

Effort

At 3:15 p.m. MDT today Mark Kiecker was finishing off a hike of three-quarters of a mile back to his bike. He had just photographed a plaque at the base of the lighthouse at Cape Disappointment, Washington bearing the only poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Crossing the Bar," that doesn't make my skin crawl. He called Lisa Landry to report on his progress. His mood was good. It should have been. He'd just picked up a 30,102-point bonus after having ridden the width of North America in 54 hours, and was planning an additional series of stops along the Pacific coast that would net him another 16,000+ points before he turned back east to Denver. It had been an unimaginably long, hard ride, one that had left his Wrecking Crew teammates, Andy Mills and Marty Leir, more than four hours behind him. They had been together for more than a week. Now it was every man for himself.

This is the kind of story that resonates with long-distance people --- watching a fellow rider throwing everything he has at the wall and ultimately punching through it. Dennis Kessler did it two years ago, as did Rick Morrison with an amazing final leg in 1997. Tom Loegering made courageous runs both in 1993 and 1995. Steve Attwood's last leg in 1993, coming into the last checkpoint on one cylinder with just minutes to spare before being time-barred, is the stuff of Iron Butt legend. Sometimes there is a winner's trophy waiting for the effort, as in the cases of Morrison and Attwood. But Kessler, already facing large penalties for switching bikes, never had any chance to do anything but finish; his ride was a statement, nothing more. But what a statement it was.

And in Kiecker's case his latest incredible ride, starting the final leg more than 11,000 points behind leader Jim Owen, will be just another heroic statement as well unless Owen breaks down completely or the Earth changes its orbit in the next 24 hours. Because the deficit is so large, all Kiecker can do is close the gap a bit or climb over a few riders from his 11th place position in Maine to perhaps 8th overall at the finish. He won't be satisfied with that. It will irritate him to no end. He will mercilessly pick his own ride apart in his sleepless moments for a long, long time. But the rest of us will only wish we could have done so well.

As we move into the final hours, the attrition continues. Dave Tyler kept asking himself if he was having fun and kept hearing himself say "no." He's on the way home. Bill Watt wasn't having any fun in Canada last night. Hurricane Katrina, which weather observers thought might turn east, instead continued north into Quebec, bringing the worst rains that Watt has ever seen. He could do no better than to try to plow through it at 25-40 mph hour after miserable hour. He thought he was taking the safe, dry route to Denver; last night it was neither. Bob Mutchler, once again grinding along I-70 near Hays, Kansas and hoping his clutch holds out for a while longer, is trying to reach Las Vegas. He may be lucky just to make it to the hotel at the finish.

Although they had anticipated a possible horror show in the North Carolina area, riders who went south from Maine instead of straight into the teeth of Canadian storms found perfect weather waiting for them. Jeff Earls called last night to thank Lisa for giving him a spectacular sunset at Cape Hatteras. Shane Smith may have been the next one through the region. The miles that he has been stacking up, 300 more than his nearest rival, are taking their toll. "Put a fork in me," he requested late this afternoon. "I'm done. I think I'm gunning for the most inefficient ride in Iron Butt history." We can't imagine what sort of pressure he has been under in the past few days. Last night his wife and daughter spent the night in McComb, Mississippi's high school, one of the few places in their home town that had electrical

power. Paul Meredith, Rick Morrison (running again with new sprockets for his V-Strom), Eddie James, and Rob Nye were also seen in the Hatteras area, dry and smiling.

Tim Conway is smiling again, having finally diagnosed and fixed the problem that has plagued his R1150GS BMW for nine straight days. His fuel injection system had somehow defaulted itself into a "safe" operating mode, restricting the engine's RPMs and driving Conway bats. He pulled the fuse, counted to ten, reinserted the fuse, and found himself aboard a new motorcycle, but hours behind schedule. Lisa begged him to turn south from Missoula, Montana. "At least you'll finish," she pleaded. Not a chance. He's heading tonight for Cape Disappointment. He can make the distance, but there's still that 1.5-mile round-trip hike up to Tennyson's poem, not to mention an almost 1,400-mile ride from there to Denver. That's a pretty fair order for the first day of the rally, but to face such odds on the last day? I don't want to think about it.

It takes some work to destroy the bottom end of a Harley but we think Brett Donahue has managed to do it. He could feel harmonic vibrations, hear unwelcome noises, and then he felt and heard nothing at all. He was close --- just four hours short of Cape Disappointment, unless you'd want to argue that he had found an entire acre of disappointment where his broken bike stood --- to snagging the largest bonus on the entire rally, but suddenly he found himself even closer to the dreaded DNF ("did not finish") status. While waiting for the tow truck for a ride to the nearest Harley dealer near Seattle, he called Lisa. She got onto the internet and broadcast an S-O-S: If Donahue can rent a bike and make it to Denver, can anyone take it back to Seattle for him? Enter Karen Bolin, wife of entrant John Bolin. She lives in Seattle, already has a plane ticket to Denver, and will be happy to ferry the rental bike back to its home. Switching bikes will cost Brett a bunch of penalty points, but when his name is called as a finisher at the banquet on Friday evening, he will remember the ovation for the rest of his life. It will be led by his wife and father.

And all it took was a little effort.

Bob Higdon
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