

Leg one: Alabama to California

Early Monday morning alarm clocks jangled, phones rang and soon the sounds motorcycle engines joined in a cacophonous mix. The one hundred and twelve Iron Butt Rally entrants began queuing their bikes two by two for the 10:00 AM start. Each had worked hard to start. All expected to finish.

This was the largest starting field for an Iron Butt Rally. Although there were 112 rider IDs issued, 114 would ride as two couples would ride two up, the McDaniel's on the Ducati and the Baileys on a Cagiva Gran Canyon. The field was mostly men but the eight women riding were more than equal to the task. Grandmotherly Ardys Kellerman prepared to begin her fourth rally and Carol Youorski, aka Skert, her first. The rally was a birthday present to Carol from herself. She hoped it would take the next eleven days to unwrap. Phyllis Lang rode individually with her husband Fritz attempting their hat trick. It was to be the second rally start for Marsha Hall who put prior equipment failure behind her and this time expected to finish on a bright yellow BMW R1100S.

Karol Patzer is the mileage contest coordinator for the BMWMOA, a BMW motorcycle enthusiast's organization. An ACL knee injury incurred just weeks prior did not prevent her from competing in this her third rally. She has made an even greater sacrifice than just riding the route with a leg brace. When a conflict arose with her longtime employer regarding available time off to participate, the conflict was resolved when Karol dismissed her employer. IBA members sport license plate frames proclaiming "Worlds Toughest Riders". It is a toughness that transcends the physical.

A horn bleated noisily as the rider queued immediately behind Karol shouted, "Damn women riders! Get out of the Way!" The good-natured ribbing of Eddie James melted the tenseness of these waning prestart minutes. Eddie mentioned that his route decision was easy. After riding in three "conventional" Iron Butt Rally's the siren call of the north was just too seductive. He mentioned that his new BMW R11500GS was crying out to tackle the frozen tundra. It was apparent that Eddie had recovered from his faux faux at the previous evening's opening banquet. Eddie picked up not only the wrong bonus envelope, incorrect rally flag but the wrong ID card as well. Eddie is the events coordinator for a national motorcycling organization where his polished organizational skills surely must shine. Only another jaded Iron Butt veteran would consider an eleven thousand mile four corners tour of America "conventional".

Corky Reed, mayor of Reed's Landing, observed at the start line as Dale Wilson's technical team collected the route declarations from each rider. This list of expected bonus goals was worth five hundred points. Corky is one of a number of folks who have attained positions of prominence that are involved in the long distance riding community. Ira Agins and Bob Ray each hold doctorate level degrees while others have attained executive level positions in the military, government and business. They are proof that high intelligence has little correlation with common sense.

Todd Witte was breathing easier this Monday morning. One day before he was greeted to a growing puddle of oil spreading beneath his Harley Davidson Tour Glide. An evening full of work to the engine had been completed and he was now ready to ride. He was motivated to fulfill the expectations of his proud sponsors now painted along the sides of the big black Harley's fairing. The lettering exclaimed: "Sponsored by Mom, Dad and Karen"

Jeff Jones fidgeted nervously while repacking what he describes as a 1993.5 Honda ST1100. He rebuilt the bike with both 1993 and 1994 model parts. Until he rescued it this ST was headed for wrecking yard oblivion. In 1999 Jeff helped with the IBR technical inspection. Then he was attired in full uniform. Jeff is a California Highway Patrolman. One can only wonder if he will require any professional courtesies as this rally novice motors north for Alaska.

One after another the bikes crossed the start line. Forty-eight BMWs, thirty Hondas, a dozen Harley Davidsons, six Kawasakis, four each Triumphs and Yamahas joined three Ducatis, a pair of Cagivas and sole representatives of the Indian, Ural, and Suzuki brands. The most senior bike a BMW built in 1938, the newest a 2002 model Honda Reflex. Although most of the riders were from America there were three riders from Germany, a pair from Australia, as well as entrants from Canada, France, England and Texas.

Thirty-seven minutes after the first rider departed, the field had crossed the start line. This did not include rally entrants Leonard Aron, Dave Zien and Gerhard Krueger. Aron's Indian required a battery jump and was off the line slightly thereafter. Dave Zien, a state senator from Wisconsin, and Gerhard Krueger, one of the two rally entrants from Germany, enjoyed a quiet brunch together in the Ramada coffee shop while their mounts were being repaired at their respective dealers. Zien's Harley had encountered severe engine problems on the ride to Madison while Gerhard's new R-1150GS was suffering from rear end difficulties after being shipped to the US from Germany. Zien's keen devotion to his well-worn Harley was amply demonstrated when he declined the local dealer's generous offer to trade his half million mile Harley for a brand new ride for this year's rally. Devotion? Yes! Common sense? Well.....

Twenty-two riders sought illumination from the Northern Lights and were headed directly for Alaska. Of this ambitious group included BMW riders Asa McFadden, Sean Gallagher, Eddie James, Glen Pancoast, Terry Smith, Michael Smeyers, Dick Fish, Paul Taylor, and Phil Mann. They were joined by an equal number of Honda riders including Bob Ray, Jeff Jones, Peter Hoogeveen, Alan Barbic, Kerry Church, Shane Smith, Chuck Pickett, Joe Zulaski and Seamans Jones.

