

Downhill

Just before midnight EDT last night I posted my latest update in the continuing road saga known as Iron Butt 2005: The Early Years. A few minutes later the witching hour clanked, at which point the riders had officially crested the half-way point of the event. For them, as well as for your crack team of paper shufflers, microanalysts, and wordsmiths at Iron Butt Central, it is all downhill now --- literally, physically, figuratively, allegorically, and psychiatrically.

It didn't take long for the armchair endurance riders on the web to begin a discussion, once the bonus listings were posted on the IBA web site, of how they would have run the first leg. Much of the discussion, somewhat to my surprise, was fairly reasonable and instructive. But curiously, even though they could plainly see the dramatic inefficiencies in terms of points per mile that had hammered the riders who'd headed east on leg #1, many of them would have opted for New Brunswick or Key West anyway. It demonstrates the powerful lure of the simple ride and the corresponding aversion to the complex one.

That was clearly illustrated in the routes the real riders chose. In the first 4.4 days of the rally George Barnes, Shane Smith, and Brian Boberick made just two bonus location stops in over 5,500 miles. They went almost as far east as you can go and still not hit Europe. Jim Owen, on the other hand, rode west and stopped 28 times for bonuses in under 4,900 miles. He leads BarnesSmithandBoberick by 8,304 points. And it would have been 1,000 more except Owen lost a gas receipt. The former put their heads down and bulled their way into the sun; Owen, Eric Jewell, and the other top-placed riders took their time and picked their way through a minefield.

Some of the initial routing decisions were made with surprising speed. Good, experienced riders --- Kiecker, Leir, Ryan, and Barnes, among many, many others --- seemed to ignore the western bonuses altogether. Within an hour of the distribution of bonus packets all of them had announced decisions to go east. But it seems so clear in the cold light of a week's worth of dawns that the real bang-for-the-buck was on the Pacific side of Denver. Yes, it required delicate planning because many of the bonuses had time restrictions on them. One of the biggest depended upon the ocean's tide. The constipation of traffic on the west coast clearly frightened away more than a few riders. But there is no escaping the results: If you were both efficient and committed, you did well on the first leg. If you were just committed, you'll be making up ground for the rest of the event. Ted Timmons' statistical analysis pretty much says it all.

The second leg, which terminates tomorrow morning at Reynolds Motorsports outside of Portland, Maine, has essentially transported the field from the west to the east. Pick up some bonuses, if you can, but be rested and ready to go for the haul back to the finish. Naturally, the water theme of the rally is continuing with a vengeance, even as Katrina gathers terrifying steam in the Gulf of Mexico. There were three basic courses that could have been followed in this leg: 1) The northern route to Wawa, Canada; 2) The middle route via Niagara Falls and the Erie canal; and 3) the southern route via bridges in Missouri, West Virginia, and eventually New York. The first has some good points; the second is conservative with frequent bail-out options; and the third, the one with the highest bonus value, will need a prayer that everything goes right. For travelers on I-95 on a summer Sunday afternoon and evening, that will require a mighty prayer indeed.

Irrespective of the route chosen to Maine, the riders had better be well rested when they arrive. Do you think they will heed that admonition? We don't. We think half of them, as usual, will show up baked. Three times in Missoula at the start of the 2003 rally Lisa Landry told the riders that they absolutely must not arrive at the first checkpoint tired. You will need to be thoroughly rested for the second leg, she said, again and again and again. And did they listen to the warning? Almost one-third of the riders arrived late, took penalty points, and from that moment on were basically riding just to finish. Paul Taylor listened. He stood 28th overall when the first leg's scores were posted, but he was also coming off of eight hours of sleep. He won that rally in no small part due to his ability to manage rest.

Some readers have cited Taylor's "recovery" in that event as proof that there is still room for picking yourself up off the floor to make the great comeback. I love the idea too. But when Taylor began to move up on the second leg, there was still 87% of the rally still to ride. When the troops began the second leg from Denver last Friday night, 40% of the rally was already in the bag. When they leave the second checkpoint for the ride back west tomorrow morning, fewer than four days will remain. Time, the eternal enemy of the long-distance rider, is rapidly running out.

In the meantime the clock has stopped for Dave Mishalof. Citing problems at home, he has bowed out of the rally. Ditto Quek Cheng Chye. Joe Mandeville may be forced to withdraw because of an emergency. Bobb Todd headed for New Brunswick on the first leg, rode 4,996 miles to pick up exactly one (1) bonus, and now has withdrawn. He thinks the rally this year was too demanding. If I'd gone to New Brunswick and back with him, I'm sure I'd have agreed. Instead of the wilds of provincial Canada, I'd have suggested to him that we visit San Francisco for a couple of days. It's a hell of a lot closer to Denver and much more scenic. If we'd done that, we might have wound up in a hot tub with George Zelenz and Bobb would still be in the rally.

ike Senty and his sidecar were hammered down in the standings after the first checkpoint. Then things got worse, as not infrequently happens on the IBR. His rear wheel cracked. Senty had it welded. It cracked again in a different place. He had it welded again. The tire began to leak, so he stuck a tube in it. Then he noticed that he couldn't make better than 65 mph before the old Gold Wing would turn into a paint shaker. It seems that the various welds had deformed the wheel. Enough, Senty said, is enough. "This new format about missing one checkpoint is killing me," Mike told Lisa Landry. "But that's the way it should be. I hate withdrawing, but I love the rally."

Rick Morrison has also withdrawn, the victim of worn out front and rear sprockets. The big V-Strom had problems from the start, losing part of its electrical system in water crossings the first evening in New Mexico. Rick had picked the right route but in this rally that often isn't the end of the story. He'll be back.

Brett Donahue was run into a median strip last night by a truck, an unequal match up even for a Harley. But in an heroic ride he'd managed to keep up with Kiecker, Leir, and Mills almost to the bitter end. The bike sustained some twisted parts but the rider was unhurt. His wife, Jodi, sent an e-mail: "I am glad we are racers and not strangers to crashing or I would be totally freaked out." The rest of his Wrecking Crew stayed around long enough to see that Brett was able to move, albeit somewhat slowly, toward Maine, then they pushed off. They have since been joined by Eddie James, another Minnesotan, forming a team that is now referred to as J-K-L-M.

In roughly twelve hours the final push begins. Iron Butt rallies have run-for-the-barn legs that are traditionally brutal. Riders who sleep well tonight will move up in the final standings; those who sleep not will lose ground. Lisa has repeatedly warned them. We'll soon see who has listened.

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