

9.2.97

A Piece of Tape

The news of Ron Major's death in Arizona struck everyone associated with this rally like a falling tree. The days that led up to this penultimate checkpoint have been long for everyone, rallyist and organizer alike, but nothing like today.

This terrible incident remains shrouded in mystery. Bill Muhr of the MotoCentral Forum on the MicroSoft Network told us that radio station KYMA in Yuma was reporting on the circumstances of the accident: "Between midnight and seven Sunday morning, the cyclist hit the guard rail on I-8 about 24 miles east of Yuma. The driver was thrown onto an embankment on the other side of the freeway. But the motorcycle continued along the guard rail for nearly a half-mile before coming to a stop. A Border Patrol helicopter found the man's body. Officials have not yet released his name."

To accept this account you must believe that a motorcycle can travel riderless for upwards of 2,500' and bring itself to a gentle stop, resting upright against a guard rail. You have to believe that hitting a guard rail can throw a grown man across two lanes of interstate highway, yet leave no evidence of appreciable damage on the motorcycle. You have to believe things that we cannot, especially since the view taken by investigators to date does not account for the fact that in the photograph we have seen of the motorcycle, the key is not in the ignition.

One day, we sincerely hope, what really happened to Ron Major will be fully understood. That day is not here.

Although there are still many questions left unanswered surrounding the events on I-8, shortly after the conclusion of the rally, Kathy Major (Ron's daughter), sent Michael Kneebone this note:

Michael, I am Ron's daughter Kathy and I would like to put the speculation and questions about my father's death to rest. An autopsy was performed after the services, because I (who have ridden bikes since I was 5) did not believe that my father fell asleep and caused his own death! He was too professional to do that, not even for the sake of coming in first (which I know was his ultimate goal). The autopsy revealed a massive coronary. He died instantly and before he even hit the ground. There were no other substantial injuries that would have caused his death.

I know it is hard to accept the death of my father, as I more than anyone can attest too!! But please remember that he died doing what he loved and with those friends he so admired and cared for.

Kathy

When we arrived in Yakima, Jan Cutler, co-owner of Reno BMW and a former Iron Butt rallymaster and participant, was already there to help us run the checkpoint. We asked Jan to tell each of the riders arriving today what we had so far learned. It was a difficult and delicate but necessary job. Several riders broke down in tears when told what had occurred. No one could believe it. That someone might be hurt during the rally was almost a given. That someone could be killed, particularly a rider of Ron Major's extraordinary talents, was almost unthinkable. To a non-rider, that may seem to be a childish denial of obvious fact, particularly in a rally of the Iron Butt's extreme nature. But motorcyclists are not fatalistic.

If they were, they wouldn't ride a bike. Injury and death happen, but you cannot believe that it is going to happen to you. To harbor such thoughts is to deprive yourself of a microscopic edge that could save your life. You need every positive thought you can muster circulating in you at all times. I have never thought of it as a matter of denial; to me it is simply self-preservation.

When disaster does strike, however, it is all the more difficult to absorb. Not only has someone you know been struck down, but you have been shorn at least temporarily of your sincere, albeit deluded, belief in your own invincibility. Twin blows of that kind are devastating. There is no defense to it. You might as well be rendered as naked and helpless as the day you were born.

I have often thought that the sorts of people who enter endurance motorcycle events are a subset of humans two orders of magnitude distant from the norm. Motorcyclists constitute just over 1% of the motoring public; long distance riders are perhaps 1% of motorcyclists. In Jonathan Swift's poem he likens this disparity in scale to a flea that sits upon the back of an elephant. That flea has upon its own back a flea of comparably small size. And so it goes, Swift says, *ad infinitum*.

There aren't many people who can do, or would even want to do, the kind of riding required merely to finish the IBR on time, not to mention lengthening their route to obtain bonus points. Such riders tend to stick together. They have something in common that cannot be understood or appreciated by anyone who has not walked into the fire and survived.

