

Every two years they gather. From all parts of the North America and far beyond they come.

They arrive with different motivations, yet all come to answer a similar challenge. A challenge that originates deep from within. They seek answers to questions that only they themselves can ask and only they alone may provide answers. They've come to conquer personal demons and perhaps quell inner doubts. They've come to compete, to measure themselves among other like-minded souls. They have come to join the cadre of less than three hundred that have completed this toughest motorcycle competition on Earth. They seek membership in a fraternity where admission is granted only by finishing. A fraternity more exclusive than those who have been to the peak of Mt. Everest, a community tinier than the total of humans who have ever traveled to outer space.

They have come to run THE Rally. These one hundred and twelve have come to ride this 2001 Iron Butt Rally. They all will ride it alone; they all will ride it together.

It is hot in Madison Alabama. Just a few miles west of Huntsville you'd expect it to be hot in these dog days of late August. "But it is WET heat!" laughs rally volunteer Ira Agins, himself a finisher of the last Iron Butt Rally in 1999. The mug factor is high as perspiration freely rolls down his back drawing dark wet blotches across his grey Iron Butt Association tee shirt. Ira is a tech inspector. He is a volunteer like the majority of the IBA staff here to assist in the start of this biennial competition. He and other past finishers Dale Wilson, Tom Austin, Dennis Bittner and a score of others have had their ride and earned their membership in the elite band of rally veterans. They go about their tasks on Saturday and Sunday checking license, insurance, registration and basic equipment. They check for compliance to the rules and regulations that limit and define fuel storage, aftermarket mufflers, and then send the entrants on a short route for odometer calibration.

The Ramada Inn is a classic roadside motel that is rally headquarters, and the site of both start and finish. The two story beige brick quadrangle has been completely overtaken this third weekend in August by the Iron Butt Association. Motorcycles and riders began to congregate at the Madison, Alabama inn as early as the Friday before the scheduled rally start on Monday, August 27, 2001. The vast majority of entrants are riding the major marques, Honda, BMW, Harley Davidson, Yamaha and Kawasaki and all are mostly of liter or larger engine displacements. But again, as in every past rally, there are some notable exceptions. This year Leonard Aron is joined in his biennial campaign of the antique and now defunct Indian brand by Richard Frost. Aron is seeking his first successful finish among his fourth consecutive start for the well-worn 1946 Indian Chief. Richard has brought his 1953 Indian Roadmaster to spur a rally within the rally. Will Leonard finally complete the circuit to that illusive last checkpoint? Will the Roadmaster outlast the Chief?

Paul Pelland represents the Siberian Speed Team with his 2001 Russian made Ural. This brand new solo Ural model sports the most up-to-date, state of art technology available from the early seventies. Will it be enough to overcome the rigors of an eleven-day eleven thousand mile ride across OUR fruited plain? Will Paul and his Ural with its Germanic originated, Soviet-Russo improved upon design prevail and realize Nikita Khrushchev's prophecy to bury the field of competition?

A number of riders have discarded the conventional wisdom of liter class power and opted to ride bikes of smaller displacement. A champion of the "size does not matter" mantra, Canadian Bobb Todd has exchanged his contact papered ride of 1997 and 1999, a very capable Honda ST1100, for a 125 CC Honda. Joining Bobb in the diminutive displacement dare in a 2001 Cagiva 2 stroke is Paul Meridith. His

mustard yellow Cagiva Mito looks very much like a Ducati 916 suffering from dwarfism and in big need of steroids to supplement the four-ounce engine displacement. Veteran Bob Ray has selected a Honda Reflex scooter deciding that his 1997 entry, a Honda Pacific Coast, possessed much too much horsepower overkill. Keith Keating campaigns a 1997 Suzuki GN125E as the other entrant in this the unofficial "Hopeless class". Who will finish first in this group of advocates of the "little engine that could" philosophy? Sure, they all say " I think I can, I think I can". But do YOU think they can? Will conventional wisdom bring enlightenment to these unconventional entrants?

There is nothing conventional when it comes to describing the remaining hundred plus entrants in this year's Iron Butt Rally. Rick "Mango" Morrison has teamed with Gary "Hobatz" Eagan on a pair of matched rally prepped deep blue Ducati ST4s. These ugly Duclings have hopes as high as the rev limits on these sweet sounding vee twins. Another new ST4 is entered but in stunning yellow color. It is being ridden by Michael and Caroline McDaniel who will celebrate their second wedding anniversary aboard the new Ducati. In the 1999 IBR they circled the country with "Just Married" on the Duc's top box. This year the back their new bike proudly announces "Still Married".

The weekend is filled with tech inspection, odometer inspection and rider's meetings. Novices listen to the freely given advice and oft told war stories of rally veterans some of which actually may be true. A nervous expectation pervades this gathering of folks about to undertake the ride of their life. Their entry into the select fraternity is not yet assured. Commencement begins with the pre-rally banquet Sunday evening. An eleven-day test soon follows on Monday morning.

The class of 2001 has now gathered.

The Iron Butt Rally is about to begin.