

The Finish Line: Madison, Alabama

Bill Kramer felt good. The three time Iron Butt Rally veteran's ride was right on plan and he was going great. The North Carolinian could "smell the barn". He was only fifteen miles out from the finish at Madison, Alabama. Bill had more than enough time to arrive and to be cheered by the awaiting crowd of motorcycle enthusiasts and friends. His wife Judy anxiously waited at the Ramada Inn to cheer him on when he crossed the finish line.

Judy Kramer is an old hand at this waiting game and had organized a pre-finish dinner for with wives and significant others the previous evening. They all would be at the finish to greet and congratulate their hard riding life's partner. She had relayed to them her own past experiences in playing this tense waiting game. She offered both support and encouragement that someone with the same-shared experience only can.

Northbound on I-65 Bill felt good about this year's ride. He had left Alabama eleven days ago deciding then to forgo the "Alaskan option". He knew that the bonus points would steadily rise as the rally progressed clockwise around America. The veteran would pace himself and arrive at Pomona seventeenth in the standings of those riders choosing the rally's conventional four corners route. On leg two he would again ride a tight route picking up points based on value versus their cost in time and miles. The strategy found Bill in eleventh place at Washington when the big points bonuses were announced. The manufacturing manager pointed his ST1100 north towards Alaska and made his way to Hyder. After checking in Maine he had boosted his standing to fourth and now was an assured gold level finish. If he could finish.

He decided that on this last leg that he would carefully budget his time, snagging a newspaper in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, visiting Mike's Famous Museum of the American Road in New Castle, Delaware, grab an easy 3,450 points by taking a rest bonus, getting gas in Chattanooga and, along the way, pick up a whopping 4813 point receipt delivered at any gas station in Jackson, Mississippi. He had totaled it all up in his head again and again. His points were accruing. His gold level was in the bag. Bill Kramer felt good.

Fifteen miles distant entrants had begun trickling in to the finish line. Jeff Jones' finish schedule was trapped in a failed pocket computer and he didn't want to risk the fear of arriving late. He returned from Alaska a full day early. One by one the entrants arrived. Bob Ray had made a beeline from the north in his newly repaired Reflex Scooter. He had little time to spare as two full hours of his ride back were spent in a remote comfort station out-waiting a hungry grizzly looking for lunch.

Bernie Weiss was not feeling good. He had missed the Maine checkpoint. It was a story right out of the twilight zone. A story that confirms that everything in this world is somehow connected to everything else. Bernie was dog-tired in Edson, Saskatchewan. He did what endurance riders do when exhausted. They stop and grab some rest. Sometimes the sleep is taken at an "Iron Butt Motel". The IB Motel might be an unused picnic table at a rest stop, the bike itself, or perhaps a park bench. Bernie chose a comfy Edson park bench. A concerned passing RCMP noted Bernie taking his powernap, very much looking like a sleeping power ranger. He closely checked out Bernie and offered, " We can do better than that". He offered Weiss a night's free shelter in the local constabulary. Bernie accepted the gracious gesture. After a few hours rest, Bernie arose and proceeded to leave. The officer in-charge mentioned that the Mountie who offered Bernie the night's accommodation was the only officer that could permit his exit.

Seems that very officer was now out on a call assisting in a deer-motorcycle accident. The deer was of the local variety but the motorcycle was from California, a K1200RS to be exact. The motorcyclist was from San Bernardino, Iron Butt Rally rider Dennis Cunningham to be exact. Bernie was going to be late to Maine. Bernie might be late to Madison. Real late. Despite the rest Bernie was not feeling good.

Leonard Aron was going to do it. He had made all the checkpoints and had broken the curse. Three times before he had tried. Three times before he had failed. Perhaps it was that plastic Jesus that Mike Kneebone had given him, perhaps it was the prayers that fellow rider Shane Smith offered up each morning at eight, perhaps it was the sure guts and determination and years of preparation. Whatever it was, it was working. Leonard would take it. He would take it all. He crossed the finish line early. The old Indian briefly a once again proud warrior, leaking perhaps a bit less and looking very much The Chief. Leonard was happy.

