

Troutdale, Oregon
8/30/99 - Day 1

Beginning at 0930 this morning, after a reasonably rotten night's sleep for a lot of people, the contestants in this year's Iron Butt Rally began assembling in a parking lot adjacent to Pat Widder's business in Ojai, California. Television camera crews, newspaper reporters, and spectators began lining the alley that led from the staging area out to the street and into the real world. It was a '60s kind of happening.

The plan was to bring the 98 riders out of the lot and into the alley in double file, hand out an identification towel to each, read the bike's starting odometer, remind them one more time to be careful, and propel them into the void. It looked like the deck of an aircraft carrier on the morning of a major launch. A couple of the bikes had engine or rider stalls and had to be pushed over the side of the ship until composure was regained. Eventually and happily they all took flight.

By 1030 Pat Widder's place had returned to normal. Only rally organizers and volunteers remained, looking somewhat stunned. We began to clean up, pack in, check out, and move on. This time, instead of running a rental car to the next checkpoint, Mike Kneebone and I decided to let United airlines do the work. Four hours later we were in a Motel 6 on the Columbia River 1,000 miles north of Ojai and it had cost us only about 400,000,000 frequent flier miles to get here. These airplanes are OK and incredibly fast; I think they're going to catch on.

But the bad news wasn't long in coming. I'd been waiting for it since the last rider disappeared down Pat Widder's alley. You cannot send 100 people on a bunch of motorcycles around the length and breadth of the country for eleven days and not expect something to go wrong.

We had been in the motel room just two minutes when Mike's cell phone went off. It was Herbie Saint, the hugely popular rallymaster of the Tarbutt Rally in North Carolina. Coming up the California coast road near Monterey, his rear wheel bearing seized. Herbie somehow avoided an accident on a barely controllable bike. He had it taken to the nearest BMW dealer. The optimistic case is that some parts can be stolen from one of the other bikes at the dealer's shop, though even there Herbie will miss the Washington checkpoint; the worst case is that repairs cannot be effected in any sort of reasonable time and Herbie's first Iron Butt will be over.

You cannot imagine the time, effort, and money all these riders have put into just showing up at the event. To be knocked out so early is hellish. It is particularly unfair in Herbie's case. The average mileage on all bikes in the event is over 44,000. Saint's has not even 30,000. We're still wishing him the best of luck. He's going to need it.

The riders had all night to consider their route to the first checkpoint in Kennewick, Washington. There were four distinct choices, but they shared a common theme: They were all bad. The unannounced theme of the leg was "Just Say No." My guess is that a lot of the riders are not saying "no" at all.

The mildest choice went up the California coast with some bonus stops along the way. It was the route Herbie Saint had chosen. No one can fault a rider for taking this option. It isn't going to garner a massive

amount of points, but it isn't going to tire a rider out in the first hours of the rally either. It is the least evil of the evil options. Kneebone designed this route with Butt rookies in mind.

The three remaining routes are much, much worse. One involves going to Sequoia National Park, taking a picture of a big tree there, winding over the Sierra Nevada mountains, crossing Death Valley in the late afternoon, and stopping for a bonus in Beatty, Nevada. To finish that string of bonuses off, the rider might also hit Cedar City and Salt Lake City, Utah. That is a terribly difficult ride at this stage of the event. Anyone who does it will be the first round's leader, but only by a whisker.

Another route takes the rider straight across the Mojave desert at midday, past Phoenix, and along a 22-mile dirt road between bonus stops at Tortilla Flat and Roosevelt dam in Arizona. The rider would then head north for about nine million hours tonight and tomorrow. This route selection is worth exactly one point less than the Sequoia route. It is also not designed for the faint of heart.

The third of the ugly sisters requires running to the La Brea tar pits in downtown Los Angeles, up a rock road that has a bike-breaker reputation into the Ancient Bristlecone forest on the west side of Death Valley, and finally to a copper mine near Salt Lake City. This is worth about 33 points less than the other routes; this too is a wretched, dreadful ride with no redeeming social value; this finally is no way to spend one's vacation.

None of these latter rides is even remotely worth the points that will be gained in the effort. Intellectually, all the veteran riders know that. If you divide the number of points the bonuses are worth by the number of miles required to obtain them, you'll wind up with a figure like 1.0 --- ride a mile, pick up a lousy point. That doesn't sound like much, and it isn't, particularly when every rider in the rally has been repeatedly told that the points-per-mile ratio increases dramatically as the rally progresses. On the final leg, for example, you may ride on average one mile and pick up five points. How can it make any sense at all in this stage of the event to break a bike or wear yourself out or both for 1.0 point/mile? It can't, period.

But somewhere tonight I know to a moral certainty that there are more than a few riders bouncing through Arizona and Nevada and Utah and other lonely places where they have no conceivable business being because for a few minutes tomorrow afternoon at the first checkpoint they will be the king of the world --- the emphasis there being, of course, on "for a few minutes."

Bob Higdon