

Launch Pad

Ninety motorcycles and their owners have gathered over the course of the past few days in the Doubletree Hotel parking lot east of Denver, Colorado for the running of the 2005 Iron Butt Rally. The ninety-first entrant, Don Arthur, a man on almost everyone's list of potential Top Ten finishers, was seriously injured on August 17 en route to the event. Everyone associated with the rally --- organizer, worker, and contestant --- sends their combined best wishes to Don and his family to aid in his speedy, complete recovery. He is one of the sport's great, tireless friends.

Lisa Landry, who supervised the 2003 rally as well as the weekend gathering of long-distance riding enthusiasts earlier this year in Omaha, is once again at the helm of this massive enterprise. Iron Butt Association president Mike Kneebone, for years in charge of every aspect of the 11-day event, has found a simple way of indicating his abdication of power. His name tag now reads: "Ask Lisa."

Assisting the rallymaster is a crew of dedicated IBA employees and volunteers. They have spent days stuffing envelopes and cranking out route packages, releases, name tags, ID tags, and toe tags. They stack up rally identification towels. They check riders in and wipe their bitter, salty tears away. They sell t-shirts, pins, hats, and assorted swag. They conduct seminars on how to deal with the media, videotape the riders signing away their lives, liberties, and sacred honors, and run up and down and in and out and around and about until you just want to sit them down and shove a bucket of Xanax down their sweaty throats. Still, they move on.

Iron Butt veterans Dale Wilson and Tom Austin run the technical inspections of the motorcycles, a job that for years I (in my capacity as the association's director of legal affairs) have repeatedly begged Mike Kneebone to abandon for reasons that any attorney even modestly attuned to the liability arts would instantly applaud. I am heeded not. Wilson, Austin, and their associates thus proceed to poke, prod, and probe the bikes, paying particular attention to auxiliary fuel containers. A good chunk of the rally's rules deal with just this arcane subject.

All but two of the machines have additional fuel tanks, enabling the riders to travel for six hours or more without stopping. It might sound like torture to you, but for the endurance rider, it's a virtual necessity. A minute spent sitting still at a gas station is a minute lost to your competition, a minute thrown away, or, worst of all, a minute lost to precious sleep. Texan Morris Kruemcke, a mechanical engineering graduate from SMU, once strapped 38 gallons of high octane fuel to his Gold Wing and rode from Butte, Montana to Wichita, Kansas --- a distance of over 1,200 miles --- without once putting a foot on the pavement.

The thought of such gasoline bombs running around the country in an Iron Butt Rally must have kept Mike Kneebone awake at night. A rule was instituted years ago that limited a bike's total fuel capacity to 11.5 gallons.

Now the game is to see how close you can get to the edge without exceeding it. Eddie James, endurance riding's Dennis the Menace, came in at 11.47 gallons during inspection. Another rider beat that by two-hundredths of a gallon. Rick Mayer overslopped at 11.79 gallons and was instructed either to find a 'displacement device' or go home. Mayer returned with two empty, capped Snapple bottles, slipped them into the fuel cell, baffled them with pieces of foam, and smiled happily when the tank retested short of the magic limit. NASA engineers should be so resourceful.

Eventually all the motorcycles survived inspection. Tonight they sit in the impound lot. When you look at them, you are stunned by gadgetry run amok. The fuel cells are just the start. These bikes carry global positioning satellite receivers, eye-searing driving headlights and fog lights, CB and XM radios, cell phone mounts, flexible map lights, reader boards, and scrollers. They have tank bags and saddlebags and top bags and bags to hold other bags. Mr. Harley and Mr. Davidson might recognize the normal bike on the road today, but I promise you that to their eyes the endurance rider's machine might as well be from Planet X.

Beyond the basic cost of the bike, this kind of improvement over the manufacturer's original concept has a price, easily the most significant percentage of the costs associated with the rally. Paul Taylor, the winner of the 2003 Iron Butt, estimates that he spent more than \$8,500 in entry fees, preparation of the bike, and expenses on the road.

Still, he was able to recoup some of that when he sold his bike this year to Sean Gallagher for \$12,000. Not satisfied that Taylor's winning bike was really up to his specifications, Gallagher immediately poured another \$11,000 into the BMW for further modifications and alterations. Gallagher laughs that while the bike may not return to the winner's circle this year, it will easily win the prize for the most expensive mount to leave the paddock.

Which it will do tomorrow when the hammer drops at 10:00 a.m. Tonight it sits, patiently waiting. Its owner sleeps, or tries to, also waiting as patiently as possible through a long, chilly, Rocky Mountain night.

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