

St. Augustine, Florida  
9/5/99 - Day 7

#### FILM AT ELEVEN

Mike said that the crew from the local Fox TV station wanted to do an interview in the Reynolds Motorsports' parking lot. It would be a good background shot with bug-spattered bikes, sleeping riders, and psychotic organizers. Most of the riders had checked in. I didn't have anything else to do except worry where the missing 18 bikes were.

"Massage them," Mike said.

It's my job. I routinely go out to tell the media that this isn't a race and that it isn't socially irresponsible to set these tired riders loose on an unsuspecting public and that everyone's having the time of their lives, including the guy throwing up in the ditch back there. I'm good at it. On days when I'm really rocking, I could make the sociopathic Clinton look almost normal.

The reporter was young and eager. He didn't yet realize that he was an incipient whore. He'll learn soon enough. We went through the preliminaries. He liked the line about my being a recovering lawyer. After that he was pretty much in my pocket, at least until the film arrives at the editing room. There we'd be trashed royally and for keeps. But I can't help that. I try to win the battle; we'll never win the war.

The interview went well. I mentioned some of the exceptional riders who were involved in the rally. Over there is Ardys Kellerman, a great-grandmother and holder of the BMW MOA record for the most miles ever ridden by a woman in the club's mileage contest. There's Paul Glaves, the president of that huge club. His wife, Voni, is in the process this year of annihilating Ardys' record, and Ardys is clapping for Voni all the way. Then there's the guy with the sidecar, Bob Mutchler. You'll notice he's on crutches? For most of the first three years of his life he was in an iron lung. Polio. The doctors told his parents to give up. They ignored the doctors. Mutchler wants to do 13,000 miles in 11 days. There's Moses, the chemistry teacher from Nevada. His kids are starting the school year with a substitute while Don finishes riding around. Those two sleeping against the wall are on their honeymoon. On and on. These people are unbelievable.

"Is there anything we didn't cover?" he asked.

"Yeah. When, despite my desperate pleas to the contrary, you persist in calling this event a 'race' in your voice-over, I want you to know I'm going to write a vicious letter to your editor, OK?"

"I won't call it a race," he laughed.

"You will," I sighed. "You always do."

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#### A SOFT BUTT?

Ron Ayres', a sixth-place finisher in 1995, put a cryptic note on the long-distance rider internet list the other day. He thought the number of ties at the first checkpoint was "ridiculous," and wondered if the

Iron Butt wasn't getting too easy. He should have been in Gorham. It looked like the day after the Battle of Gettysburg. The "ridiculous" number of ties at the first checkpoint had evaporated by the second. The only ties there were among seven pairs of contestants who were riding together.

Five riders were late, taking punishing penalties at ten points-per-minute. Eighteen riders were time-barred, including Phil Mann, the co-leader in Kennewick. He retired with mechanical problems after coming through Chicago. Also in the no-show tank were Alan Barbic and Bob Grange, riders who had clearly overextended themselves on the first leg. Heinz Kugler, a top ten finisher in 1997, DNFd with a broken shock. The Langs called to say they would be taking a miss in Maine, would try to regroup, and would aim for Florida. The Slash 5 pair of Jacobs and Chase DNFd. Melody Albers took a miss but was hopeful of continuing.

Thirty-two riders rode from Washington to Maine via Texas. Thirty-one of them made it to Gorham. They are the top 31 riders in the standings. Mike Kneebone feels that ten years ago not three riders would have attempted such a jaunt. Higher speed limits make a difference, true, but the fact of the matter is that this is the finest field of endurance riders ever assembled in North America. They could make riding to asteroid B612 look easy. It isn't.

Historically 26% of the starting riders in the event have been lost to attrition. In 1993 it was a grim 40%. So far 19% of the riders have taken checkpoint misses. It will get much worse. And it isn't just rookies who are falling back. Every other rider on the starting line in Ojai was an Iron Butt vet. This is a tough event, and it's getting tougher.

Ayres was the high-mileage finisher in 1995 with 12,007 miles. At the point that penalties began accruing in Maine in this year's rally, 22 riders were on a pace to beat that mark. Five of them were projected to run more than 13,000 miles. Anything beyond 12,777 miles will break an Iron Butt record that has stood for 13 years.

A weak Butt? Sure. You try to keep up with them.

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NEITHER RAIN NOR SLEET NOR CANADA . . .

I noted at the riders' meeting in Maine that Tropical Storm Dennis had moved most of coastal North Carolina ten miles into the Atlantic. It was still hanging around, trying to figure out what to do next. Probably they'd be best served by avoiding the bonuses around the Outer Banks. The storms rarely come far inland, I said. Raleigh should be OK, and everything to the west. At that very moment T. S. Dennis was preparing to put Raleigh under 356 feet of water. The coast was clearing up beautifully. What the hell. I'm no weatherman. Even the weathermen aren't weathermen. No one can predict the future. And anyone who'd trust my predictive abilities deserves what he gets.

Besides, the serious riders shouldn't have been thinking about anything to the south anyway. They should have been looking at a map of Canada and the maritime provinces. There's a bridge 450 miles north and east of Portland that runs over to Prince Edward Island. You could hardly find a worse way to travel to the St. Augustine, Florida checkpoint than by way of the Confederation Bridge, but it is worth 4,000 bonus points to anyone who can do it. No other stop on the third leg comes close to it in value. There is another 650 point bonus in Cutler, Maine that adds to the attraction.

But be honest. Can you deliberately set out as the sun begins to fade in a direction opposite to the next checkpoint, aim yourself toward a foreign country, ride 450 miles through the night in deer-infested forests, take a photo of a bridge, turn around, and backtrack 450 miles over the very roads you have just travelled? The longest day I ever lived I could not do that.

But someone will. Whoever does has a chance to win the rally. Whoever doesn't almost certainly doesn't. It doesn't get much simpler than that. Or harder.

Bob Higdon