

A Day At the Dog Track

With not much else to do as we wait for our greyhounds to make the turn into the final stretch of leg #1, the odds makers at Iron Butt Central have been re-evaluating the competition. As usual, finely tuned assessments are made on the bases of breeding, history, weight, hearsay, blood level of anabolic steroids, rumor, map folding skills, and reasoning by false analogy. Here, then, are our current thoughts, which are subject to revision, if not total denial, 40 milliseconds after this post hits the web.

Hans Karlsson, age 11.3 in dog years (he will be 11.4 in October), remains an even-odds favorite to finish, principally because we have heard nothing from him other than that he headed for Key West on his mammoth Gold Wing and apparently arrived there. It may be the same bike that he used last year to slog through eleven time zones in Siberia and Russia, becoming the oldest dog on the heaviest bike ever to make that vicious ride (and cruelly breaking the record that your esteemed scribe held for almost two whole weeks).

The ratings of Dave Mishalof and Joe Mandeville have been revised from Like Silent to Like Tomb-Like. Mishalof confided on the evening before the start that he would head back home to Los Angeles. The next morning he confided that he'd changed his mind. He has confided nothing since. In the 1991 IBR Mishalof and Mandeville rode together, taking it easy and still finishing tied for 7th overall. That year Dave won his second mileage contest that the BMW Motorcycle Owners of America hold from April to October of each year. He's won at least two more since then. And Mandeville is no stranger to the contest either. In 1993 he won it by racking up over 106,000 miles in six months. Experience has taught us that when these guys are quiet, they can only be up to something no good.

Trivial problems --- Rebecca Vaughn lost a key, Rick Morrison and CHP sergeant Steve Hobart lost the use of their fuel cells, Brian Boberick lost confidence in his GPS, and Michael Smyers lost Kerry Church, for example --- are par for the Iron Butt course. We hardly mention them except for a cheap laugh, and only rarely do they affect a doggy's odds. But with disasters continuing to wash over her like waves on a beach, Coni Fitch's chances have been downgraded from Doubtful to Circling the Drain. She had interrupted her ride to Denver to fly to Missouri to be with Don Arthur's wife following his accident. By the time she reached the rally headquarters, her headlight's low beam had become no beam, delaying her technical inspection and odometer check. Her bike was reassembled just before the start and just in time for a problem with her GPS receiver to erupt. She was, by more than an hour, the last one out of the gate but the first one to lose her gas receipts. Could it get any worse? Sure. An hour later she broke down with a massive oil leak near Death Valley. The K1200LT was towed to the BMW dealer in Las Vegas. Technicians have been looking at it and they're not smiling.

Not only smiling but moving up in class is Vicki Johnston by virtue of a big ride to Chicago via North Carolina and Key West, the same route adopted by the Wrecking Crew. On your scorecard change her classification from Middleweight (23rd overall, and the highest placed woman, on the 2003 IBR) to Light-Heavyweight and adding attractive pounds with each passing mile.

Speaking of the gauchos of the Minnesota pampas, there appears to have been a change in the Wrecking Crew's composition. Tim Conway is evidently having some sort of fuel problem, seriously cutting his range between gas stops. He was dropped by Kiecker, Leir, and Mills back in Kansas. He then teamed up with a hard-charging Allen Dye, the favorite son of an internet group known as the Chatty Morons. It now seems that Dye has forged ahead of Conway in the eastern plains, forcing a reduction in Tim's status from Big Dog to Dog.

Taking Conway's place, in the tradition of true Iron Butt zaniness, is Brett Donahue and his 1,200cc Harley Sportster. Because of a fuel petcock error, Donahue left the start with practically an empty tank. He stopped within the first couple of miles to fill up, grinding his teeth and watching Kiecker's group leave him in the dust. Hours later, he passed the Crew. Then the Crew passed him. They leapfrogged this way all the way to the Keys, at which time he apparently became inducted into the Crew as the fourth musketeer. That was good enough for Iron Butt Central's prognosticators to upgrade Donahue from Low Octane Dog to Is This Guy for Real?

Since more than 40% of the leg's 73 bonuses are in California, Oregon, and Washington, there are a staggering number of possible routes through the point maze. We don't have any idea, except by reading tea leaves, where one-third of the field might be hiding along the Pacific coast. Our handicappers are consequently at a complete loss to calculate even laughable odds for them. They rarely call; they never write; they apparently don't miss us at all, though we think of them all the time. A couple of the ones we're thinking about tonight are Rick Morrison and Jim Owen. Morrison's route, after he gobbled down a big bonus in southwest New Mexico, is a mystery, but he promised before leaving to do "an efficient route." Read: few miles, big points. That looks exactly like what Owen has done when you follow his path on the Star-Traxx web site. It is possible that he might have picked up as many as 25 bonuses so far with more to come in the final 24 hours. If so, you could easily be looking at the top dog tomorrow night. And if Owen can figure that out, can Morrison, one of the canniest of the endurance riders, be far behind?

Motojournalist Jerry Smith, who had been assigned by Kneebone and Landry to act as an observer at the Bandon lighthouse bonus in southwest Oregon, got a glimpse of a rare west coast specimen yesterday. Actually, he heard Bill Crittenden's Boss Hoss before he saw it, a 350-cubic inch Chevy V-8 engine strapped to what looks like a bicycle frame. Even heartless touts know a good story when they hear it, so for managing to shove that 1,300-pound thing this far down the road from Denver, we're adjusting Crittenden's odds against finishing from 100-1 to 47.3-1. And while a Hoss surges, a top-seeded Big Dog takes a dive, straight into a hot tub. George Zelenz reported that, even before the sun set yesterday, he was unable to resist calling it a night at an upscale spa in Ukiah, California. Say what? IBA's bookies think that's barking up the wrong tree. It's puppy chow for you tonight, George. Woof.

Meanwhile, trying to prove that they're the best in show, George Barnes, Brian Boberick, and Shane Smith are following the poet Robert Frost's advice and have taken the road less traveled back to Denver from New Brunswick. It's via a dam in western North Carolina, which means that if they straight-line it to Colorado from there, they'll have averaged almost 1,200 miles/day for the first 105 hours. Will it be enough?

We'll know tomorrow.

Bob Higdon
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