That is why Ron's demise has struck this small band of hard riders with such force. He was not just a biker; he was an Iron Butt rider, and a great one. He won this rally six years ago. He won the 8/48 last year. He designed equipment that could help a rider stay on a bike longer and with greater safety. If you moved in this circle at all, you knew Ron, the man with greater name recognition among the long riders than King Kong. He was that good.

At 1900 PDT the riders received the last of the bonus packs. They have 64 hours to get back to Chicago, some 1,970 miles to the east. They won't forget about Ron Major during that last long ride of this event. Warren Harhay, one of the contestants, asked each departing rider if he or she would like to carry a reminder of Ron on the last leg. No one declined.

Every bike leaving the checkpoint parking lot tonight had a 2" strip of black tape on the windshield.

Peter Hoogeveen, leading at every checkpoint so far, held onto his lead on the next to last checkpoint today by the slimmest of margins. It wasn't a particularly inspired route, but it was enough to hold off a giant effort by Rick Morrison. The difference between first and second place has been cut to a trivial 60 points out of more than 25,000 total to date. Morrison, cranking out 2,001 miles in 49 hours since southern California, outdid every other rider by almost 200 miles, in the process picking up almost 700 more bonus points than unflappable Bill Kramer, who scored the second highest total for the leg. Mike Stewart, with a second straight big run, climbed to within 700 points of Hoogeveen. Mike Stockton, Dale Wilson, and Tom Loftus are hovering within clear striking range. Eddie James, having run a notably quiet event, lurks not much more back. Harold Brooks and Jerry Clemmons, riding together as if they shared a single carburetor, are tied for 8th place. Mary Sue Johnson, upon whom Ron Major's death hit particularly hard, climbed back into the top ten with a determined ride.

Two notable misses on the leg were Ron Ayres and Boyd Young. Ayres was time barred because he pressed himself, went too far afield, and could not return in time. Young's problem was more prosaic, a

flat tire, but one that was ripped to the point that four plugs could not repair the damage. They'd each been close to the top, Ayres tantalizingly so. Now they're running just to finish.

A rider who never had any chance at all, Marty Jones, turned in his third straight sensational leg. This is a man who missed the first checkpoint with mechanical problems and has now climbed to 42nd place, ahead of thirteen riders who have missed no checkpoints at all. In one of my first posts, I predicted Jones would win the Iron Butt before his career was through. He's showing why I wrote that.

And Manny Sameiro climbed out of the negative points pile today, jumping over three riders who never made a checkpoint. For the first time on the rally, he has a positive points score next to his name and stands 75th of 78. We knew you could do it, Manny.

It'll be over soon. And safely, we all pray.

Bob Higdon

The Top Twenty in Yakima (200 elapsed hours):

Rank	Rider	Bike	Miles	Points
1	Hoogeveen, Peter	Honda	8,633	25,392
2	Morrison, Rick	BMW	8,730	25,332
3	Stewart, Mike	Honda	7,863	24,657
4	Stockton, Michael	BMW	8,069	24,351
5	Wilson, Dale	Honda	7,697	24,320
6	Loftus, Tom	Honda	7,676	23,904
7	James, Eddie	BMW	7,720	23,843
8	Brooks, Harold	Honda	7,554	23,721
8	Clemmons, Jerry	Honda	7,524	23,721
10	Johnson, Mary Sue	BMW	8,353	23,714
11	Kugler, Heinz	BMW	7,398	23,712
12	Smith, Shane	Honda	8,557	23,512
13	Kramer, Bill	Honda	7,559	23,172
14	Tegeler, Craig	BMW	7,237	23,091
15	Johnson, Gary	Honda	7,855	22,761
16	Withers, Peter	Yamaha	7,373	22,632
17	Keating, Keith	BMW	7,568	22,468
18	Ferber, John	Triumph		7,510 22,449
19	Franklin, Rand	Yamaha	7,610	22,307
20	Crane, Fran	Buell	8,393	22,295