

Missoula, Montana
August 22, 2003
Day 11

The Interstate at 3:30 in the Morning

The 2003 Iron Butt Rally is officially in the bag. Although it was the shortest base route in the event's history, it began picking people off on Day #1 and didn't stop until about 3:30 this morning when Eddie James smashed into a deer on I-90 near Billings. He is hospitalized with some broken ribs, a fractured clavicle, and other injuries. Riders were on the scene within minutes and have stayed with him ever since. He'll be O.K. He asked the admitting doctor if he were a real physician or just played one on TV. Does that sound like he's in trouble?

If he hadn't whacked the deer, Eddie might have encountered 30 hay bales on the highway. Tom Loftus rode into them just after a truck driver lost control of his rig, swerved into a ditch, and threw the bales all over the highway. I can't repeat Loftus' description of how he got through that lethal mess because my hands shake too much just thinking about it.

Tom might not have been able to see the bales in time because of the smoke all over western Montana. It has turned from simple gray clouds into gray clouds that drop ash and other particulate matter over everything. If this keeps up much longer, the second largest city in this state is going to start looking like the countryside around Mount St. Helens two days after it blew its top.

Still, smacking into the bales would have been better than smacking into the crane that sat on the interstate, trying to lift the truck that dropped the bales on the highway out of the ditch that the truck eventually wound up in, possibly because the driver couldn't see through the smoke.

Dropping Like Flies in a DDT Factory

A few days ago I began losing track of the people who were going home prematurely. The IBR is usually a war of attrition, but this was worse than the norm. Twenty per cent of the starting field didn't finish. Nine per cent had seen medics. Roughly 100% of me was jumping 94% out of my skin every time a cell phone rang. But the only goal that really matters was achieved: every rider who started the rally is breathing tonight. They may not be here in Missoula, but they're somewhere and, except for Eddie, they're vertical. That's all I care about.

Here's another 100% statistic, a much happier one: All the women who started the rally finished. You go, girls.

Checking In

Tom Austin, chief technical advisor of the IBR, rode his bike from here to Nevada to Florida to Maine to here. He left each checkpoint two hours after the last rider departed, arrived at the following checkpoint at least four hours before the riders were due, ran the scoring assembly line at each checkpoint, and persistently looked in better shape than anyone else involved in the process. He didn't get a finisher's certificate, but he deserved one.

We began checking off the riders who were in, on the way, or missing. It's that last class that is worrisome. No news on this rally is bad news. Three of the missing were Paul Taylor, Leon (The Animal) Begeman, and Peter Hoogeveen.

At 7:53 a.m., seven minutes before penalties would accrue at ten points per minute, Taylor sauntered in, produced his rider's ID tag to stop the ticking clock, and said, "I didn't want to peak too soon." The Boys -- Leir, Outlaw, and Kiecker --- were the clubhouse leaders in the scoring computer, but they hadn't gone to the Pentagon. Taylor had. It might be decisive, depending upon what Hoogeveen had done on the last leg.

That assumed Peter would show up at all. At 8:26 he ran into the scoring room, 26 minutes late. His 260-point penalty was subsequently reduced to 110 because he had stopped to assist Eddie James. I asked if he'd gone to the Pentagon. He shook his head.

The last rider to show up before 10:00 a.m. was Begeman. He was a mere 16 minutes from being time-barred, and for his lateness took a penalty of 1,040 points. Had he had a breakdown, an accident, or a time delay to help someone else? Nah. "I thought the penalties started at 10:00," he said. Sometimes I wonder how these guys can even get out of bed in the morning, and The Animal may be the smartest one in the rally. If he can't read, what hope is there for the others? I sighed, not for the first time.

Eventually, we had accounted for everyone. We went into the restaurant for a late breakfast. The waitress, Amber, seated us.

"Are you with Harold and Rick?" she asked. You don't hear this question every day.

"You know Brooks and Williams by their first names?" I said, trying not to laugh.

"Oh, sure," Amber nodded. "They're real nice."

Harold has a Virginia accent that even Mississippians can't decipher. He can turn a word like "four" into "fo" and make seven syllables out of it. I later congratulated him on his having finished six Iron Butts. "Is there a seventh in your future?" I wondered.

"No," wife Jean said without a moment's hesitation. And the Winner Is . . .

This was it. People ride for days from everywhere to be part of the Iron Butt final banquet. It's a big deal. Michael Kneebone took the microphone, told a few lies about our ride around the country in Moron, and turned the ceremonies over to Lisa Landry, the rallymaster. She received a standing ovation, the first of three on the night.

The first award was presented to Quek Cheng Chye in memory of Fran Crane. It's an award for perseverance. Chye's ride was the stuff of Old Testament pain and suffering. It began with his rider identification number: 58. In Chinese culture the number 50 stands for luck; the number 8 stands for bad. Chye was screwed before he even showed up in Missoula.

