitan Washington and the toughest long rider ever to emerge from that huge club.

Adam Wolkoff labored under the dual burdens of having to complete a demanding ride as well as having to act as Eddie James' attorney. It would be difficult to decide which was the harder task. But he carried both jobs off with apparent ease, finishing 15th overall. Jerry Clemmons and Harold Brooks, riding together for every mile of the event, shared 11th place. For Harold it was the completion of his fourth Iron Butt, tying him with Gregg Smith. No one has more career IBR miles behind him than does the quiet Virginian.

Tom Loftus, the son of an American serviceman and a Samoan mother, claimed the 8th spot. He jokes that he's the only Samoan on earth who doesn't weigh 300 pounds. His heart is a pretty fair size, I imagine. And by taking 7th place in the rally, Shane Smith instantly became the most famous person to emerge from McComb, Mississippi since Frances Durelle Felder, my mother. He'd also kept pace during huge chunks of the event with the blazing Fran Crane, something that few riders can claim to have accomplished.

Six years ago IBR rallymaster Jan Cutler denied Mary Sue ("Suzy Q") Johnson a place in the starting field. "Insufficient experience," he said.

Today, averaging 998 miles a day for eleven days, she has the experience of having beaten all but five of the toughest motorcycle riders on earth.

Dale Wilson began riding motorcycles just five years ago to erase the pain of having lost a custody battle for his son. Anger used to propel him down roads that he today cannot even remember having travelled. He's calmer these days but still is a ferocious competitor. His fifth place trophy will undoubtedly find a home in his boy's bedroom.

It was going to take a monster ride for Eddie James to make people forget his being thrown out of the '95 IBR, and he came up with one. Eighteenth in Maine, he crawled steadily upward on each leg. No, people aren't going to forget what he did in 1995, but they also won't forget his fourth place finish this year. No rider could have been under more scrutiny, knowing that everything he did would be triple-checked. He stared down the pressure to the end, laughing and telling outrageous stories that couldn't be any better if even half of them were true.

Fifteen or twenty people had gathered around at the finish to watch Brian Bush and his film crew interviewing Mike Stewart, the guy who'd taken a box of parts worth \$525 and turned those parts into a motorcycle that nearly won the Iron Butt Rally. But I wasn't watching Mike. I was watching his wife. Rarely have I seen a look of such undiluted pride as that which was etched on Katherine Stewart's face. In every way this daunting event is far harder on the families and close friends that the riders leave behind than it ever could be for the motorcyclists. The riders are doing what they seem born to do. Their loved ones can only wait and hope for the best. As she watched her husband easily fielding Brian's questions, she must have known that when she picked Mike, she'd picked the right guy.

And then there were but two names left, the riders who'd stood just sixty points apart in Yakima, Peter Hoogeveen and Rick Morrison. Could Peter finally shake the demon that seemed to condemn him perpetually to a second place finish? It wasn't just a monkey on his back; it was an ape the size of Mighty Joe Young. He'd led at every checkpoint on this rally. Would he finally lead at the last one, the only one that mattered?

In 1991 he had found a dozen ways to win the IBR but thirteen ways to lose it. He'd been stopped for a speeding violation fifty yards from a checkpoint in Pennsylvania, accruing hundreds of penalty points in lateness. He'd left his route instructions at a restaurant and had to backtrack 100 miles to retrieve them. Still he was leading the event as they headed for the last checkpoint in Reno. Legend has it --- Peter vigorously denies it, but that hardly matters any longer --- that he stopped for a six-pack of beer before hitting the finish line, taking a six point lateness penalty for his trouble. He lost the rally by two points.

Whether the story is true or not, it is unforgettable. Mike Kneebone certainly hasn't forgotten it. The final bonus on this year's rally, a whopping 999 points, required the riders to bring a cold six-pack of soda or beer to the scoring table at the finish.

As we sat there today, logging in arriving riders, the news flashed through the parking lot like a bolt of electricity. Peter was down. Run off the road by some stupid car. Fifteen miles short of the finish. Bike wrecked. Probably couldn't be ridden. His parents, having come to the finish in Chicago from Ontario, stood together in shocked silence, quietly holding hands.

