

Washington, D.C.  
9/1/99 - Day 3

We are taking fire.

Mary Sue Johnson has dropped out of the rally, citing emergencies at work. SuzyQ is about three feet tall, weighs fifty pounds, has the competitive instincts of a wet raccoon, and drives a tractor-trailer rig for Roadway Express. In 1991 Jan Cutler turned her away from the IBR because he felt she lacked experience. On the '97 IBR she finished sixth overall out of 78 starting riders. I know she enjoys being reminded of that wonderful bit of IBR trivia almost as much as Jan hates hearing it repeated. We will miss Mary Sue's presence during the remainder of this event.

David Bankhead's bike has oil emerging where it shouldn't. We know nothing else.

The stator in Peter Withers' 13 year-old Yamaha Venture went belly up. You might blame the bike's long teeth for the problem, but you would merely be discriminating against seasoning, you ageist thug. The stators (a/k/a alternators) in these kinds of big Japanese tour bikes have a documented history of meltdown for no reason at all, sometimes before they even leave the assembly line. Peter, one of the Butt's truly nice veterans, may not be out, but he's definitely down.

One rider narrowly missed being beaten to death this morning by Mike Kneebone and me. In rallies past Mike would deliver an harangue to the riders at the preliminary banquet about dealing with the press. This time he met privately with every rider in the event, reminded each of the obligations of the press (i.e., to report lies, foment rumors, and make things up), reviewed the ethics of media representatives (i.e., at or below the level of disbarred attorneys), and suggested effective methods to ensure that the rider has been quoted correctly (i.e., don't speak to the miserable bastards at all).

But inevitably a reporter shows up at a checkpoint, sticks a tape recorder in a rider's face, says, "Hi! I'm Brown from the 'Sun.' Let's talk," and proceeds to pop a few innocuous questions:

Q. How fast do you ride?

A. With the flow of traffic.

Q. How fast is that?

A. I don't know. I'm looking at the traffic, not at the speedo, you fool. You think I want to die?

[Reporter writes: "Rider has speed-induced death wish. Blasts through school bus zones at 155 mph while tapping a vein for his next crystal meth injection."]

Q. Do you ever sleep?

A. Of course I sleep, you idiot. Don't all animals?

[Reporter writes: "Rider confesses that he's an animal who never sleeps while speeding through school bus zones."]

I sent out my daily e-mail report this morning just before 0300 PDT. The program then picked up incoming e-mail, among which was a message from George Mastovich, an attorney and former vicious,

blood-death enemy of mine. It contained the text of a story in the Monday edition of the Chicago Tribune. As my distribution list consists principally of God-fearing, kindly citizens, I decline to reproduce George's comments, but permit me to quote some of the more outrageous passages from the hack newspaper:

"Ken Hattom [sic] has a passion for motorcycling. He has blasted down the nation's highways at speeds of up to 173 m.p.h., and he holds the record for the fastest land trip ever between New York City and San Francisco: 41 hours. But this year, he's traveling a little bit more slowly . . .

"As a participant in the biannual [sic] Iron Butt Rally, he is about to attempt to travel 11,000 miles in 11 days, touching the four corners of the United States in a bizarre combination of speed race [sic] and scavenger hunt . . .

"And while Hattom [sic] has ridden a 124-horsepower Kawasaki in the rally before --- driving with so much power that the bike's sprocket teeth ripped off --- this time he's riding a 6-horsepower Suzuki GN125. Its maximum speed is about 50 m.p.h."

I read this drivel to the bitter end. Mike was asleep. My hands began to shake in fear and rage. At 0410 I took the cell phone into the bathroom and called the long-suffering Susan. When I absolutely, positively need a legal opinion I can trust to the dark, cold grave, I call her.

"This article is gibberish," I said. "They didn't even spell Ken Hatton's name right. It isn't a biannual rally; it's a biennial event.

"Furthermore, Hatton couldn't do 1,000 miles in one day on that slug bike if he were dropped from the space shuttle. And a SPEED RACE? A simple DEATH-DEFYING race isn't enough for these hyenas? But even in its abject illiteracy, this trash is a time bomb. Suppose he really said this horrid rot and we ignore it. If he has an accident, we're all going to jail."

"Did he say it?"

"It sounds like Hatton," I said. "That reporter didn't dream up the crap about the sprockets. Hatton DNF'd in '93 and '95 on that swine ZX-11. Both times he said the sprockets crumpled. That excuse is all over the internet. Hell, I wrote the stories myself. They're in national rags."

"If the reporter doesn't substantively retract this piece, I think you have to disqualify the rider. You can't ignore this."

"I agree," I said bleakly.

"You have some hope," Susan said. "Remember that photo of Harry Truman laughing and holding up the newspaper on election night in 1948 with the headline that he had been beaten by Tom Dewey?"

"Not the Trib," I said.

"The Trib," she said.

I slept an hour. The motel's wake up call came at 0600. Mike snapped up. "Get your e-mail," I said.

"Right now. I forwarded you a love letter from Mastovich."

He picked up his e-mail.

"Oh, God," he groaned. The day wasn't ten minutes old, and already it was way old.

We knew that the odds of the reporter retracting his story were zero. Between us in maybe 100 lifetime-years of newspaper interviews, neither of us had ever been misquoted. By mid-afternoon, following a few telephone calls from Mike, the reporter retracted. Mike is being sent a letter of apology. Hatton never said anything remotely similar to that which was reported. Yadda yadda. There was some confusion between the reporter and his editor. Yadda yadda yadda. Freedom of the press. Yadda yadda. Rocket's red glare. Yadda yadda yadda. These people are worse than I ever was. I'm at least a recovering lawyer. These Inside Edition/People Rag creeps get worse every day. Yadda.

Morris Kruemcke reports that he passed Ken Hatton's whining lawnmower bike on I-84 early this morning. I'm here to tell you that neither of them was going 173 m.p.h., OK?

Bob Higdon