

To Stand and Wait

It will take someone more clever than I to construct, in Steve Martin's immortal phrase, interesting word usements that will make the Iron Butt Rally seem to be just another walk in the park. I can't do it because it isn't that; it never has been; it never will be. It is unapologetically what it is, an extreme form of getting from A to B for no other reason than the ride. And because it is so singularly unforgiving, the attrition rate is always high. I recall seeing Michelle Phillips of The Mamas and Papas in a documentary about surviving the 1960s. "It was a war out there," she told the interviewer, shaking her head. "Not everyone made it home." She could have been talking about the Iron Butt.

Five days are beginning to take their predictable toll. It is the BMWs, half of the bikes on the starting grid, that are taking the worst hits. We noted that Coni Fitch's K1200LT ground to a halt yesterday. Last night John Bolin's R1100RT lost a rear drive bearing. He looked down and out in Platte City, Missouri, but heroic assistance by the dealer in Kansas City may have saved Bolin's day. He struggles toward Denver even as I write. Bob Mutchler's R1150RT, dragging a sidecar around that has had mounting and shock absorber issues on its own, lost an alternator belt, the same problem that stopped a half-dozen BMWs in their tracks two years ago. He too struggles toward the finish line tonight. Dick Fish has stopped struggling; his BMW GS blew up. Why? Who knows. The turn will come in good time for the other brands. In the Iron Butt no machine is immune.

Rains that were sweeping the riders off the Great Plains on the first day of the rally returned on the fourth day with even greater violence. Morris Kruemcke wanted nothing to do with two large bonuses in downtown Chicago but rode north to the Windy City anyway just to avoid storms in Missouri. Torrential rains stopped Phyllis Lang cold and may time bar her at the first checkpoint. Nine horses yesterday were swept away and drowned in floods of Biblical intensity in Kansas. Far to the north in Montana the Boss Hoss rested safely in a metaphorical corral as its owner, Bill Crittenden, peacefully slept. And slept. And woke up so late today that he has no chance to arrive before the checkpoint window slams shut in Denver tonight. Thus does the brief career of the largest horse ever to run the Iron Butt end, not with a 300-horsepower bang but a snore and a whimper.

Those riders and machines who've survived have been drifting in for the past six or seven hours. Soon the penalty clock will begin to click at five points per minute. After 9:00 p.m. tonight they're time barred. Their next stop will be back home. It will be a personal disaster for the rider, but for the wife or husband or lover who has been waiting through these long, tense hours, it will be nothing but relief. For them the war is over. Their soldier didn't win, but that hardly matters anymore. In some cases, peace at any price may not be such a bad thing after all.

In a couple of hours the war resumes. For the riders who nervously await the start of the next leg to Maine, their battles will be waged on the road. For their significant others, the waiting war begins anew. I've become a pen pal with some of them. "I feel connected to him through you," one writes. And they tell me things that they can't tell their husbands. "This is not fun being at home worried. It is a shame that it takes something like this ride to really realize how much someone means to you and how dangerous this madness is. But he loves it." I try to assure them in my uncomfortable role as father confessor that things will be fine, and most of the time they are. Tonight an air of real gaiety surrounds the hotel. It is hard to find a frown, even from the riders who've screwed up a bonus or lost a gas receipt. The rally has truly been as carefree as a dance around the maypole. But we all know that . . . , well, we know.

She had calculated that he should be coming in at one in the afternoon. She wandered back and forth under a tree. By two he hadn't arrived. She couldn't take her eyes off the entrance to the parking lot, where he should be now, must be, just has to be. She knows the bike as well as he does, its headlight, its shape, its silhouette. She can recognize the motor's sound. 2:10. 2:15. At 2:20 he rounded the corner. Her head sagged forward momentarily in a kind of desperate relief. She stood, steadied herself, and walked quickly toward him. Before he was off the bike, she had her arms around him. I had to look away.

One of John Milton's most famous poems concludes, "They also serve who only stand and wait." Only? Only? Some days it is a full time job, a job so hard that simply to stand is to prevail. I'm sorry. There's nothing "only" about that.

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