

Portland, Maine
9/4/99 - Day 6

THE DOLLYWOOD SIEGE

The checkpoint in Kennewick had not been closed for five minutes before we were asked to post on the internet the bonus locations for the leg from Washington to Maine. Naturally we ignored the requests. If people knew where the riders were going for bonus points on the current leg, they'd go there to meet, to greet, and to observe the gnarled, wrinkled seat of the Long Rider.

If that were all they were doing, we wouldn't mind. But the fans don't stop there. They begin to trespass and to ignore the requirements of civilized society. They shoot off fireworks, dance the lambada, and congeal. They invariably fail to act in an age-appropriate manner. In a word they act like . . . er, motorcyclists.

Somehow, by conspiracy or blight, the bonuses for the second leg of the rally were posted for some indeterminate amount of time yesterday. As soon as Head Butt Mike Kneebone realized that his web site had been wormed, he yanked the bonus site information down. Ah, too late. Adoring Buttphiles began to gather at Dollywood, a spectacularly kitsch place but private property withal. Dollyguards, a humorless lot, sensed impending violence. I don't blame them one bit. I sense violence every time I see a motorcyclist. And if you looked the way Dolly does, you'd surround yourself with guards as well, I suspect.

As the eager motocrowd began to drape their illegally-posted "Go Butt Go!" welcoming signs all over Dolly's estate in the middle of the night, the Dolly Bureau of Investigation swung into action, ripping the offensive material out of the trees, dispersing the trespassers, and restoring the entrance pasture to its pristine, bosom-like state. Peace was restored. Once again Pigeon Forge, Tennessee was the land of milk and oh, honey, the Biblical (and Fruedian) symbols of Dollyness.

Ten minutes later Shane Smith showed up. He wanted to take a photo of his ID towel at the Dollywood entrance sign, a 340-point bonus. Lightly does he place the towel upon some identifiable part of Dollywood; gently does he step back to focus his Polaroid upon the bucolic scene; in horror does he realize that a Dollyguard has leaped out of the underbrush to seize the felonious towel and thence to run away with the same.

Now it is difficult for any reasonable person to understand just what the ID towel means to an Iron Butt participant, much less an Iron Butt participant who has a really excellent chance to win this rally. Smith, a modest and unassuming pharmacist from McComb, Mississippi, knows the significance of the towel: It is the difference between winning the event and having his teeth kicked in. That towel is proof of his very existence. Give up my scooter? Fine. Give up my towel? Never. And so at this wretched time of his life, Mr. Smith was either going to have to retrieve his towel from the uncooperative Dollywood management or he was going to have to pharm a Prozac for himself, which is almost certainly illegal. He chose to recover his towel.

The story ends happily, thank Dolly. Shane gets towel. Mike Kneebone mollifies Dollypeople. Iron Butt organizers are asked as soon as the Maine checkpoint closes today when we intend to put up the bonuses on the next leg to Florida. We reply that we hope to do so within the next fifteen years.

THE MAINE CHECKPOINT

Mike and I arrived at the Reynolds Motorsports dealership --- site of every IBR checkpoint since 1984 --- in Gorham, Maine shortly after 1000 this morning. Waiting for us were the sad messages, as predictable as the tides:

Garve Nelson, the oldest (at 71) finisher of the IBR, has headed home. The same rains that yesterday stopped vintage riders Doug Smith and Kevin Chase in their tracks have made this ride a misery for Garve. Now at the tender age of 75, he knows that when the ride stops being fun it is time to turn around. He turned around.

Bob Grange's motor burned out. He was finished.

Al Holtsberry, whom we'd already consigned to Definitely in the Can, confirmed that he was Definitely in the Can. Any DNF is a disappointment, but for Al it is doubly so. Earlier this year he set a record for the earliest finish on the Four Corners tour, a mark that may never be equalled.

Peter Withers appeared in front of me as I sat at the bridge of my battle-hardened scoring computer. I was looking at a man I'd said just yesterday was Heading for the Can. He advised that he had indeed avoided The Can but that his odometer, a necessary instrument for procuring bonus points, was eviscerating itself in true hari-kiri style, appropriate for a wide-bodied Japanese bike. In my capacity as the Iron Butt Association's chairman of the rules committee, press spokesman, chief scorer, sergeant-at-arms, and general counsel, I ruled that Withers would thenceforth be permitted to use a GPS unit to crank out mileage. The Iron Butt's president, Mr. Kneebone, attempted to countermand my well-reasoned decision, but I summarily overruled his objection on the ground that I had more jobs in the organization than did he and/or that if I didn't get my way I would pout.

