

## Tempest

From the balcony of the Iron Butt Rally administration suite on the top floor of the Doubletree Hotel in Denver, Colorado, you can see the staggering wall of the Rocky Mountains all the way from Pikes Peak in the south to far beyond Boulder's Flatiron mountains in the north, a sweep of more than 100 miles. On summer afternoons like this the storms routinely boil up along the length of the front range and begin smacking the tops of the mountains with lightning strikes and sheets of rain. In a few hours things will calm down and the landscape will retreat from being actively frightening to merely forbidding. As many times as I have seen this show, I never tire of it.

Another kind of rain, the sort that turns the Great Plains into a sea of whistling wind and hard, gray pellets, reduced speeds on I-70 in Kansas yesterday afternoon from 80 mph to under 40. Morris Kruemcke, who knows something about rain in a riding career that includes more than 160 thousand-mile days, was muttering darkly to himself. Dean Tanji called his former riding partner, rallymaster Lisa Landry. "It's definitely bad," he said grimly. Morris was drying out when he reached a toll booth in Kansas City. The attendant looked at him and asked cheerfully, "Are you with the Iron Butt Rally?" Not having much else to do, Morris considered that question as he rolled eastward through the next couple of states. Were there really that many riders ahead of him on the way to Key West?

He didn't know. We don't know. No one knows. We receive bits of information now and then, and there is a web site that is plotting the tracks of thirteen --- well, twelve now, but more on that later --- riders who have been outfitted with satellite transponders. But beyond that, in times like this your crack IBR administrative staff is as essentially out of touch with our motonauts as Houston is with their space cadets when the lunar module has wheeled around to the other side of the moon. So rather than just admit we don't have a clue what's happening out there in the void, in the great journalistic traditions of the New York Times, Washington Post, and National Enquirer, we just make things up.

Still, while we may not know exactly where these riders are, we do know who they are, and without any question at all this is the finest group of motorcyclists ever to assemble for the event. It is literally a Who's Who in endurance riding that is fanning out like flies across North America tonight. Take Eric Jewel, for example. He rode on the legendary last leg of the 2001 rally with George Barnes, time barred at the end but unforgettable nonetheless. Landry says she'd be happy with a field composed of 100 Eric Jewels. Or Jim Owen, who has never had a bad rally. Or Ed Phelps, the great hope of the BMW Bikers of Metropolitan Washington, and the winner of the Mason-Dixon 20-20 rally earlier this year. Jeff Earls hits long balls with the best of them. George Zelenz? All he's done in 2005 is finish high up on the Cal 24 rally and win the White Stag and Utah 1088 rallies.

The list goes on. John Ryan, the only rider ever to do three consecutive 1,500-mile days within 72 hours, scans the skies for bad weather. "The worse it is, the better I like it," he says without a smile, making everyone around him even more nervous than usual. Then there's the Minnesota Wrecking Crew led by Mark Kiecker and Marty Leir, who finished 2nd and 3rd overall in 2003 respectively. Their co-rider then, Will Outlaw, came in 4th. He couldn't run this year, but in his place are more Team Strange Minnesotans, Andy Mills and Tim Conway. These guys are young, rude, talented, fast, tattooed, pierced, and fearless. If they finished 1st through 4th this year, no one would be surprised.

But to do that, they're going to have to strike out the Murderer's Row of long-distance riding --- Shane Smith, Peter Hoogeveen, Rick Morrison, and George Barnes. Before Chris Sakala broke it in 2003, Smith

held the record for the fastest time from Prudhoe Bay, Alaska to Key West. He has three top ten finishes in three Iron Butt rallies, his best being a 2nd overall in 2001. It was a ride that left Paul Taylor, the 2003 IBR winner, in the dust. Canada's Hoogeveen has five top five placements, including two agonizingly close second-place finishes. It is a record of accomplishment that no one is even close to touching. Morrison won the IBR in 1997 and finished second in 1999. At one time or another he has held every long-distance record worth chasing. When most riders see Rick's bike in the parking lot, they mentally adjust themselves to shooting for second place.

And then there's George Barnes. In 1997 he was just behind the leader Hoogeveen at the second checkpoint. His bike blew up on the next leg. In 1999 he held off a final charge by Morrison to win. In 2001 he entered the final hours of the rally with a secure lead over Bob Hall and Eric Jewel. Five things had to go wrong between Fairbanks, Alaska and Huntsville, Alabama to deny Barnes another victory. Five things went wrong. Having seen who I believe are the best riders of my time, I'd have to put George and Ross Copas at the very top. They actually competed against each other one time at the Bite the Bullet rally in Nevada in 1993. Naturally, they tied for first.

The rain has disappeared from the deep blue mountains to the west. The sun has set and a pleasant coolness has returned to Mile High City. Bill Watt, on his way to New Brunswick last night, reported that it was freezing. Others picked their way cautiously through cold, Canadian fog. At the same time riders on their way to Key West were motoring through a steaming, soaking sauna. Tonight, wherever they are, a merciful sleep bonus awaits them. They will stop at a gas station after midnight, obtain a time-stamped gas receipt, sleep for at least six hours, and return to the same pump for a second receipt. It's being paid for resting, a bonus that they just can't afford to pass up. And for at least a few hours, they can forget about uncaring weather.

### **Feedback**

A reader sent an e-mail accusing me of softening up now that I'm receiving Social Security checks. How come you didn't name the poor guy who dropped his bike while trying to leave the parking lot, he asks. What gives?

That's easy. There are basically two ways to guarantee being mentioned in the rally reports: 1) Do something spectacularly daring, brilliant, or courageous; or 2) Do something incredibly dumb. As for the parking lot incident, that was just bad luck, not purposefully stupid. I wrote: "I can't name him. A low-speed face plant under those circumstances could happen to anyone. The pressure on those poor bastards is absolutely unbelievable. There are cameras everywhere; there is noise, congestion, and terror in every direction. Your heart is racing and your adrenal glands are the size of volleyballs. Nah. That would be the worst sort of cheap shot."

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