He failed the muffler sound test during tech inspection, which caused him eventually to have to buy a new BMW muffler system for close to \$900. At the first checkpoint in Primm he overslept, missed the rider's meeting, and had to call Mike at 4:00 a.m. to receive his route instructions for the second leg. At a rest stop in Florida someone stole a saddlebag off his bike. Fortunately, not everything he valued in life was in that bag, just most of it. In deranged frustration, he lashed a kick out at a cruel and vengeful

world, missed the world, hit his remaining saddlebag instead, and destroyed it on the spot. He lost his wallet and then was time barred in Maine, sinking deeper into the swamp. He finished 92nd overall, beating just two riders. Someone mockingly asked what he was going to carry the plaque home in. Poor Chye tried to smile.

This is the kind of story that could bring tears to the eyes of Cinderella's stepmother. And it would have had much of that effect on the banquet crowd as well, except that by this time the entire room was doubled over in rib-cracking laughter. Pity on your fellow human? A grain of empathy? Oh, please. We're motorcyclists.

When Chye modestly accepted the award, you could hear the cheering in Idaho.

Jim Hickerson was called up to receive his trophy for a 54th-place finish on his Buell. A heckler in the crowd made rude remarks to the effect that the machine should have been placed in the Hopeless Class. Hickerson didn't blink. "How many BMWs failed and how many Buells failed?" he asked rhetorically.

Most riders, realizing that they have no hope of a Top Ten finish, will content themselves to strive for a gold, silver, or bronze medal. I, for example, was awarded the bronze for my masterful ride in 2001, a tour in which I finished something like 65th, rode fewer miles than almost everyone else, and expended so much energy in the process that I came under the care of a psychiatrist for the eight months following the rally's conclusion. Silver medals are harder to get, and don't even think about the gold things.

Now consider Sparky Kessler's final leg. He burned up the highways from Maine to Montana, raking in an astonishing 58,826 points, a score that was enough to take home a gold medal on that leg alone. I can't even imagine such fiery determination. He finished 49th, with half of his points taken away because of the bike swap. In my opinion, that ride deserves something in addition to a gob of metal. Sparky deserves to have his name back: I salute you, Dennis. I knew you were good; I didn't know you were that good.

When Lisa called out the name of the 12th-place rider, the whole room stood for the second time. The plaque went to Leon Begeman on the 250cc Ninja, who rode 11,186 miles in 11 days. It is the kind of effort that will live in the annals of endurance riding forever. I have rarely seen anything to compare to it. Confident to the end, Leon told me, "Now that I've seen what kind of rally Kneebone puts on, I can build a bike to beat it." I've known The Animal for more than ten years and I've learned this: Don't bet him anything you can't afford to lose.

Just two riders from the blue pill route, who shouldn't have been anywhere near the Top Ten, were Brent Ames (10th) and Todd Witte (8th). Paul Pelland had started a red pill route but in California reconsidered and took off for Florida. He finished 9th. John O'Keefe and Eric Jewell had done the same thing as Pelland but had stronger finishes (6th and 7th).

That left five, and in the end, it came down to the Pentagon bonus. Paul Taylor drove the punishing miles south to Washington to earn it. His competitors didn't. That was it. Peter Hoogeveen finished fifth, his fourth Top Ten finish. No one in Iron Butt records has more podium finishes or a higher finishing average than does he. He'll be back.

The Boys stuck together almost until the end. Will Outlaw took fourth, Marty Leir was third, and the youngest rider in the field, 26-year-old Mark Kiecker, was second. The entire State of Minnesota must be standing on its head tonight. For once even Eddie James wasn't talking about himself. These were his guys, and a prouder father he could not have been. You'll be seeing their names in the game of long-distance motorcycling for the next 20 years.

But the Commonwealth of Virginia must be the proudest of all for its favorite son, the unstoppable Paul Taylor. When his name was called last, the crowd rose for the third time. I've watched him from his first rallies, back-to-back wins in the Capitol 1000. In 1999 he was called up to the Big Leagues for the Iron Butt. He was a rookie, made some incredibly bad route choices, and still finished 8th. In 2001 he ran a much better route but finished fourth behind Bob Hall, Shane Smith, and Peter Hoogeveen. That, by the way, isn't bad company with which to be associated.

This year Paul's route planning was perfect. He needed one big bonus to pull himself away from the pack. The Pentagon was it. The difference between his winning score and that of Mark Kiecker was the 2,359 points at the Pentagon plus 272 miscellaneous points.

On Day 2 I wrote: "A rider with an excellent efficiency is smart; a rider with big points is an animal; a rider with both is the guy to beat in the Iron Butt." Among the top five riders, Taylor rode the fewest miles. He knew how to take down the big points. He can ride through anything. And ultimately he was the guy to beat in the Iron Butt Rally.

"The Robo is ready to rumble," he had said in Maine.

Was it ever.

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