

Orange, California

8.31.97 - Just Another Day At The Iron Butt Office

Misery is in everyone's saddlebag on the Iron Butt, a companion as constant as the fuel receipts the riders keep. But for outright disaster, however, it would be hard to top the events of the last three days. Eight of the top ten riders at the Daytona checkpoint went into the pits, four of them out of the rally altogether. Only Canadian Peter Hooegeveen and Texan Ron Ayres maintained their places with steady rides. For every tale of success, there were six of utter failure. If an Iron Butt can have a Black Leg, this one was it.

Most motorcyclists will never ride across the United States. Of those who do, 90% of them will do it in ten or twelve days. These contestants were given seventy-six hours. That's one of the reasons the rally bills itself as "The World's Toughest Motorcycle Competition." But "tough" didn't begin to describe the war zone that was waiting to hammer these riders:

----- George Barnes (2nd): holed piston - out.

----- Fran Crane (4th): => 28th.

----- Morris Kruemcke (5th): rear-ended - out.

----- Gary Johnson (6th): => 17th.

----- Herb Anderson (7th): => crashed - out.

----- Ken Hatton (8th): engine failure - out.

----- Shane Smith (9th): => 14th.

----- Mary Sue Johnson (10th): => 15th.

It didn't stop with the top riders. Joan Oswald called in and reported that she was down and out from a minor accident near Gallup. There was nothing broken, she said, except a dream. She wanted to know where to send her entry fee for the '99 Butt. Ron Major, '91 IBR winner, did not appear at the California checkpoint. Several riders reported seeing Ron's bike, moderately damaged on its right side, on I-8 near Yuma but its owner was nowhere to be found.

Also high up on the list of Things We Didn't Want To See Happen was the retirement of '95 IBR champ Gary Eagan. Broken wrists are a dime a dozen among motorcyclists who've been around any length of time, but Eagan's is so trashed from an accident last year that he cannot flex and extend his right wrist to twist the throttle. He has to rotate his shoulder to accomplish the maneuver. Despite that, by Florida he'd been knocking off better than a thousand miles each day and picking up bonuses as well. Pain and horrific swelling have finally driven him out of a rally that few motorcyclists in his condition would have even tried to enter.

Bob Grange's transmission went belly-up. Don Wescott, a Canadian obstetrician with a rotten fuel pump, delivered himself to the checkpoint two hours after it closed, though he will be able to continue.

Fifteen of the starting seventy-eight riders are now either at home on their way there, an attrition rate that is high even for the IBR.

Sometimes you don't even see it coming. Houston's Morris Kruemcke was having the ride of his life. On track and rested in Daytona, he had picked a route to California that seemed guaranteed to have him breathing down Peter Hoogeveen's neck. Already having taken in big points in Oklahoma and at the top of Pike's Peak --- that in blowing snow and sub-freezing temperatures --- he was sitting at Dante's View overlooking Death Valley just before sunrise this morning, ready to circle around for the rest of the jewels in the area: Badwater (201), Whitney Portal (310), Manzanar (240), and the leg's killer bonus, the Bristlecone Pine forest (1,001). He didn't know it, but with all those bonuses in hand he would have finished the day in first place with a thousand point lead.

Death Valley is aptly named. It was about to kill Kruemcke's rally. Just as he was leaving, Herb Anderson rolled up and asked if he could follow the Texan to Badwater. No problem, Morris said. "Follow me." That was the worst advice Morris Kruemcke ever gave to anyone. Thirty miles later Anderson inexplicably crashed into the rear of Kruemcke's Gold Wing, sending both riders and bikes into a ditch. Miraculously, Morris wasn't hurt. Anderson, with a hip contusion, was taken to a local hospital for an examination and quickly released. Both bikes were total wrecks. Kruemcke was able to ride his to the checkpoint, if only to advise that he could not continue.

Every story of an early departure from the rally is an unhappy one, but this seems harder to accept than most. Kruemcke, an intelligent and brilliantly-prepared endurance biker, really was at the top of his game. Only a handful of riders ever had a serious chance to reel in the awesome Hoogeveen on this rally, once the Canadian began to pour it on, but Morris led my short list of those who might . And now he's gone.

Hoogeveen and Ayres took different routes to the Death Valley mother lode but wound up with similar scores for the leg, thus holding on to their respective first and third place positions. So with all the other big dogs dropping like stones, others had to emerge from the pack to fill the void. And one of them came out howling.