Shane Smith had arrived in Madison early. His wife Karen and friends ecstatic to see the pharmacist from McComb, Mississippi return from a monster ride from Prudhoe Bay to Key West. It made no difference if his extraordinary efforts would be surpassed in the point totals. He had been the first of the northern Alaska adventurers to arrive. He was and will always be their winner. Shane felt good. Everyone felt good.

Al Willis was one hundred miles from the finish. Two hours more and he could start telling his own Alaskan travel tales to his wife and friends assembled in Madison. He had traveled to Denali and was only fifty miles from home when he found himself standing at the roadside looking down at his mangled bike. Not good.

At five am the checkpoint opened for the early arrivals. The riders had until 8:00am to check in without penalty. Points then were deducted until the checkpoint's closure at 10:00am. A late rider had thirty-six hours more to arrive to claim a finish. However, any bonus points earned along the last leg would not be counted in the total with such a late arrival. But you could still be a finisher.

Bob Hall arrived at 7:54. By a six-minute margin he narrowly missed any late arrival point deductions. Bob had just returned from Prudhoe Bay, Alaska. He had elected to go for the big one million-point bonus offered in Sunnyside, Washington. He gambled on the weather. He won. He gambled that the BMW R1100RT would run without problems. He won. He knew that what he could control he would. And he did. Bob felt good. Extremely good. He won.

1999 IBR rally winner George Barnes had made a similar gamble. He had elected a more aggressive route, this by also sweeping through the Denali National Park. His plan would have him return before 10:00 am window slammed shut. He hoped.

Eric Jewel, an accomplished rallyist and winner of other competitive rallies had similar ambitions. He had made it to Prudhoe Bay from Sunnyside and had a similar plan for his return. He was bearing down on Madison for the finish. Eric, like George, had no time to waste feeling neither good nor bad.

Bill Kramer knew that his ride would not garner the top spot. His concern was doing the best that he could do. And, he was. He felt good as the truck to his right suddenly pulled into his lane. Bill had no option but to swerve left to the median. Exit 334 was not where Bill planned to leave I-65. Especially not into the median opposite the ramp. Not in the grass. Bill stood on the pegs and tried to recover, but the big Honda ST1100 sport-tourer was not intended to be ridden off road. The bike bucked and Bill was

high-sided, thrown off the bike, perhaps mercifully. The bike continued on to cross the opposing lanes of traffic and came to rest in the midst of the southbound lanes. Bill was wearing a full-face helmet, boots and protective riding gear, nevertheless his arm and hand really hurt. He was fifteen miles from the finish. Bill Kramer now did not feel good.

Paul Pelland was happy. He had ridden around the country with a unique combination of good nature, determination and resourcefulness. He had been tested again and again by a machine that was in many ways technically similar to entrant Martin Hildebrandt's 1938 BMW R-51. The BMW broke. While Martin crossed the finish line with a ten thousand-point penalty on a rented Honda Hurricane his old Beemer was now on its way back to Germany still broken.

Paul's URAL had broken also. He fixed it and then it broke and then fixed it once more. It broke again and was fixed. At least a score more times this vicious cycle would repeat. Paul took it all in stride as he rode the URAL over the finish line, fixed but once again, at least for now.

Marsha Hall had arrived in Maine late. She was time barred and as such could not pick up additional bonus points on the final leg. Marsha certainly did not feel good about that. As she made her way south she joined with fellow rider Karol Patzer. Karol, a veteran rider, was conquering her own demons. Karol's own leg injury had not been improved over the last few days but she knew that she could make it. At a stop Karol helped Marsha find a room and get some well-needed rest. Marsha would succumb to a problem that others had encountered and had a late start for those last miles into Madison. She arrived a little past 10:00am. She had missed the checkpoint window by just a few minutes. Cruelly she had crossed the finish line but it would be for naught as this was her second missed checkpoint. She had ridden the miles. She had gone the distance. She had lasted the eleven days but missed only by minutes. She had arrived but she had not finished. Marsha, of course, felt bad. Later she would feel better reflecting that her effort to arrive had revealed a toughness of spirit and a commitment to finish no less than any other's.

