

Chicago, Illinois
August 18, 2003
Day 8

The Riders' Meeting

Ninety-nine riders stood in the Reynolds Motorsports parking lot in Buxton, Maine at 6:00 p.m. yesterday, awaiting the distribution of bonus packets. After a week of separation, the red and blue pill entrants had rejoined for the run back to Missoula. Lisa Landry called for quiet.

"On this final leg," she began, "you may be visiting some airline disaster sites that will demand your respectful attention. Families of passengers lost on these downed flights visit the memorials to this good day. You will do nothing to disturb their thoughts. Nothing. Is that understood?"

Ninety-nine heads nodded.

"Those of you who went to the bonus in Palouse Falls, Washington on the first leg may have seen a bird watcher near the falls," Lisa continued. "You may also have noticed that he trained his binoculars more often on your license plates than he did on the fang-beaked mud warbler."

"It was pretty obvious," Paul Pelland said.

"It was meant to be," Landry replied. "We wanted you to believe us when we tell you now that we have volunteers stationed at every one of these tragic sites. They may identify themselves to you. They may not. You will be watched, that I promise. And if our observers report to us that your behavior has brought the slightest discredit to yourself or to this rally, rest assured that at that moment your participation in this event has just been terminated. Are we clear on that as well?"

Ninety-nine heads nodded.

"Good," she said. "Now in the battle for dead-last-but-still-running, Sparky Kessler with -1,946 points has overtaken Bob Wooldrige with -2,101." A huge cheer went up for the arsonist, particularly from Sparky's wife and daughter. Elizabeth had shown up earlier in the day wearing a fireman's turnout coat and a red, plastic helmet that read "Ride 'Em, Sparky." There's nothing like support from the home front to keep your overall score closing in on zero.

Memorial Stones

The sites that Landry mentioned hold terrible memories. They are five of the worst airline disasters in recent memory: the SAS crash near Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia; the downed TWA flight in Long Island Sound; the Twin Towers memorial in lower Manhattan; the west wall of the Pentagon where the hijacked plane struck on September 11, 2001; and the field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania where the last plane came down on that awful day.

These locations are clearly not typical IBR nonsense stops like touring the Museum of Questionable Medical Devices or paying a call on Clay Henry, the beer-swilling goat. They are serious, somber places, difficult to get to and more difficult yet to absorb once there. Riders may one day forget taking a photo of the world's largest ball of twine, but they're not likely to forget visits to places that have scorched the pages of American history.

Jack Savage, a senior editor at Whitehorse Press, came into the SAS memorial park this morning and met John McKibbin, our observer. Jack thanked him for providing such spectacular weather. John replied that they have about ten days like that on the south coast of Nova Scotia every year. When Savage left the park, he called Mike Kneebone.

"Thank you for sending me here," Jack said. "It's a beautiful park and a beautiful day. If I don't finish the rally after this, it'll be O.K."

McKibbin reported that while he was there (from 5:45 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. ADT) the following riders showed up: Jim Frens, Eric Jewell, Leon Begeman, John O'Keefe, Jeff Earls, Brent Ames, Todd Witte, Sean Gallagher, Will Outlaw, Marty Leir, and Mark Kiecker.

"You've got some big bikes there," John told Mike, "but what really impressed me was that fellow on the 250cc Ninja."

"Leon Begeman. We call him 'The Animal.'"

"I'll say," John said. "Do you know that he's about to complete ten straight 1,000-mile days?"

We do. In fact, while at first blush it looks as if Leon lost two places (from 24th to 26th) in the leg from Florida to Maine, when you factor in those riders from Canada who reappeared in the standings and took over the top seven positions, The Animal actually gained five spots on his competition.

Hopeless Class indeed.

The Gladiator

John Hart, one of the original 33 red pill riders, had gone to California, declined to join the 11 pills heading for Canada, and showed up at Ira Agins' house in Santa Fe on the way to Florida. There Hart was offered an additional bonus: go to Andy Goldfine's Very Boring Rally in Duluth. There he should track down the person who had won the I'm Wearing the Ugliest Aerostich Suit on Earth Contest and take a photo of the winner. If successful, he could bypass the Florida checkpoint.

The problem was that no one had a clue when the contest would be over. Hart might be sitting around, bored to tears at the Very Boring Rally, for longer than riders would ever have had to wait for a barricaded road to open in Bella Coola. No one in his right mind would accept a challenge with so many uncontrolled variables.

Why not, thought John. He set his GPS coordinates for Minnesota, called to say he was skipping the Florida checkpoint, and disappeared from the Iron Butt radar for the next four days.

Hart could hardly have expected what would follow when he arrived in Duluth. Andy Goldfine, Aerostich's founder, hauled Hart onto the stage and introduced him as an Iron Butt rider who was then and there bravely fighting his way through snow, rain, heat, and gloom of night toward the swift completion of his appointed bonuses. The crowd applauded happily.

"It was unbelievable," Hart said. "They treated me like a gladiator." He was surrounded and assaulted with questions about his heroic deeds. The 2005 IBR unwittingly may have recruited 15 new riders that evening. Hart got his photo, climbed onto his chariot, and charged out into the gloom of night, feeling possibly just a little like Spartacus.

The Moving Finger, Having Writ, Moves On

On Sunday morning Marc Lewis was forced to withdraw because of family problems. He had been running 31st at the Florida checkpoint.

In Maine yesterday Mike Grosche's endless struggles with his Hopeless Class Suzuki GS750 came to an end. In Missoula he began re-routing the fuel cell hose minutes before the start of the rally. He was the last rider out of the Holiday Inn's parking lot. Two flat tires slowed his ride east, but a blown head gasket was worse, causing him to miss the Florida checkpoint altogether and dropping him down to 108th place. The gasket was fixed, but as he plodded north to Maine, his clutch headed south to Hell. He came into the Reynolds' parking lot 45 minutes too late. With a second missed checkpoint, his rally is history.

Bob Higdon
www.ironbutt.com