

Gillette WY

9.3.97 The Rock and the Hard Place

I started grinding my teeth. Spending even ten seconds giving non-negotiable instructions to this man was becoming less productive than the time I tried to teach my cat Bud the multiplication tables. She didn't seem to care what I said. Neither did Martin.

"Look, Chicago is that way." I waved my hand in a generally easterly direction. "If you see the sun in your eyes in the late afternoon, you're going the wrong way. Understand?"

He smiled and nodded.

"Now I'm not a bit happy about your picking up these bonuses on the last leg. I'm telling the checkpoint people in Chicago that if you show up with so much as one measly bonus on this last leg that they are to give you zero points for it. Zero. I don't know how to say it in German. Zerorbeschweigenscheiss. Nada. Nothing. Understand?"

He nodded again, still giving me the look he uses to suffer fools.

"You get on I-90 and you stay on it until you see the checkpoint. You don't get off of it except to get gas, take a nap, eat, or pee. Got it?"

Another nod.

"OK. Any questions?"

"Yes," he said. "Where is Lander, Wyoming?"

"Damnit, Martin! Don't do this to me. Lander is not on the 90."

"I know, but you were talking about South Pass."

If you love me, you will forget that. South Pass is U.S. history. You are going to make Iron Butt history if you finish this rally on that ugly bike. Straight to Chicago you go, and not by way of South Pass."

I think he promised me he'd consider it. I can't remember. At that point I was just trying to find a brick wall to bang my head against.

Martin Hildebrandt will finish. When he does, he'll have ridden the smallest bike, a 175cc Zundapp, ever to complete the rally. But he's not content with just finishing these days. He wants to beat some people. He's been averaging 880 miles every day for eight days, manhandling the screaming two-stroke up mountains and hanging on downhill, a large man on an ancient, small bike. When he's astride it, he bears a passing resemblance to Arte Johnson on a tricycle in the old "Laugh In" show.

Why would someone with such a mammoth handicap try to beat anyone except the rally itself? He's a competitor. He's doing what competitors do. He must feel that he already has the rally by the neck. Now he's looking for another challenge. In that sense he's no different from most of the other riders, except that he's from Germany and has ridden more miles around the United States during the last two IBRs than most American bikers will do in a lifetime. He has blood in his eye. He's ahead of six guys who have had previous top ten finishes in this rally.

On the last leg he sucked up 7,331 points, a full 600 more than the average for the field and just 443 less than Peter Hoogeveen roped in on a bike that's nearly three times as fast as Hildebrandt's. He has to stop at least every 500 miles to pre-mix the oil/gasoline sludge that his engine requires. His knowledge of the geography of the U.S. is limited, but it's getting better every day. He probably knows by now that Miami isn't a suburb of Seattle. That wasn't always the case.

He didn't take the best route on the California-Washington leg, but 1) he doesn't have the bike to do that and 2) no one else took the best route either. The riders should have passed up a bundle of bonuses hiding in the woods and coastal mountains in northern California in order to head straight for the Olympic peninsula. It was an easier ride and was worth more than what most of them actually did do on the leg. Mike and I don't wonder why any longer. They're tired. They don't want to think too much about optimizing miles and points. That takes work. They'd rather jump on their bikes and head for the first big bonus site. Among the top riders, whoever does the best job of avoiding that temptation on the final leg will be the man to beat.

Temptation #1 is in Hyder, Alaska. It's worth 9,999 points, but it would take an average of 60 mph for some 60 hours to scoop it up, not to mention crossing four international borders. Anyone who goes that way won't be seen again on this event.

Temptation #2 is in southern California --- Sequoia national park and Joshua Tree national monument. They're worth slightly less than Hyder, but require almost as much effort. Arguably they're doable. Eddie James might go that way. He's more than 1,500 points behind Hoogeveen and needs a show stopper finish. He asked Mike about his chances if he did ride south.

"If you go, give me your ticket to the finishers' banquet right now," Mike said. "You'll never need it."

Take away the two giant temptations and you're left with smaller temptations of varying worth and difficulty that are scattered around I-90 for miles in every direction. Do you visit Andy Goldfine's Aerostich factory in Duluth or make a beeline for The Elvis Is Still Alive museum near St. Louis? Can you pick up Mt. Rushmore and still make Metropolis, Illinois to take a picture of the Superman statue? Should you do Devil's Tower or Carhenge or Chimney Rock? Can you do two of them? All three? Will there be time to have your head phrenologically examined at the Museum of Questionable Medical Devices in Minneapolis?

Mike and Ed Otto spent months sorting through these combinations and permutations. The riders don't have months. They have to make decisions in precious little time. Assuming everything else goes well, those choices will determine their final placement. The correct decisions will be forgotten in the haze of a happy triumph. The wrong ones will be remembered for the rest of their lives.

It isn't easy to do. If it were, anyone could do it.

don't know where Martin Hildebrandt is tonight. I barely know where I am. But if he's heading for Bismark ND to pick up a coffee mug that says "Forty Below Keeps The Riff-Raff Out," then he and I are going to have a little talk on Friday morning.

Bob Higdon