Somehow he made it in. I don't know how. The right side of the motorcycle had been ripped away. There was no coolant left in the motorcycle. The magnificent Honda Blackbird, once the fastest bike in the field, was finished. Peter took forty points in lateness, relieved that it wasn't worse. Now all he could do was wait. His name would be called out at the banquet. With another huge ride behind him on the last leg, he knew that he would finish no lower than second. But would he be first?

No.

Rick Morrison had done it again with a second straight monster ride. In the two legs since California, he'd put more miles away than any other rider in the field. Those miles added up to points, nearly eleven thousand of them on the last leg alone. No one was going to beat this rail-thin flight attendant from Seattle. He'd averaged 1,076 miles each day for eleven straight days, in the process taking first overall with a winning margin of more than 1,000 points. It wasn't even close.

For the young Canadian it was just another heartbreaking second place finish in what seems to be an endless string of them. Despite that, he is still the man to beat at every endurance event he enters. No one in the history of this game has ever had such a remarkable consistency. He'll win, and he'll win a lot, before he quits. But if he never rode another mile, I'd still call him what I've called him for years: Peter the Great.

The riders went out into the parking lot after the banquet for a group photo. I looked at them. Some appeared tired, surely, and the strain of what they'd done to themselves still showed, but the most common expression was one of satisfaction, a tranquility and inner peace that you could almost touch. They smiled. Mike Stewart even smiled as he awkwardly ran his fingers over his bald head. He'd rashly told Bob Ray earlier in the rally that "If I finish third or better, you can cut off my hair." And at the banquet Bob Ray was there with the barber's clippers.

For most of these men and women, the Iron Butt Rally is a defining moment in their lives. Few things they will ever do will demand so much of them for so long under such trying conditions. It really is an unforgettable experience, one that can be shared truly only with others who have also run along this demanding, nearly interminable, gauntlet. They are changed, most of them, and will never think of themselves quite in the same light again.

For everyone, however, this rally will always be remembered as the last one that Ron Major ran. Mike Murphy, the neurosurgeon who ran in the '95 IBR, has begun a memorial fund in Ron's memory. Rallymaster Ed Otto has arranged for a plaque in Ron's name to be placed in the American Motorcyclist Museum. The black tape that the riders put on their bikes in Yakima will one day come off and be forgotten. For those of us who had the happiness of knowing Ron, however, our memory of him will continue.



And now it's over. The parking lot, once filled with motorcycles of breathtaking beauty and variety, will slowly empty, only an occasional spot of oil or a side stand scrape in the tarmac to mark the spot where one of them once stood. The bikes will go home, some --- like Peter's broken Blackbird --- in a truck. But most of them will be ridden, perhaps not so far tomorrow or as hard as they have been recently, but ridden just the same.

They don't seem to mind.



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1997 Iron Butt Rally Finishers (78 Riders started the rally):