This could be a particularly whimsical ride for Seamans as he had just ridden to Madison from his home in Anchorage Alaska to compete. If he is successful he will have to have ridden from Alaska to Alabama, Alabama to Alaska, Alaska to Alabama then once more ride home Alabama to Alaska all within three weeks. He may become a candidate for AA after this ride.

Pete Withers and Bryan Moody rode the two Kawasakis. Two Triumphs piloted by Dennis Kessler and Kevin Sickles rounded out the ambitious band of endurance riders headed toward the cold unknowns of the arctic circle. The remainder of the field rode west expecting soon to be bathed in California sunshine while being baked by the desert heat. Unexpected extremes even for this extreme ride.

Gary Eagan certainly had expectations of doing very well. This three time veteran and past IBR winner had every reason to expect that he would travel further and last longer than rest of the pack. Less than an hour and twenty-eight miles from the start, just across the Tennessee border, he decided to glance at his tank bag map. He did so with a curve looming directly ahead. Gary is expected to set records. And he did, although certainly not the one he expected. His was to become the shortest Iron Butt ride attempt recorded for both time and distance. Fortunately the only major injury occurred was to his well-earned pride.

Through driving rainstorms these riders traveled on to their individual bonus quests. Riding along at night along Interstate 40 a bright orange triangle appeared to float above the road ahead. At first thought the possibility occurred that this triangle was attached to some quaint Amish horse drawn buggy. Upon closer approach it was clear that no buggy could travel at 65mph. No buggy could make the incessant buzz of a high revving Honda 125. No buggy could be lit up brighter than rider Bobb Todd. Although Bobb shortly thereafter withdrew from competition it was apparent that his prior year of preparation and testing at least was working at that point in his ride.

As in all past rallies the bonus locations and their value cruelly tugged at the rallyist's psyche playing a wicked game with each rider's mind. High bonus point locations required riders to head east when their ultimate destination lay west. The straight-line route from point A to B would not graph the ride of the big dog. More likely that map would resemble the wild swing of a California seismograph in the midst of the "big one". That cruel combination of value and location explains the gaggle of bikes and riders swarming through the lush green roadways of the Blue Ridge Parkway collecting points all the while knowing that soon they must grind through the bland beigeness and oven-like heat of the Mohave desert. It also provides the motivation for driving well north past the first leg's checkpoint in Pomona to collect a tantalizingly high bonus waiting at Pat Widder's business in Ojai. The points cruelly inflated to such a tempting level that even the most cautious rider would find himself fighting agonizing freeway traffic through Los Angeles to Ojai and then back once again. Off course at most of these high point locations and all of the checkpoints local law-enforcement has been made aware of the arrival of these bonus hungry motorcyclists. This is fun. At least that is what the evil Lord Kneebone says.

By Wednesday afternoon riders began to arrive at Brown's BMW in Pomona. Bob Brown, himself a veteran of the 1999 IBR, had made his dealership available as the checkpoint and terminus of the rally's first leg. By the end of the check in window at 8:00 PM all 112 riders had been accounted for.

In addition to those 22 riders who did not arrive because they were otherwise engaged four others did not appear in Pomona. These were the unexpected. Surprisingly the 2001 Ural experienced mechanical difficulties requiring Paul Pelland to rethink his plan for world domination. Gary Eagan's frame altering experience in Tennessee had temporarily muted his mighty Ducati's roar. Bobb Todd had abandoned his ride and was returning to Canada. Although Dave Zien's Harley finally had been repaired, after a long talk about the requirements for rally completion with Mike Kneebone Zien chose to withdraw. The evil Lord had convinced the state senator that his Iron Butt ride was yet to be. The irony of this being a government employee and bureaucrat telling a state senator and politician what to do. Perhaps it is a good thing they don't share the same jurisdiction.

Gerhard Krueger who faced the same unexpected dilemma as Zien chose to ride straight to Pomona from the shop in Huntsville, arriving within fifty two seconds of incurring time penalty points. Although he is at the bottom of leg one's standings yet has placed himself at the top of most people's lists. He expects to finish. He has company. Bob Mutchler, a veteran of the 1999 Rally, was running once again to champion the Polio Plus campaign of International Rotary. This Rotarian rider, himself a polio victim, rode his sidecar equipped BMW R1100RT. During the ride from Alabama a road alligator unexpectedly rose up from the road and snapped off his bike's custom designed hand gearshift lever. While stopped at the bonus location hosted by Eddy Metz a Rube Goldberg-like repair allowed Bob to continue on his quest to rid the crippling killer disease from the face of the Earth.

A quick review of the preliminary first leg standings places 1999 IBR Champion George Barnes in first place which was expected. Ardys Kellerman leads all of her female riders with a solid ride. She also leads Bob Higdon, which to some is not unexpected.

As the riders all head north, some to Washington, others to Alaska they realize to expect the unexpected.