

Iron Butt Rally - Day 2
Albuquerque, New Mexico
August 13, 2003
Day 2

Go West, Young Man Or Maybe East

The first leg of the 2003 edition of the Iron Butt Rally followed a typical format with its route instructions. Thirty-three bonus listings spread over nine pages invited the riders to figure out the most efficient and effective way to pile up points between Missoula, Montana and Primm, Nevada.

You might think that there is a fairly good correlation between efficient riding and a high finishing position. There isn't. More than any other factor, a winning ride almost invariably correlates with total miles ridden. There's no getting around it: Efficiency looks great, but sloppy most often takes home the bacon. Never forget, however, that fatigue can easily give it all back. The dynamics are complex.

After the first leg the points-per-mile efficiency of Eric Jewell and Bob Cox was almost the same (2.12 v. 2.11), but Jewell stood in first place while Cox was 60th. The difference was that Cox had ridden a very short, controlled route while Jewell was all over the map, racking up 621 more miles than Cox. 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.

But the bonus instructions are not always so straightforward. In 1993 Mike Kneebone handed out not one but two sets of instructions for a single leg. He called it "Pick Your Poison." Both sets of route instructions went from Point A to Point B, but one set was dramatically more difficult than the other. You didn't have to decide which route to follow, but if you began picking up bonuses from Poisoned Route #1, you couldn't grab any from the other route.

It sounds somewhat worse than it was. The tough route was clearly for those who had aspirations of winning the event; the simpler set of instructions was for everybody else. Most entrants realize that they have no realistic chance to win this rally. Being selected in the drawing for a starting number was more luck than they ever should have had. They had jumped to the head of a line of more than 2,100 hopefuls. For almost everyone the mere fact of being able to participate in such an amazing circus is sufficient. There are rides with some friends in the country; there are cross-country rides that can last weeks; you may take rides to foreign lands. And then there is the Iron Butt, the big one. Winning it, except for a couple of dozen heavies with the thousand-yard stares, isn't why they're there. Finishing it is.

For the second leg on this year's IBR from Nevada to Florida, Kneebone turned up the heat to a degree that was clearly uncomfortable for more than a few of the riders. Instead of having the opportunity to check out bonuses in a single set of route instructions or having the chance to compare two sets of route instructions and decide which might be more suitable, at 11:00 p.m. PDT last night The Evil Lord Kneebone forced the lambs to select one of two possible routes out of Nevada without first being able to look at either of them.

It was a variant on a theme from the original "Matrix" film. The rider would pick a colored pill, red or blue, and once having done so, his future would be fixed for the next several days. The riders had been gathered together in a huge showroom. Kneebone walked up to the stage. They stared at him uneasily.

"In that movie," he began, "the blue pill made your life fairly easy and safe, but it wasn't reality. If you needed reality, with all its sordid, downside risks, you'd take the red pill. Your life would immediately become hard, dirty, tiring, nasty, brutish, and short. But it was in the tradition of True Iron Butt. And it will be the route that the winner of this rally will take. Any questions?"

A hand was raised. "Is there any way the blue pill route can win?"

"Yes," Mike said. "If every single rider on the red pill route crashes, breaks down, goes home, is time-barred at the next checkpoint, develops tertiary syphilis, or is abducted by aliens, it is theoretically possible that a rider on the blue pill route could win. Still, I view it as unlikely."

There it was. You want to win? Pick that red pill. You say you don't have a clue where it could take you? Well, Kneebone spent the next twenty minutes trying to assure the quaking riders that most of the rumors they'd heard during the months leading up to the event were baseless. Yeah, one option was the road to Goose Bay, Labrador, but it wasn't worth taking. No, the winning route wouldn't require slogging through 15,000 miles of corrugated dirt roads. Yes, rallymaster Lisa Landry had gone to every major bonus aboard her massive Gold Wing, and if she can do it, stop telling me that you can't.

The long and short of it was that taking the blue pill would guarantee a nice, easy ride from Las Vegas to Florida via the top of Mt. Evans in Colorado (the highest paved road in the U.S.) or via the bowels of Carlsbad Caverns. The average motorcyclist would view either of such trips as the mother of all rides; for the Butt entrant, it was not much better than an also-ran. Me? I'd have kicked my own mother down the stairs for one of those blue pills. Let's be realistic, OK?

Lisa and Mike arranged to have the riders approach the stage single-file, declare their preference of pill color, and accept one. Having done so, they were directed to return to the chairs in the audience. The chairs to the left of the stage were for red pill holders; those to the right for blue. I later asked Mike how he and Lisa had arrived at this structured kind of dance.

"People are constantly telling me that they're ready to go to Prudhoe Bay or Cabo San Lucas or the Isles Beneath the Wind. Talk is cheap. Half the people who declared they were going to Alaska in 2001 never went near the place. I thought it was time for them to decide in advance whether they were big dogs or not. The red pill will win. I told them that. The blue one won't. You want that red sucker, not knowing where it will take you? Here it is, Jack, and good luck."

All in all, they had about two hours to consider the odds. Then they were lined up and fed up to the stage one by one where Lisa waited with the two bowls of pills.

"Red or blue?" she asked repeatedly.

Kneebone dotes on this sort of drama. It's the most obvious kind of cheap, staged effect, from the Greeks to Jolson. I tell him that these poor bastards are tired, frazzled, and crazier than rats in a coffee can. They don't need to stand in a line like this, I plead. They need to be lying down in a manger somewhere, loaded up with 200mg of Ambien and Prozac, dreaming of bunnies hopping through a

green meadow. You're prolonging their nightmares, I say. Have you no sense of shame, sir? He chuckles sadistically.

When the ceremonies were concluded, just 33 of the still-standing 110 riders held red pills in their sweaty fists. Thirty-four had initially picked red, but Rob Nye, a BMW MOA club director, chugged back to the stage just before bonus packages were handed out and begged for the chance to exchange his red pill for something milder. Landry granted his wish.

Today 77 riders are on their way to Florida, while 33 of their friends have gone in the opposite direction to the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountains in California. There they will receive further instructions. Pain is on the horizon, I fear. Stay tuned.

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