

Missoula, Montana

August 10, 2003

Day -1

Who's Who

The final rider count is 117 bikes. One team is two-up. A breakdown and a family emergency today will keep John Ferber and Gary Johnson, both Iron Butt veterans, out of this year's running. They aren't the only experienced hot shoes missing from the 2003 lineup. Gary Eagan, the winner in 1995, is at home. The 1997 champion, Rick Morrison, after having set almost every motorcycle endurance record imaginable, claims to be in retirement. George Barnes is out this year. He won in 1999, setting an IBR record of about two billion miles in the process. Only Bob Hall, the top dog two years ago, is here, trying for a second IBR crown. The bookmakers in Las Vegas are not looking kindly upon his chances. Since Mike Kneebone raised the Iron Butt Rally from the ashes in 1991, no rider has ever won twice. Shane Smith, with three top ten finishes in three tries (including a second overall in 2001), couldn't make the start, nor could the profoundly cherubic Morris Kreumcke. Other perennial hot shoes absent this year are Chuck Pickett, Asa Hutchinson, Bill Kramer, Bob Ray, and Germany's Martin Hildebrand. These are all colorful people; their absence makes the rally seem just a little paler this year.

The veterans who have showed up are tanned, rested, and ready to roll. They are a Who's Who of the long-distance motorcycle world with hundreds of huge rides in their collective wake: Five-time finisher Harold Brooks; Joe Mandeville, a member of the exclusive 100,000-mile-year club; Paul Taylor; Eric Jewell; Eddie James; Tom Loegering; prosecutor Manny Sameiro; ISDE qualifier Dick Fish; Rallye Tunisia finisher Steve Eversfield (via Great Britain); Dennis Kessler; and Tom Loftus. You'll probably be seeing their names toward the top of the rankings for the remainder of the rally.

And then there's Peter Hoogeveen, who has more podium finishes on this event than anyone else. What he lacks is a win. His string of second-place finishes in rallies all over North America is the stuff of legend. Still, no one in his right mind would bet against this tireless Canadian.

There are 67 rookies in the pack. Most of them have no chance for distinction. But some will do amazingly well and cause no trouble. Other riders won't do well at all but will cause metric tons of trouble. Take, for example, Leonard Aron, an attorney who looks as if he might have been a defendant in the Chicago Seven trial. He isn't a rookie, but he often acts like one. He introduced himself to one of the check-in workers yesterday with this: "I'm Leonard. It isn't easy being Leonard. But I make it look easy because I'm so good at it." His singular claim to IBR fame was that in 2001, after a bunch of miserable DNFs, he shoved a '46 Indian completely around the country. It was the oldest bike ever to complete the IBR. After that, Leonard has nothing to prove in endurance riding forever.

At the drivers' meeting in the afternoon, rules and procedures

were reviewed a final time. For example, it is critical that you must call the rallymaster if you are going to be more than two hours late to a checkpoint. A hand was raised: Suppose I am allowed only one phone call? You get the idea.

Mark Kiecker, who came in 10th two years ago, wondered whether he would be considered a finisher if his bike broke down in Texas and he trailered it to the next checkpoint. Kiecker is known to the IBR administration as a relentless provocateur, a younger, slimmer version of Eddie James. Mike Kneebone's usually calm demeanor went stratospheric in a matter of milliseconds. He threatened to have the next person who asked such a question doused with acid and set afire. The meeting moved along more briskly after that.

At the opening banquet, Lisa Landry, a finisher on the 2001 IBR and this year's rallymaster, took over the meeting to pass out name tags and rally identification towels to the riders. Bob Hall received towel #1 in recognition of his status as defending champion. In 2001 when I was the holder of towel #1, they told me the number represented my percentage chance of reaching the first checkpoint in something other than an ambulance. I thought it represented the rider's anticipated finishing position. When Hoogeveen was handed towel #116, he sighed, "Of course. Second to last. I can't even be last."

The riders and guests then filed out into the Holiday Inn's lobby atrium. A moment later Michael Kneebone appeared on a second-floor balcony decked out in a white robe and mitre, looking every bit the twin of Pope Silver Wing the First. He gave a brief blessing to his children, wished them a safe journey, and commanded them not to speed in school zones. The audience over, the crowd disappeared --- some to plot routes to the first checkpoint, some to hoist a glass in the bar, and some to scribble furiously by candlelight in a cold, dark garret.

When I mentioned some of those missing in action above, I neglected two because their stories are significantly different. One, Dan Lowery, isn't here tonight because he is on his way back to Cody, Wyoming to pick up his bike. It is recuperating from a blown whozit or a fractured whatzit. We never use the word "race" in endurance rally circles, but at this moment Lowery is in a legitimate race to retrieve his bike, chase back up here to Missoula, obtain a timed receipt, and then head off to the first checkpoint in Nevada. He will be hours behind the field; he will have no chance to win the rally; he probably won't get a single bonus on the first leg; but he will be on the road and running. That's all that matters to him. Any one of these 117 riders can appreciate that.

Another MIA is Airyn Darling. She has never run an Iron Butt, but she has worked on the last couple as a volunteer. Missoula isn't far from her home in Seattle, and she had confidently expected to be here. Unfortunately, conflicts with her work schedule at a wolf shelter kept her from being here. She sent a despondent e-mail to me a few weeks ago.

I tried to console her. "You have to choose between the animals that you can help and the animals that no one can help." Tonight the

animals that no one can help are but one restless night's sleep away from
the ride of their lives.

And with that I blow out my candle.

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