Rank	Rider	Miles	State	Age	Motorcycle	Points
1	Morrison, Rick	11,832	WA	42	BMW K1100LT	36,063
2	Hoogeveen, Peter	11,497	CANADA		HONDA CBR1100XX	34,972
3	Stewart, Mike	10,636	IN	33	Honda V65 Magna	34,369
4	James, Eddie	10,667	MN		BMW K100RS	34,360
5	Wilson, Dale	10,529	WA	38	Honda ST1100	33,622
6	Johnson, Mary Sue	10,974	IN		BMW R1100R	33,247
7	Smith, Shane	11,452	MS	36	Honda ST1100	33,065
8	Loftus, Tom	10,192	WA	42	Honda Gold Wing	32,906
9	Kugler, Heinz	10,033	TX	49	BMW K100RT	32,563
10	Hogue, Brad	10,483	CO	48	Honda Gold Wing	32,415
11	Brooks, Harold	10,006	VA	55	Honda Gold Wing	32,388
11	Clemmons, Jerry	9,974	NC		Honda ST1100	32,388
13	Stockton, Michael	10,321	OK	42	BMW K1100LT	32,244
14	Kramer, Bill	10,028	PA	41	Honda Gold Wing	32,195
15	Wolkoff, Adam	10,046	MN	31	BMW K1100LT	31,703
16	Mann, Philip	10,948	MI	63	BMW K1100RS	31,619
17	Crane, Fran	11,329	CA	50	Buell S3T	31,548
18	Keating, Keith	10,300	CT	50	BMW R100RT	31,191
19	Tegeler, Craig	9,794	MO	29	BMW K1100RS	31,119
20	Franklin, Rand	9,964	FL	39	Yamaha Venture	30,380
21	Pipes, Terry	9,686	LA	57	Yamaha Venture	30,171
22	Lambert, Jeff	9,656	IL	46	BMW R1100RS	30,095
23	Ray, Bob	9,592	AL		HonPacific Coast	30,018
24	Ferber, John	10,115	CANADA	43	Triumph Trophy	29,977
25	Withers, Peter	9,532	MA	42	Yamaha Venture	29,958
26	McQueen, Gregory	9,772	CO	41	Honda ST1100	29,841
27	Roy, Leonard	9,215	MD		Honda ST1100	29,579
28	Smith, Elsie	9,091	VA	50	BMW K100RT	29,205
29	Harris, Gary	9,125	NY	37	BMW K1100RS	29,105
30	Todd, Bobb	9,700	CANADA	45	Honda Gold Wing	28,968
31	McFadden, Asa	10,684	FL	50	BMW K1100LT	28,842
32	Kraus, William	8,727	MI	47	Honda Gold Wing	28,553
33	Jones, Marty	9,366	TX	35	Kawasaki Voyager	28,366
34	Grupp, Alex	8,605	CANADA	29	Suzuki GS1100	28,159
35	Kaplan, Harry	9,291	NY	46	BMW K75	28,055
36	Weyher, Bill	8,819	UT	49	BMW R1100GS	27,134
37	Patzer, Karol	9,469	MN		BMW K75C	27,112
38	Pickett, Chuck	10,779	PA	57	Honda Gold Wing	26,634
39	Haak, Horst	9,163	CANADA	59	BMW K1100RS	25,608
40	Harhay, Warren	9,335	NV		Honda ST1100	25,528
41	Hildebrandt, Martin	8,451	GERMANY		Zundapp KS175	25,521
42	Kellerman, Ardys	8,444	TX		BMW R1100RTL	24,818
43	Cimino, Chris	8,410	MO	32	Triumph Trophy	24,405
44	Wiley, Kerry	8,944	IL	49	Yam Royal Star	24,333

45	Elberfeld, Charles	9,154	OH	43	BMW K75SA	24,179
46	Farrell, Edwin	8,614	ME	45	H-D FXSTC	24,003
47	Johns, Fred	8,586	OH	56	BMW R1100RT	23,751
48	Bitner, Dennis	8,442	MO	42	Honda ST1100	23,582
49	Johnson, Gary	11,067	NY	51	Honda Gold Wing	22,761
50	Singley, Van	8,755	FL	49	BMW F650ST	22,608
51	Cunningham, Dennis	8,772	CA	47	BMW K100/SIDECAR	22,331
52	Souder, Jerry	9,132	OH	26	Suzuki RF900R	21,909
53	Gerber, DeVern	8,920	UT	44	BMW R1100RSL	21,454
54	Ayres, Ron	9,118	TX	52	BMW K1100LT	20,293
55	Wescott, Don	10,146	CANADA	46	BMW R1100RT	19,505
56	Jewell, Phil	7,180	GA	35	BMW K75RT	17,847
57	Lang, Fritz	8,298	PA	59	BMW K100LT	17,289
58	Williams, Rick	7,863	IL	45	Yam Royal Star	16,476
59	Lang, Phyllis	8,260	PA	58	H-D FXR	15,034
60	Hageman, Dwight	9,269	OR	55	Honda Gold Wing	11,842
61	Sameiro, Manny	8,989	NJ	34	Honda V45 Shadow	9,553