Paul Meredith had answered the challenge of "Could it be done?" with planning, preparation, technology and a well-executed drive to pilot the little Cagiva Mito across the finish. The other tiny bike, a Suzuki 125GN, relied less on technology and more on brute determination and sheer saddle time. Keith Keating had also made the full circuit of rally checkpoints. Keating's only required repair was to replace the speedometer bulb in the process. Yes! It could be done. They had done it. Paul and Keith both felt good.

Ardys Kellerman had finished once again. She held the distinction of being the most senior of riders at age sixty-nine.

At the finisher's banquet the room buzzed with tales of the road. The rider's all shared their differing variants of a shared similar experience. It would tie them together for all time as the class of 2001 in this most exclusive of organizations, these Iron Butt Rally finishers. These now Iron Butt veterans. The stories of the big dogs would be known by all, as would their inverse counterparts at that barely squeaked to a finish. Although there was but one rally it was knit from one hundred twelve different threads.

Mike Kneebone announced the point totals and then offered a special treat of Baked Alaska to those who had earned the elegant desert by riding far north. While awards were distributed two faces were noticed outside in the hall. Eric Jewel and George Barnes had arrived. George still in his Aerostich, his

face still covered with road grime looked very much like the cartoon character Wiley Coyote after the box of Acme Dynamite had exploded under his face. Both were roundly applauded for their big ride. It was futile only in points, meaningless only in the final standing. They won the admiration of each person present. George and Eric would always be winners for their effort.

Bill and Judy Kramer had also arrived, but straight from the local hospital. Bill was achy but doing OK. The banquet luncheon had not satisfied Bill's hunger for his Iron Butt finish. A fifteen-mile gap had remained in his ride. It branded his standing as "DNF". A plan was brewing to satisfy this craving. Actually two plans were brewing to satisfy the same lust. One hundred miles distant a similar hunger tore at Al Willis. Since neither rider had missed any checkpoint but the last, and even though the final checkpoint had closed, there remained a thirty-six hour window to claim the finish.

Bill approached Bob Ray regarding borrowing the Honda Reflex. The clutch less automatic scooter could easily be maneuvered with Bill's remaining one good hand. That evening at the after rally party at Ray's home, Bill took Bob's scooter out for a spin to confirm that he could safely pilot the little grey machine those last remaining fifteen miles of untraveled road.

On Saturday morning Bob Ray arrived at the Ramada with the Reflex followed by his car to pick up Bill and Judy. The plan was simple. Bob piloted the scooter to exit 334 on I-65. Bill suited up in his gear and simply rode it back to the Ramada and the finish line. Bob rode in his car ahead while a van followed behind. As the scooter turned off for the exit to Madison, it was joined by Shane Smith on his Alaska dirt encrusted ST1100. Shane had seen the trio of vehicles while traveling west. He turned around and closed in on the procession. Shane pulled alongside the scooter, flashed a big thumbs up, and fell behind as if in an escort in this parade of toughness, determination, perseverance and honor.

As Bill pulled into the Ramada, a small crowd of assembled rider's applauded his successful effort to finish. Bill had completed what he started a dozen day ago. Although he was still hurting, Bill now felt good. Really good.

After that day the Ramada parking lot was almost empty. And although most had now left surely thinking this Iron Butt rally was complete, it was not. Not until three-thirty that afternoon when Al Willis arrived on his other bike, a Harley Davidson. The last two IBA volunteers remaining checked him in. Ira Agins noted the mileage. I noted Al's big grin. His family cheered and applauded. It was no less a roar than that for the others. He had been to Alaska and back. He had been sorely tested. He did not win but yet was a winner. He felt good. Everyone felt good.

It's not over 'till it's over.

The 2001 Iron Butt Rally was now over.

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