

Rising and Falling

They made it to the checkpoint in Maine, most of them, a little wetter and somewhat worse for wear, but still smiling. Those coming up I-95 saw the road shut down in both directions for a while Sunday night because elephants had managed to escape from a circus truck. Someone asked me if I believed the story. Of course I did. I've been marooned and adrift on that ugly road off and on since I was a teenager. Elephants? That's nothing. It's the electric eels slithering through the toll plazas that give me the willies.

As they rolled in, a few of the riders appeared to be actually rested, or at least they said they were. I'd quiz them when I saw a suspect case.

REH: "Suspect, don't lie to me. Are you tired?"

Suspect: "No."

REH: "Are you lying to me?"

Suspect: "No."

REH: "Would you tell me if you were lying to me?"

Suspect: "No."

I learned this interrogative technique in law school, as I recall. As a method of truth detection, I find that it perhaps could use refinement, though it remains elusive exactly how I could pry actual truth out of the suspects short of coming at them with a funnel and a bucket of molten lead.

No, real truth is in the eye of the beholder of interim checkpoint scores. They were posted on the front door at Reynolds Motorsports this morning just after 11:00 o'clock. Because the leg was basically a transition for the riders from Colorado to Maine, we expected few major changes in standings and few changes of substance did we receive.

Jim Owen held onto first place by 3,584 points over Jeff Earls. Eric Jewell dropped a spot to third. Chris Sakala jumped over seven riders into fourth place. We thought Eddie James would be in free fall by now, but he slipped just one place to fifth. Shane Smith, continuing to plot routes with a sledge hammer, broke out of a tie with George Barnes and Brian Boberick, gained one position in the standings to sixth, but lost more than 600 points to Owen on the leg. Unless he's stopped soon by rogue elephants on the highway, Shane is on a pace to set a record for total miles ridden in the event. We try to tell him that the points matter more than the miles, but by then he's already in the next county.

Jack Savage dropped from 5th to 7th, still showing the other rookies in the list how it's done. Tom and Rose Sperry, in sixth place in Denver, tanked to 39th in Maine after a disastrous ride. Rounding out the top ten are the Wrecking Crew's Marty Leir and Andy Mills, tied for 8th overall, and Peter Hoogveen, rising from a tie for 13th to sole possession of tenth place.

Think about this: Do you have any idea what it takes to be among the top ten riders in this event with just four days remaining? I ask not to demonstrate what may be your woeful lack of comprehension of things iron and butt; I ask because I don't know either. Not one-hundredth of one percent of the readers of these diaries will ever know what it takes to achieve that kind of stature. They are different, those

guys; they do things that you and I can't. Sometimes I am not sure that even they know what sorts of skills they have. They may discover how they do it one day; you and I will never know.

Sixty-eight other riders are still in the hunt, but absent extraordinary circumstances, they're riding to finish now, not to win. Look at Keith Keating and Paul Meredith in 17th and 21st places. They won't be in the top ten when this is over on Friday, but they're doing a lot better than they did in 2001 when they were on 125cc bikes and struggling simply to make it from one checkpoint to the next on time. In that rally they asked themselves just one question when choosing roads: Do I have to climb a hill? If so, forget it. The bikes were underpowered even when coasting downhill with a tailwind. Can you imagine what it must have been like for Keith and Paul to plot and thread their way through the Rockies? Neither can I. But they did it, and they finished on their feet.

We counted Rick Morrison out last night. The '97 IBR champ was an early favorite who has unfortunately suffered a series of electrical and mechanical problems. He somehow made it to the checkpoint in Maine but will be unable to continue until he can replace his bald sprockets tomorrow morning. He stands 42nd and is no longer worrying about devising a winning route plan. His next critical decision will come when he must decide between lobster or crab cakes for dinner this evening.

In 51st place is Al Holtsberry, never a threat to win on his 1977 BMW R100/7. It is an entrant in the aptly named Hopeless class. Al has had his share of big rides --- he once held the record for the earliest completion of the Four Corners tour --- but this year he is paying a courtesy call on history: The bike is the same one he rode to a successful conclusion in the Iron Butt Rally of 1986. Does anyone care whether Al finishes 50th or 500th? Of course not. Do they care that he will finish at all? You know it. Hopeless? There never was and never will be a hopeless dream.

Other members of the Hopeless class battled on during leg #2. Duke Dunsford's 250cc Ninja, the smallest bike in the field, holds close to a 1,000-point lead over George Zelenz' FJR1300. Steve Steller's Vespa motor scooter had a great second leg. He gained 705 points on Zelenz and closed the day just 92 points back of the FJR jockey. This fight promises to go right to the wire.

Beverly Ruffin, an accountant from Houston and a rookie, sought my advice at the start. "I'll make this easy for you," I said. "Whether you bust your ass or dog it from start to finish, you're going to finish in the bottom third of the pack. As your attorney, I advise dogging it. It has always worked for me." No, she's not going to win the Iron Butt either, but she gained six places on the second leg, stands 52nd overall, and will almost certainly finish in the top half of the field. So much for heeding sound legal advice.

Hans Karlsson, by eight years the most senior rider in Iron Butt Rally history, sadly has withdrawn. With hurricane Katrina bearing down on his home in New Orleans, and unable to reach his wife and son by telephone, he has been forced to abandon what was, win or lose, a magnificent effort. It is at least fitting that it took a catastrophic natural disaster to stop him. The rally couldn't do it, and it has stopped scores of people half Hans' age in the past.

Fourth from the bottom of those still chugging is Joe Mandeville, a rider of exceptional talent and determination. There are rallies where nothing goes right. This is that event for the California judge, starting with his recalcitrant GPS. "I've named it 'Sondra,' after my ex-wife," he says. "That [expletive deleted] sent me to more places I didn't want to go than I can count." He won't win the rally this year,

but that long ago ceased to matter. The IBA web site lists seven men as having ridden more than 100,000 miles in a single year. Joe's name is there, but he didn't need a year. He did it in under six months.

When the scores went up on the door this morning, one of the younger riders turned to me and smiled. "The guard is changing," he said. I knew what he meant, and he may be right.

Bob Higdon
Denver CO