

## Apogee

The web site this morning showed a picture of North America that truly was worth more than my next 1,000 words. The site pinpoints the current locations of 13 motorcycles, each of which is equipped with a device that communicates with global positioning satellites that orbit the Earth. It is the ultimate response to that anxiety-inducing question you used to hear on the radio: It's 2:00 a.m., and do you know where your child is? At Star-Traxx the answer is always yes, at 2:00 a.m. and at every other hour of the day or night.

For the past several days the bikes have been spreading out from Denver like concentric ripples from a disturbance on an otherwise calm lake. Because the rally's starting location is also its first checkpoint, what left here last Monday morning ideally and inevitably will return here by Friday evening, as if drawn back by tiny rubber bands. Now almost halfway through the first leg, the bands have begun to grow maximally taut; they will pull their riders back to Colorado from the four corners of America. Star-Traxx has dutifully recorded the ebb and flow, but you still cannot quite make out the little rubber bands.

Consider the analysis that led to the unique distribution of the bonus locations on this first leg of the rally. Mike Kneebone and Lisa Landry constructed a matrix that balances out the competing factors of time, speed, distance, geography, point value, and a maze of other variables in remarkably fair, yet dramatically different, ways. You say you like a long roll on interstate highways into the Turkish bath of Florida in August? Go to the Keys.

If your preference is to freeze your buns on an even longer ride, head for New Brunswick. Perhaps your inclination is for a shorter but more demanding tour, particularly if you don't mind battling traffic and congestion. The bonuses in southern California and the Pacific Coast Highway were made for you, bubba. Ditto a visit to the northwest, which has a dizzying variety of bonus stops from Yellowstone to Seattle and down the coast of Oregon. No matter which route is chosen, they all work out to approximately the same bonus point value. That, my friends, is not an easy thing to do. It can be an even more nail-biting task to try to put the entire array into logical perspective.

For Mike Kneebone though, the choice was obvious. "The northwest," he said, when I asked him which was the easiest of the possible routes. "You can pick up almost as many points as by riding east, but you can do it in a fraction of the distance." Bob St. George and Jim Frens apparently agreed, but even the best plans occasionally bump into one of Mother Nature's jokes. They were near the Tacoma Narrows bridge this morning, trying to take a photo of a lighthouse that was utterly invisible in a dense fog. They walked toward the sound of a fog horn, but each step was actually taking them farther away from the lighthouse. In moments like this, when the ticking clock is acting like a brass gong against the interior of your skull, you can understand what it's like to be crazier than a rat in a coffee can.

Other good riders --- Rob Nye, Brian Roberts, Eddie James, and Tom Melchild --- also went north and west. Unfortunately, Roberts, before dawn yesterday, was forced wide in a sweeping turn on I-90 northwest of Missoula, Montana to avoid a worthless deer and lost the bike in a gravel shoulder. Brian is all right, thanks in no small part to some Samaritan-like assistance from Melchild, but the motorcycle is awaiting ascension to Bike Heaven. It was one of the transponder-equipped machines. You can see it on the Star-Traxx map, not having moved much in the last 30 hours but looking better on the web site than it does in person, I'm told.

Opting for the southwest route were big dogs like Rick Morrison, George Zelenz, and Jim Owen, the latter another blip on the Star-Traxx map. That kind of technology doesn't interest Morrison, who used to compute distances on a road atlas with a Marlboro cigarette. From the filter to the tip was 200 miles. Flip it over end to end? Another 200 miles. Do that another five or six times and you have the day's route. Nothing to it, and when you're through, you get to smoke the calculator.

Rick has evolved from those primitive days to the point where his bike now carries a GPS unit. Admittedly, the model that he's using is so low-rent that it might have come from a Cracker Jack box. Worse, Rick may not be quite sure what the thing is supposed to do. Still, loading him up with all the electronic gear that the other boys and girls carry is like giving a rhinoceros a grenade launcher. He doesn't need it; he's a *rhino*, for God's sake. Isn't that scary enough?

About a dozen riders headed for New Brunswick, a continent away to the northeast. They included Bob Todd, Dean Tanji, Jim Winterer, Bill Thweatt, Rick Martin, Shane Smith, and George Barnes. Shane had originally been heading for the Keys but switched direction in St. Louis. "Giving George a 100-mile lead probably isn't the best idea I've had in this rally," he told me wryly. True enough. The best thing to give rhinos like that is some room, but 100 miles might be a little too much.

That left the remainder of the field, half the riders altogether, heading to Key West. Doug Chapman's Star-Traxx bike apparently has been in the lead from the start. Not far behind was the Wrecking Crew, accompanied by Steve Steller aboard a 450cc Vespa. Don't ask me how a scooter can keep up with those headhunters from Minnesota. I never thought that Ed Otto would finish the 1995 Iron Butt on a Honda Helix, but I've been eating that crow for ten years.

Others sighted in the Keys: Ed Phelps and John Ryan, with the Fontana Dam already in their pockets; John Bolin, en route now to Scottsbluff, Nebraska; and Bob Mutchler, whose sidecar has wiggled free but is awaiting reattachment. Allen Dye, Paul Meredith, Dick Fish, Beverly Ruffin, Peter Hoogeveen, and Bill Shaw have also come and gone. What will separate these riders in the first scoring round will be how many bonuses they manage to obtain on the way to or back from Florida.

An orbiting object reaches its apogee when it is most distant from the object it orbits. Gravitational rubber bands are now beginning to pull the riders on the east coast back to Denver. Those who hurled themselves to the west will start to feel the force sometime tomorrow. The weather reports show clearing across much of the country, except for a disturbance south of the Florida keys. There Tropical Storm Katrina is bubbling up. She won't be a problem on this leg of the rally --- the group now in Florida will be long gone before she arrives this weekend --- but if past Iron Butts are prologue, one of the big bonuses on the next leg will be, of course, Key West.

No, my children, Katrina isn't your problem. What you should be worrying about in the days to come is the next weather bomb in the alphabet: Tropical Storm Lisa.

### **Feedback**

One of these days fact checking here at the Iron Butt Tribune will catch on. Until that happens, we'll continue to embarrass ourselves with, for example, allegations that the winner of the White Stag Rally this year was George Zelenz. That came as news to Dick Peek, who actually won the event and can prove it with the affidavits of 50 witnesses. Sorry, George. Sorry, Dick. Sorry, one and all. I'd promise to do better, but we all know that's not going to happen.

Bob Higdon  
Denver CO