Leonard Aron's '46 Indian Chief ground to a spectacular halt on the New York throughway at dawn this morning with a skid mark --- described by one witness as "twice as long as the longest skid mark I have ever seen before" --- when the primary drive chain locked up and slowed the rear wheel's revolutions from lots per minute to absolutely nothing. No one likes to see an old Indian take a hit, particularly while off the reservation, but I'd already bet Leonard \$10 (at 8-1 odds) in California that he'd never go the distance. See? It's an ill wind that blows no good. [P.S. He paid off. I tried to talk him out of it. He said it was a debt of honor. I reminded him that he was an attorney, so his words were meaningless. It's a stand-off, I think, but I've got the ten bucks.]\

Aron's contretemps was salvaged in significant part because he had earlier been serendipitously picked up and sandwiched like a waif between Paul Graves, the president of the 27,000-member BMW Motorcycle Owners of America, and Chris Cimino, a vicious S&L investigator and stringer for Motorcyclist magazine. They helped him through his downtime.

Rick Morrison, the '97 IBR champ, and Gary Eagan, the winner in '95, continued to ride joined at the hip on the second leg, a formidable pair of riders if there ever was two, so to speak. Morrison is trying to shake the curse of the Iron Butt winner (they always screw up after they've won); Eagan is trying to shake the curse of some horrific accidents in recent years. These two have dominated every rally they have run this year. At the end of the first leg they were tied for twenty-eighth place. Tonight they are tied for second. Watching them is like watching another shoe drop.

Three points behind Eagan and Morrison is George Barnes, a Colorado rider on everyone's short list for the victory platform. He has run almost exactly the same route as the guys in front of him, but he didn't stop for a pathetic 3-point gas bonus in Staunton, Virginia. I'm not sure why. He'd spent some time earlier in the day fixing Eagan's flat tire.

Kerry Willey sent his secretary to check in for him. I looked at her. She was too clean to be an Iron Butt rider. I sensed a plot. Then I saw Kerry in the corner laughing at me. Not bad. I pride myself on being in total control of my section of the checkpoint. Kerry Willey obviously prides himself in being in total control of me.

WHERE WE ARE Everyone who looks at the entry list of these riders says the same thing: Wow. There has never been assembled anywhere as fine a group of long-distance rallyists as these. It sounds hyperbolic. It's just true. Any one of twenty of these men --- and one woman --- could take this event. They're tough, they're smart, and they're all proven.

And alone at the head of the pack, by 216 points, is Eddie James, one of the most remarkable riders ever to terrorize the Iron Butt rally. He wound up 22nd of 24 riders in 1993 with a checkpoint miss, the excuse for which, even if true, is the stuff of Iron Butt legend. In 1995 he finished second overall but was disqualified for picking up an after-hours receipt at bonus location.

In 1997 we told him that everything he did on the rally would be reviewed by a dozen eyes and three computers. If a receipt squinted, he'd be popped. If a photo was blurred, he wouldn't get the benefit of the doubt. He finished fourth, withstanding pressure from organizers and contestants that I don't want to think about. After the finisher's banquet he came unannounced into my room, sat down at my desk, and as he began to speak saw five checkpoint folders in front of my computer.

"They have my name on them, those things," he said. He seemed almost hurt.

"The do indeed," I said. "I told you: We watch your ass like a hawk."

When the checkpoint results went up this afternoon, he said that he wasn't sure he liked being in first place. But he's looking pretty good --- excited but rested, cleaned up but always the human pin-ball machine. I knew the first time I saw him that he was a bag of distilled trouble and he's never let me down. This afternoon, smiling, he said he was going to Prince Edward Island in the maritime provinces of Canada for a big bonus, then he'd backtrack and straight-line it down I-95 to Florida. He might. He's Eddie James. He's liable to do anything.

Tonight he's the king of the Iron Butt world.

Bob Higdon