

Missoula, Montana
August 21, 2003

Day 10 Fire

More than one hundred miles east of Missoula the cars coming at you have turned on their headlights. It's the middle of the afternoon. The visibility is under one-half mile, and the tops of some of the mountains that line both sides of I-90 have disappeared in dense smoke. On the worst day it ever had, Los Angeles could never have looked like this.

Forest fires have ringed Missoula to the extent that parts of the town have been evacuated. When we left here a week ago Monday, smoke was drifting through the motel's parking lot. It's much worse now. You never know from hour to hour what highways will be open. So widespread are the fires and so resistant to eradication are they that they may not be fully extinguished until the snows fall next month.

A lot of motorcyclists are riding through the night toward this city. If they're not in by 8:00 a.m., the penalty clock starts running at 10 points per minute. At 10:00 a.m., they're time barred. Every second is counting now. The last thing you want to see on a motorcycle at night is the glow of a fire and a wall of smoke. God only knows what could be hiding behind it.

We Know What We're Doing, More or Less

A question was raised on the Long Distance Riders list about the 10,000-point penalties assessed against Sparky Kessler and Bob Wooldridge for changing bikes in mid-rally. The rule states that the rider's final score shall be reduced by one-half. Which is correct?

The fixed penalty worked well until the point inflation that appeared in the 2001 IBR. Bob Hall picked up one million points for making the Prudhoe Bay bonus on the final leg. Had his bike fallen apart on the way to the finish, he could have changed machines 42 times and still have won the rally.

Last year we amended the rule to eliminate that absurdity, but the scoring program was not similarly revised. We think the 10,000-point spanking roughly approximates in a rider's running score what his final total will look like, but we don't really know and we don't really care. It'll get taken care of in the end, anyone who swaps isn't competitive anyway, and we think it's lots of fun to watch guys scrambling randomly around, trying to pull their scores up to nothing.

Will the Last BMW Running Please Turn out the Lights?

BMW motorcycles constituted about 50% of the starting field. Tonight they constitute more than 90% of the mechanical breakdowns. Jeff Earls' K1200LT ground to a halt late today in Dickenson, North Dakota with a rear wheel bearing failure. Earls, riding the entire distance with John O'Keefe, was having a magnificent ride, grabbing every bonus that meant anything on the final leg. With any luck he and O'Keefe would have been close to a Top Ten finish. Now he's just another DNF.

Had enough of BMW rear end collapses, have you? Not quite. Don't forget to count the rear end of Jim and Donna Phillips' K1200LT. It dropped dead earlier today as they were going up Pikes Peak in Colorado, the largest individual bonus on the entire leg. Had they made it to the top, they would have

guaranteed themselves a Top Twenty finish. Instead they nursed the bike back down the mountain, caught a ride into Colorado Springs, and bought an 1800cc Gold Wing.

It gets even uglier. Yesterday Jim Owen, who stood 8th in Maine, took a photograph of Eric Jewell and Brent Ames in the process of replacing the alternator belt on Eric's BMW R1150RT at the Shanksville, Pennsylvania bonus stop. A few hours later the belt on Owen's R1150RT failed. He had no replacement, couldn't find one, and will be lucky at this point to finish the rally at all.

Mike Kneebone and I sat in the hotel room tonight and reflected on the string of BMWs that have bitten the dust in the last ten days. We shook our heads. Between us we have around 800,000 miles on these bikes.

"If you're looking for something to write about in an epilog," he said, "this is it."

He's right. BMWs could easily finish 1-2-3 in this rally, a tribute that will be due far more to the talented singers than to the ugly song. In the 2003 IBR BMW's song has been the shriek of alternator belts coming apart and the wail of ear ends seizing. Don't play it again, Sam.

And Then There Were Five

Seven riders in Maine had a chance to win. Leonard Roy was first. He says that this will be his last Iron Butt, and he wanted to go out with a finish he could be proud of. He has done that in his customary quiet, outstanding fashion. He knew that he hadn't gotten enough rest at the start of the run back to Missoula, so he picked bonuses that should guarantee him the highest finish he has ever had. Tonight he is safely in Missoula, catching up on a week's worth of lost sleep.

Mike Hutsal was roughly in the same boat. He arrived at the Maine checkpoint after it closed, but was granted a time delay allowance for having stopped to help his partner after an accident. The revised checkpoint score put Mike in fourth place. That was as high as he would fly. Without rest, the last leg was impossible. He will finish, but he will take a heavy hit in the standings.

That left The Boys --- Marty Leir, Will Outlaw, and Mark Kiecker --- who stood 2nd, 3rd, and 5th in Maine. We're confident that they managed to earn the large combination bonus and pick up other big points in Chicago and Sauk Center, Minnesota before pointing to the finish. It might be enough to take home all the marbles.

Paul Taylor was 6th in Maine. We are under the impression that he has picked up the same bonuses that The Boys did. But Taylor also dropped south to pull in the Pentagon bonus. It's worth 2,359 points. If The Boys didn't do that, Paul could vault ahead of them. We don't know. Taylor was in western North Dakota tonight, aiming for the barn door and hoping his alternator belt would last a few more hours.

And then there is Peter Hoogeveen, who has more second-place finishes in rallies than most riders have rallies. He stood 7th in Maine, 50 points behind Taylor. We know little about Peter's route in the final leg. He was seen at the TWA crash site on Long Island early Wednesday morning. He signed in at a bonus in eastern Pennsylvania later that morning. Since then he has disappeared. Is it reasonable to assume that he did the combination bonus? Clearly. But he didn't show up at the large Minnesota bonus, unlike The Boys and Paul Taylor. So where has he been for the last 36 hours?

Scenario #1: he broke down. If so, why haven't we heard? Scenario #2: he couldn't go any farther. That doesn't sound like Peter Hoogeveen. Scenario #3: he saw where the other riders would naturally head -- - Pennsylvania, Chicago, and Minnesota --- and realized he had to do something dramatic to beat them. Did he then run south from Pennsylvania to the Pentagon and turn due west for Pikes Peak? Depending upon how many other smaller bonuses he and the others either earned or skipped, such a run could be the winner.

It's almost 1:00 a.m. in Missoula. In ten hours we can stop guessing.

Bob Higdon
www.ironbutt.com