

Ojai, California
9/10/99 - Final

The '99 Iron Butt Rally was decided on the final leg of the eleven-day event by 317 points, the closest contest since 1991. Inasmuch as the underlying theme of this year's rally was tragedy --- contestants had visited bonus sites memorializing plane crashes, train wrecks, toxic waste spills, homicides, floods, volcanic eruptions, meteor strikes, and nuclear meltdowns --- it was only fitting that this year's finish would also be the usual combination of thrill, victory, agony, and defeat.

The key to the final leg required backtracking to New York from St. Augustine, then plotting a route to southern California to maximize bonus points along the way. Pressures of time --- only 88 hours were available from the moment the bonus lists were distributed in Florida for the contestants to reach the finish in Ojai --- as well as increasing fatigue would explain why few of the riders would have considered a ride back up the terminally-ugly I-95 to White Plains under any conceivable circumstance. Yet 25% of the riders in Florida made that ride. I would emphasize here that we are not talking about a profound, perhaps rally-ending commitment on the first day or so of the event. No. These riders were wondering whether they could make such a backbreaking ride on the 9th, 10th, and 11th days of the event.

One of the riders who skipped due west, Shane Smith, began kicking himself around the midwest for days, regretting his decision to bypass New York. He knew the oversight might cost him at least fifteen places in the final standings, so valuable was a visit to White Plains, but Shane's determination to vacuum anything not nailed down in the Great Plains saved him. When the dust settled, he had bagged 13 bonuses from central Texas to North Dakota and points west, dropping only a single position in the standings. In the process he had ridden a total of 12,780 miles, breaking, if only temporarily, the record previously set by Barry Norman in 1987. It was an amazing effort.

Virginian Paul Taylor, a rider undefeated in three east coast endurance rallies, had an even more unbelievable final leg. He too had forsaken New York, but managed to gather up 17 bonus sites on the ride west and actually gain two places at the rally's end. For unalloyed aggression in sucking up bonus sites, however, no one could top the 19 bonus hits that Jeff Simmonds accomplished, lifting him four places on the leg to 31st overall.

But the heavyweights went north, and the event ultimately would be decided by who went where from New York to southern California.

George Barnes looked like an odds-on favorite until his K-bike began running on three cylinders. He had hoped to charge over to North Dakota then drop straight down into Kansas, thereby picking up over 8,000 bonus points with just two stops. That plan became impossible with the bike's failing engine. Barnes somehow concluded that the oxygen sensor in the fuel injection was the culprit. In such a case the engine will revert to pre-programmed fuel map. That caused the bike to run fuel rich, which in turn fouled a plug. Which one? Barnes dropped to his hands and knees, grabbed each exhaust header with his bare hand until he found a cold one, then changed the plug for that pipe. If you can't treat the disease, at least treat the symptoms. Problem more or less solved, if only momentarily, and off to Ojai he went with his five bonuses ---big bonuses --- in hand.

Barnes in the meantime was being dogged by serious rivals --- Tom Loftus, Peter Hoogeveen, Harold Brooks and Manny Sameiro (riding together from the outset), and the always dangerous Eric Jewell,

winner of the five-day Butt Lite earlier this year. Previous IBR winners Gary Eagan and Rick Morrison were also mathematically in contention. If Barnes faltered, it would be one of these riders who would take the win. Eddie James had already knocked himself out of the running by an agonizingly late start to New York from Florida.

Loftus became the first to drop out. He became sick. He stopped his ride west, tried to shake whatever bug he'd picked up, but couldn't. Twice he tried to continue and twice he could not. But with an 8th overall finish in 1997 and a 3rd overall placement with one leg remaining in 1999, Tom Loftus has already shown that he is one of the most capable riders in the game.

One by one the riders began rolling into Ojai at dawn this morning. All had taken dramatically different routes to the finish, with the exception of Brooks and Sameiro, who had ridden together from the start to the bitter end. Had anyone found a way to circumvent Barnes' apparent stranglehold on the '99 Butt?

Mike Kneebone began calling the contestants' names off in inverse order at the finisher's banquet. Listening to a recitation of the names on the list could not help but remind those in attendance that never before had there been a gathering of endurance riders such as this. Even the dead-last-but-finished rider, Fritz ("the second nicest guy in the world") Lang had averaged 811 miles/day, riding in a week what the average motorcyclist will do in a year.

Kneebone reached the Top Twenty, that spot occupied by Tom Loegering, a man as cursed by fate as any who has ever entered the event. Bill Kramer, who was mortally locked in a perpetual smile contest with Australian John McCrindle for eleven straight days, was 19th. Kramer had more points than the Aussie, but in overall smiles smiled it was a clean draw.

Berti Levy, at 28 the new kid in the group, proved his mettle with a ride up I-95 on the final leg. He finished 18th. Bob Brown and Dennis Cunningham, riding together, tied for 16th. Then came Morris Kruemcke, Bobb Todd, and Greg McQueen, the latter two also riding the entire distance as a pair. Richard Bernecker's Rolling Bordello rose from 21st to 12th with a huge final push. Asa McFadden took eleventh.

Maryland's Leonard Roy was #10, greatly improving on his finish two years ago. Shane Smith took ninth, and Paul Taylor eighth. Peter Hoogeveen closed with a predictably hard ride but could grab no better than seventh this year. Such a finish would be a lifetime accomplishment for almost any rider in this world-class pack. For the star-crossed Canadian, it must be a disappointment. He has such talent and such skill that it is incredible he has been deprived of the victory platform for so long. I truly hope he will not give up his riding.

The 1995 winner, Gary Eagan, rolled in at sixth. Five men then remained. Fifth overall went to Eric Jewell, who'd lost an entire place with a lateness penalty of 2,400 points earlier in the morning. He had come within one minute of being time barred. But even with the penalty, far and away the most severe of the entire rally, his ride from Florida had been so fierce that he still gained two places on the leg. He is simply an incredible motorcyclist.

Manny Sameiro and Harold Brooks were next called, tied for third. They are an improbable pair, the young New Jersey prosecutor and the grizzled IBR veteran from Virginia who has more miles on the event than anyone. There is some obvious synergy at work here: Sameiro two years ago was dead-last-

but-finished, laboring in negative points for half the rally, and Brooks has never come close to finishing this high. Together they did what neither could do alone.

It was now between 1997 IBR winner Rick Morrison and the leader going into the final stretch this year, George Barnes. Two years ago Morrison had come out of the middle of the pack with two gigantic final legs to snatch a victory from Peter Hoogeveen. Could he do it again? Not since the first two IBRs in 1984-85 has anyone taken a second win. Would the curse that seems to hang on the necks of former champions like an albatross continue?

It sure would. Morrison's ride had been another for the books: eight bonuses worth 23,511 points, the best in the field and almost 3,000 points higher than Barnes' total. But Rick had too much distance to make up from his 9th place position in Florida against one of the hardest riders the endurance motorcycling community has ever seen. Barnes not only grabbed the most points in the eleven days but in doing so he rode 13,346 miles, setting a new record for the event by over 560 miles.

In Barnes, the easy-going Coloradan, the Iron Butt Association today has a new king, but this cannot be a surprise to anyone who has watched his endurance career. Today was inevitable. He's that good. He really is. And he rode against a group of men and women who play a different game than do the rest of us.

This was an awesome eleven days.

Bob Higdon