A couple of days ago, I stuck a mathematical function in the scoring spreadsheet to see what kind of prediction the computer would make about the final standings, based upon the results of the first two checkpoints.

It hummed for a moment, then cranked out a name.

"Who's Dale Wilson?" I asked Mike.

"He did the California 24 last year. And 1,500 miles in 36 hours with his son as a passenger for a Bunburner Award. He might also have done a Saddlesore. Why?"

"The computer says he's going to wind up 66 positions ahead of first place."

We both chuckled. There's no real limit to the speed at which a hot Pentium chip can dish out bullshit.

Tonight Dale Wilson is in second place, 210 points behind Hoogeveen. And the computer, not me, is doing the chuckling.

He was 54th in Maine, 24th in Daytona. The computer liked that sort of rate increase, I guess. Then in the last three days he did as nearly a perfect ride as could be done on this leg, nailing 4,107 points in bonus locations, 323 more than second-place bonus hound Marty Jones (still recovering from a miss in Maine) and 810 points better than Hoogeveen. Wilson had ridden a huge arc north and west from Daytona to Los Angeles via Oklahoma, taking in a large number of back roads which experienced Butts tend to avoid like wormwood. It worked, though, and now Mr. Wilson is heading to the northwest, his home turf. The computer still likes Dale as the eventual winner, tonight predicting he'll finish 51 places ahead of first overall. You heard it here first.

The tank job of the leg goes hands down to the fastest, most skillful scooter pilot in the entire pack, Fran Crane, a woman who could destroy any other contestant in the rally, man or woman, on any race track in the world and who has done everything that could be done in endurance riding --- including once holding the record from New York to San Francisco and still holding the record for the shortest time through the contiguous states --- except win the Iron Butt.

It's not Fran's fault. It's that . . . er, thing she rides, a Buell. Even with what amounts to factory support waiting to rebuild the bike from the frame up at each checkpoint, she was whacked on the last leg, taking a pathetic 524 bonus location points. Forty-nine other riders did better. That Fran had managed to kick the pig --- I don't know what else to call it since it oinks at everyone who walks near it --- up to 4th place in Daytona was due exclusively to her incredible talent and not to a single dime of the megabucks that Erik Buell is probably throwing down the storm sewer on this embarrassing promotional effort. One thing is certain: if Fran were riding any BMW or Honda, even a 400cc Rebel, Peter Hoogeveen wouldn't be smiling so much.

With California behind them, the field is mercifully on the downhill slope as they head north. All but a handful of them were looking surprisingly chipper today, especially for people who are cranking out an average of 928 miles every day and who'd just come through the fireball of the Mojave desert in late summer. Maybe it's the prospect of visiting the checkpoint in Yakima, the garden spot of Washington, that's putting the gleam in their eyes.

Or maybe it's just a hope that Dr. Jack Kevorkian will show up there to examine Fran's bike.

The Top Twenty Plus One Other (147 elapsed hours):

Rank	Rider	Bike	Miles	Points
1	Hoogeveen, Peter	Honda	7,055	17,618
2	Wilson, Dale	Honda	6,413	17,408
3	Ayres, Ron	BMW	7,063	17,293
4	Kruemcke, Morris	Honda	6,686	16,981
5	Stewart, Mike	Honda	6,398	16,895

6	Stockton, Michael	BMW	6,535	16,521
6	Morrison, Rick	BMW	6,720	16,521
8	Hogue, Brad	Honda	6,417	16,129
9	Loftus, Tom	Honda	6,319	16,074
10	James, Eddie	BMW	6,265	16,013
11	Kugler, Heinz	BMW	5,980	15,962
12	Brooks, Harold	Honda	6,160	15,959
12	Clemmons, Jerry	Honda	6,134	15,959
14	Smith, Shane	Honda	6,704	15,938
15	Johnson, Mary Sue	BMW	6,935	15,884
16	Young, Boyd	BMW	6,220	15,812
17	Johnson, Gary	Honda	6,327	15,406
18	Ray, Bob	Honda	5,994	15,374
19	McFadden, Asa	BMW	6,720	15,365
20	Keating, Keith	BMW	6,060	15,344
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78	Sameiro, Manny	Honda	4,096	-2,929

Go, Manny! Zero is within reach!

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