

Troutdale, Oregon
8/31/99 - Day 2

Let's see. We don't drive from checkpoint to checkpoint this year. We fly, using up lifetimes of frequent flier miles. It's faster and more efficient. How fast and efficient? Last night we went to bed at 0300. We got up at 0700, packed the car, rode 220 miles to the checkpoint, and worked for about twelve hours checking almost 100 riders in. Then we had dinner (lunch was a diet Dr. Pepper at the computer), drove 220 miles back to the motel, left a wake up call for 0600, and will go to bed at 0430. The plane leaves at 0850. And I wrote a story about Day #2 with palsied fingers on a rotten little computer in a shaking, dark car as we rolled through the night, just as I did in 1997.

At some point my long-suffering Susan called to say that she thought her mother was having a heart attack but wouldn't go to the doctor. I told Susan I was checking in a rider and would call her right back. But I forgot to.

In 2001 I'm holding out for a private berth on the Concorde.

This afternoon Rick Morrison and Gary Eagan together walked into the Crocodile Motorsports Honda dealership in Kennewick, Washington, the location for checkpoint #1 on the 1999 Iron Butt Rally. These two riders, the winners of the '97 and '95 IBRs respectively, had ridden together before. They evidently have resumed their old habits of showing up with the same list of bonus points.

Morrison sat down and checked in. Since he was the first rider to be scored by the rally computer, at 1309 PDT Morrison found himself leading this year's Iron Butt Rally, right where he left off two years ago. A few moments later he was predictably tied by Eagan.

"You guys are riding together because you have some plot," I accused. "Don't deny it."

"We deny it," they said in unison.

"I know you're lying," I said. "You have a secret agreement to ride together until twelve hours from the finish, at which point you will revert to a vicious sort of every-man-for-himself cannibalism. Admit it."

"We deny it," they repeated.

I know they're planning something evil. I just can't prove it. They seem happy and relaxed. That too must be a ruse. I'm never happy and relaxed when this rally is underway. I don't know why anyone else should be.

Soon they were joined at the top of the leader board by Fran Crane, Shane Smith, and George Barnes, each one a serious, skillful rider. They had all taken the great eastern arc through Nevada and Salt Lake City, racking up an average of 1,500 miles in about 28 hours. That is 20% farther than the longest day I've ever had. For them it's warming up.

Then Morris Kruehmcke walked in. He's not tall, the Texan with the molasses-like drawl, but he's l-a-r-g-e somehow. The checkers went through his paperwork and passed the forms to Mike Kneebone for final approval. Mike began reading the details to me: Rider number, odometer, gas bonus, bonus codes.

"TF," Mike said.

"TF?" I repeated. It was the bonus location code for Tortilla Flat, Arizona. It was true. Morris had done Arizona, almost an 1,800 mile ride, with six hours to spare for sleep before the next leg began. It was an amazing performance. Two other superb riders --- Alan Barbic and Al Holtsberry --- would try to duplicate Kruemcke's run but each would hit the rocks. Barbic arrived very late, took a heavy hit in penalties, and wound up 16 positions below Morris by day's end. Holtsberry fared even worse. Twenty-five miles from the checkpoint the rear wheel bearing in his R1100RT failed, the same problem that yesterday whacked Herbie Saint, and he finished the leg in a tow truck, uncertain whether he can continue.

Kruemcke's lead didn't last long. Phil Mann, a 66 year-old BMW rider from Michigan, arrived with bonus stops in Sequoia National Park, Nevada, and Utah. It was a harder route than Kruemcke had taken and worth just one additional point. In mid-afternoon Mann, who once rode over 113,000 miles in six months, led the Iron Butt. No one could beat that score, but Eric Jewell, the winner of the '99 five-day Butt Lite rally, quickly tied Mann. And that was it for the top places.

Fifteen riders tied for fourth place behind Mann, Jewell, and Kruemcke by hitting the bristlecone pine park and a mine near Salt Lake City. The cluster led by Morrison and Eagan follows them. The difference between first place and fiftieth is about 600 points. At this stage of the event 600 points is beneath nothing.

No one reported any accidents, but there were moments of sadness nonetheless. In addition to the no-show BMWs of Saint and Holtsberry, Marsha Roach's Panzer developed stator problems in Oregon. She couldn't make the Washington checkpoint but said she would try to reach Maine. Mary Sue Johnson, the sixth overall rider in the '97 IBR, lost a gas receipt and, consequently, the 500-point gas bonus. That oversight cost her 37 places in the standings, but she knows that this event is still young.

That's more than I can say. I'm growing older by the minute. We've found that trying to manage 100 riders is an administrative nightmare. I'm trying to convince Mike that in 2001 we should reduce the field to ten riders and charge each an entry fee of \$25,000. As nearly as I can tell, the only thing such a large field is good for is a limitless supply of really terrific stories. In the ensuing days I hope to be able to relay a few of them.

But here's one I can't resist. Fritz and Phyllis Lang of Pennsylvania, in just three IBRs, are already legends. As desperately as Phyllis tries to drag Fritz along the route, he just as desperately wants to sit around and talk to people. He is perpetually late. They were late again today. They had picked up two bonuses for 325 points, but their lateness penalties amounted to 330 points. Every bonus stop they made was thus worth 2.5 negative points. This is abnormal.

"See, Phyllis?" I said. "If you stop for 100 bonuses between here and Maine, you'll lose 250 points. What does that tell you?"

"I tell him to keep going," the saintly Mrs. Lang said. "But he won't. You know that."

Yeah. I did. But Fritz likes people and they like him. And if you can't talk to people, what's the point of riding around?

Mike Kneebone passed out the bonus locations for the second leg, from Washington to Maine. It too follows the usual script of multiple routes. You pick one, then grab the bonuses only on that route.

One of the paths is to Hyder, Alaska. It sounds impossible. It isn't. If someone can do it, he or she will be leading the rally in a few days.

Another path generally follows the main interstates eastbound. It's a straightforward route with a bundle of easy bonuses that collectively aren't worth the one bonus in Alaska. The rookies will go this way.

The final path leads to Plano, Texas, a suburb of Dallas. This route is drawing the heavy riders like a magnet. Peter Hoogeveen and Paul Taylor asked me to calculate the distance to Maine by way of central Texas on a computer mapping program. I did. It was close to 3,900 miles. They looked at each other and smiled. A few minutes later Shane Smith asked if the Texas bonus was really as easy as it appeared. Normal people would laugh at such a ridiculous comment. No one was laughing at him. He once went to a dinner in Alabama from his home in Mississippi by way of northern California and wasn't even late.

I began packing up my scoring weapons. Michael and Caroline McDaniel, the Iron Butt newlyweds, asked me if I thought they should go to Texas.

"Are you delusional?" I asked rhetorically. "You had a television crew here today interviewing you. People all over the world are talking about this insane honeymoon of yours on the internet. Forget Texas. People you don't even know are waiting for you in Maine. Go to them, my children. Go to them now."

But everyone thinks they're going to Texas.