

Lift Off

I have been at the start of every Iron Butt Rally since 1991, eight in all, and in seven of them I have, in my role as the association's director of pastoral affairs, blessed the field at the opening banquet with varying degrees of success. In 2001, since I was a contestant on the rally, my spiritual duties fell that year into other benevolent hands. Unhappily, that benediction too failed to achieve its intended result. Gary Eagan ran off the road not 27 miles into the rally, becoming one with a corn field.

It was a record (of sorts) that we hoped might stand forever. It didn't stand for even two years. In 2003 I returned to the banquet pulpit, cast devils from the assembled crowd in a fiery incantation, and watched the following morning as a rider dumped his bike five feet beyond the start line, breaking Eagan's record by approximately 26.999 miles. Nothing could top that, right?

You wish. Last night I skipped the benedicting part altogether and just threatened all the riders in the room that if they didn't come back in eleven days 1) safely, 2) healthy, and 3) happy, then I would track them down one by one in my capacity as the organization's avenging angel and make their lives even more miserable than they already were. As you might expect, this sort of inspiration by fear tactic had a mighty effect: This morning one rider was on his face 200 feet short of the starting gate. I submitted my resignation as the Iron Butt Association's chaplain not long thereafter.

Following last night's dinner, rallymaster Lisa Landry ascended the dais, took the microphone with a steady hand, waved an envelope of bonus instructions at the riders with another hand, and said, "Ahoy." Moments later, when the packages were distributed and opened, her cryptic comment became altogether too clear: The riders found themselves staring at 25 pages of directions to locations --- spread throughout the entirety of North America, from Seattle to Key West and from Los Angeles to New Brunswick --- almost every one of which involved an association with water. There were lakes to be visited, along with rivers, dams, lighthouses, swamps, reservoirs, oceans, waterfalls, hot springs, aqueducts, bridges, ships, a flood museum, a lifeguard tower, a naval acoustic research center in landlocked Idaho, and the Panama Canal. As I thumbed through the maze of papers, I found myself becoming slightly seasick.

A basic feature of the rally had also been altered. But before I turn to that, first permit me a moment of backtracking for the benefit of the seven people (out of the 2.6 million who read these posts) who are not completely familiar with the rally's essential design.

It has always been the case that the rally has a start and finish in one city with three additional checkpoints, generally located in the corners of the continental U.S. In years past it has been permissible for a rider to travel along the base route from one checkpoint to the next, earning points for showing up on time, and arriving at the finish in one piece. If you did nothing more than that, you'd beat the 20% of the field who routinely and invariably break down mentally or mechanically.

To gain additional glory, however, most riders normally will visit various bonus locations that may be (but usually aren't) along the base route. Each bonus stop has an associated point value. The more points you acquire, the higher your final standing. In general, the more difficult the bonus is to obtain, the more points it is worth. Final point totals are usually, but not always, positively correlated with total miles ridden. In past events, running the base route might require traveling just 7,500 miles in eleven

days; the top ten riders, on the other hand, will be cranking out 12,000 miles or more. No one ever said it was easy being a big dog.

This year the rally's basic structure has been changed in two significant respects: 1) Denver is both the start and the first checkpoint, and 2) there is only one other checkpoint, not the customary two. The riders will leave Denver today, return to it as the first checkpoint on Friday evening, depart for the second checkpoint outside Portland, Maine, and return to Denver for the finish by the end of the eleventh day. To counter the argument that the "base route" is really from Denver to Maine and back (with the lazy, scurrilous rider having spent the first four days of the event sleeping 16 hours a day in a Wal-Mart parking lot in a Denver suburb), Lisa requires that a minimum number of bonus points --- sixty thousand --- be collected in order for the contestant to be considered a finisher of the event. The top fifteen riders will come home with more than 80,000 points and the podium finishers will corner even more than that. As I said, woof woof.

After the dust had settled, Lisa took questions. There weren't many. The banquet hall quickly emptied as riders hustled back to their rooms to plot strategy with friends and other riders. In the old days that work would have been aided by road atlases, four-function calculators, and wax pencils. These days they hunker down with electronic spreadsheets, computer mapping programs, and fax machines. Kneebone and Landry know that they can't control outside assistance when a rider is putting a route together so they don't even try. A brilliant solution to the leg's routing problem is one thing; riding all those pesky miles is something else. It is, after all, the ultimate sticking point. The rally's focus may change a bit from year to year, but the bottom line --- sitting on that seat and twisting that throttle --- never does.

It didn't take long for a consensus to develop. Although the first leg's bonus points were fairly equally distributed in the four quadrants of the country, by bedtime almost half the riders had made plans to head for Key West, Florida. That dead-end town, 2,200 miles from Denver and a hopeless sucker bonus on every Iron Butt Rally since the dawn of time, was becoming a siren call to the heavyweight sailors. A smaller number had decided to head west to the closer bonuses along the coasts of California and Oregon. Those locations have a slightly higher value than in other sections of the country, but there is also the downside risk of nightmare traffic jams. A final ten or twelve riders took deep breaths and geared up to visit a lighthouse on an island in New Brunswick, almost 2,400 miles from rally headquarters.

Are you kidding me? Denver to Key West and back in 4.5 days? To the end of New Brunswick and back? If you're normal, you're laughing at the thought of such bravado. Yet this is what they live for, these men and women who dance fitfully along the edge of both geography and reason. And as hellish as their goals might seem to the rest of us, the riders know one other fact to a moral certainty: These are the easy days.

Bob Higdon
Denver CO