

Washington, D.C.
August 16, 2003
Day 5

The Florida Checkpoint

On the day after Paul Pelland learned that he had won a protracted, bitter, legal battle, he found himself in first place at the Lake City, Florida checkpoint of the Iron Butt Rally. Two years ago he dragged a Ural motorcycle in the Hopeless Class around the country, surviving disasters by brute force on an almost daily basis. He finished so low in the standings that it took miners to find him. This year he's on a BMW R1100RT and has better than a 2,100-point lead over Eric Jewell and Rick Sauter. Still, the scoreboard isn't quite as simple as it looks.

The 110 riders who left the first checkpoint in Nevada split into two groups: 77 headed for Florida and 33 aimed for southern California. The latter group split again with 22 riders going to Florida and 11 chugging toward Canada. The pack of 22 now occupies 20 of the first 21 positions in the standings. Todd Witte, at 20th place and the highest ranked of the blue pill brigade, is 120 points ahead of Homer Krout, the lowest ranked of the red pills. This was almost exactly the scoring breakdown that Mike Kneebone and rallymaster Lisa Landry had predicted in Nevada.

All this ignores, however, the 11 riders who departed southern California for the Great White North. We are fairly certain that they have all reached Bella Coola, British Columbia or Goose Bay, Labrador. If they arrive at the Maine checkpoint on time, they will immediately take over the top positions, irrespective of what any of the riders in Florida may accomplish on their next leg. At that point only the final run back to Missoula will remain.

Virginia's Leon Begeman, 24th overall, apparently is insulted that his 250cc Kawasaki Ninja, the smallest machine in the rally, is assigned to the Hopeless Class. As usual, he is running like a man possessed. Tonight he stands 42 places ahead of Paul Meredith's 750cc Suzuki water buffalo. Sure, Meredith's two-stroke bike is ancient and struggles to get even 20 mpg, so maybe that's not a fair fight. But Begeman takes on motors with five times his displacement --- BMW K1200LTs and 1,800cc Gold Wings --- and chews them to pieces as well. If you put him on an armadillo, he might lose a few places, but he'd still be scratching his way down the road.

Sparky Kessler, the terror of the bristlecone forest, parked his replacement bike at the checkpoint, was awarded 2,000 points for making it to Florida without incinerating anything along the way, and remains firmly in control of 117th (and last) place with a total score of -8,000 points. This afternoon, however, he picked up some competition. Bob Wooldrige's '64 BMW R69S, having had alternator replacement surgery two nights ago at Craig Vechorik's vintage BMW factory in Sturgis, Mississippi, has eaten a valve. Wooldrige grabbed a newer BMW, will take a 10,000-point hit in Maine, and soon should challenge Sparky to see who can crawl out of the negative number territory first. My bet is on Sparky; he'll torch Wooldrige's bike the first chance he gets.

The ride west to Lake City was not completely uneventful. John Langan hit a deer but was able to continue. Jerry Harris, coming down from the top of Mt. Evans in Colorado, was smacked by a mud slide.

For a moment he thought he would skip through. He didn't. The right side of his BMW K1100LT looks as if it was scraped by a train, but it's still running somehow.

Great Britain's Steve Eversfield ran into a nightmare while attempting to pick up a valuable bonus in Silverton, Colorado. He was on U.S. 550, The Million Dollar Highway, one of the most picturesque roads in the West. Southbound from Ouray it rises straight up and over a couple of 10,000' passes. On a clear day you can almost see Argentina.

Eversfield, however, wasn't having a clear day; he was having a black, fearsome night. He was reminded of the terrifying Bald Mountain scenes from "Fantasia," a movie that has sent two generations of children from playgrounds to psychiatrists. Lightning smashed into the hills all around his elevation, raising the hairs on the back of his neck. Unable to see through his rain-swept visor, he raised it. That was worse. In the Rocky Mountains that awful night he was practically the tallest thing around. He was also on top of a 700-pound block of metal.

A mud slide had wrecked Jerry Harris' day; a mud slide now saved Steve Eversfield's night. As he rounded a corner, he saw that the highway ahead had been completely washed away. He was the first vehicle southbound to encounter it. Disappointed was he? Not a bit of it, mate. He jumped off the bike, draped his identification towel on the rocks that covered the road, and snapped a photo. Because of an act of vengeful Nature, Eversfield would be able to claim the Silverton bonus without actually having to go there. Better still, he could turn around, get off that hateful mountain, and look for a quiet place to dry out and stop shaking.

All's well that ends well, right? Sometimes, but not for Eversfield. His Silverton bonus was disallowed by the scorers when he arrived in Florida.

"Excuse me?" he said in his best British accent, the kind of sound you hear just before a Limey begins beating your head in with a spanner and tyre iron. "The road was completely blocked. Other motorcyclists have verified it. I followed the rules exactly."

"Sorry," the scorer said. "There was an alternative route to Silverton."

"That 'alternative route' was a 300-mile loop around half the state of Colorado," Eversfield protested.

"True," the scorer replied, "but it was available."

In the old TV series set in New York, "The Naked City," the closing voice-over intoned darkly each week, "There are eight million stories in the naked city. This has been one of them."

And there are eight million stories in the Iron Butt Rally. Some of them are sad.

The Top Ten in Florida

1. Paul Pelland BMW 18,517
2. Eric Jewell BMW 16,391
3. Rick Sauter Suzuki 16,348
4. Tom Loftus Honda 15,998
5. John O'Keefe BMW 15,919

5. Jeff Earls BMW 15,919
7. Jim Owen BMW 15,903
8. Jeff Fisher BMW 15,842
9. Heinz Kugler BMW 15,751
10. Eddie James BMW 15,010

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