

Riding Home

In 1999 Shane Smith rode to Daytona for Bike Week with Fran Crane from his home in McComb, Mississippi. They had been friends for several years, having first met on a Three Flags rally. Something about the way he rode appealed to her --- perhaps the three-minute gas stops or the 225 miles ridden without putting a foot down. On their last day together, as she prepared to head back to California, she looked at him and said, "I think one day you could win the Iron Butt Rally."

Their riding styles were similar, as was their focus and their approach to a big ride. They traded visits at least a couple of times a year, covering the 4,300-mile round-trip between Santa Cruz, California and southern Mississippi in a few days, as befits true long riders. Despite backgrounds that could not have been more dissimilar, they formed a bond that broke only with Fran's death later that year. At the memorial service for her, Shane could not get through two sentences before he broke down himself.

Tonight Fran's prediction came to pass: Her friend has won the Iron Butt Rally.

It was not the kind of event that suited him. This rally required some delicate planning, resembling not so much an eleven-day rally as eleven one-day rallies with each phase demanding a different kind of analysis. Sometimes the route would not be immediately obvious. It might reveal itself over the course of hours or even days. No, Shane and Fran preferred the big, long, simple ride, the one where all you do is aim the machine for a thousand miles in one direction, fill it with gas every few hours, take a photo of the bonus object, log the mileage, turn around, and repeat in reverse.

Lisa Landry and Mike Kneebone, who constructed the bonus maze for this year's rally, know that riders like Shane and Fran are not alone in their preference for a straightforward route. Look at the choices available to the riders on the first leg for this year: 1) Go to New Brunswick; 2) Go to Key West; or 3) Pick your way through a briar patch along the Pacific coast, stopping seven or eight times a day to pick up another cheap bonus. To make the choices even starker, they made the bonuses on the east coast worth a fortune and assigned pathetic little points to the array of stops in the west. It was irresistible not just to Shane but to two-thirds of the riders in the field. "I thought you said this was going to be hard," one rider (who shall remain mercifully nameless) chuckled to me as he headed out the parking lot for Key West.

He wasn't laughing quite so merrily four days later when the scores for the first leg were posted. The correct route had indeed been to the west: More bonuses with smaller individual values, but higher final scores and fewer miles ridden. The message had been written by Landry and Kneebone with red ink in 72-point type: You may have done it before on other rallies, but we guarantee that you will not hammer your way through this one. The final leg is going to be more complex than the one you just finished. Forewarned is forearmed, yes?

Well, not quite. In Maine the bonus listings for the last stage were not in their hot little hands for more than mere moments before a gaggle of riders headed straight for a 30,102-point bonus, by far the largest single item of value on the entire rally, on the shores of the Pacific ocean. Did not the bitter experience of Leg #1 mean anything? Wasn't it obvious that a little planning could produce far more points for a lot less work? Apparently not. And these were some of the best riders in the field who were storming west: leader Jim Owen, Kiecker's Wrecking Crew, Brett Donahue, George Barnes, Allen Dye, and many, many others.

For Owen the route choice was essentially immaterial. His leads of 3,500 points over Jeff Earls and almost 6,000 points over Eric Jewell could not realistically be overcome unless, as indeed was to happen, Owen failed to finish. But some planning would have revealed that a route sweeping up a series of bonuses in New Brunswick and North Carolina would, just as had occurred on the first leg, produce far more points with less mileage than anything else. It was Shane Smith's nightmare all over again. Every nerve in his body was screaming at him to head west. Then Rick Morrison grabbed him, tossed some maps on the floor of a garage at Reynolds Motorsports, and began plotting a route that could take his friend from sixth place to the top. They were almost the last two riders out of the parking lot, but they finally had a plan.

Smith needed more than just that, however. He needed to execute it. That would require tap dancing through unfamiliar roads in Canada, praying for clear sailing from New England to North Carolina, making ferry schedules in the Outer Banks, and slogging through the Blue Ridge mountains to bonus destinations in southern Virginia and West Virginia. He wasn't concerned about Jim Owen; he was trying to leapfrog over four other riders into 2nd place. Every mile and every minute counted. In the last 25 hours he covered more than 1,750 miles. He also crossed two rivers on ferries and climbed the steps to a lighthouse in Hannibal, Missouri, his last bonus of the 2005 Iron Butt. It had been a water-logged rally from the first day. It stayed that way to the very end.

At the closing ceremonies tonight Lisa called out the names of the finishers, from the bottom to the top. Interrupting the procession before the tenth-placed finisher, she paused to acknowledge the magnificent ride put in by one rider who, although leading from wire almost to wire, failed to finish at all: Jim Owen. I have been to seven of these closing banquets now, but this is the first time I have ever seen a standing ovation given to a rider who will return home without so much as a cheap medal for his trials and tribulations. He will remember the cheers and the clapping, however, and we will remember one of the smartest, efficient rides ever put together in the history of this series.

Canada's Peter Hooegeven finished tenth. It is, I think, his sixth top ten finish in seven tries, an unparalleled record of accomplishment. Eddie James ran hard to the end, slipping gently to ninth overall. Of all of the rallies the American Motorcyclist Association's director of road riding has run, this surely must rank as one of his happiest moments. Eric Jewell came in eighth, a disappointing finish for him. We hope he'll be back. In seventh place, with a final monster leg, was John Ryan. He climbed 15 places in the last four days of the rally, a truly incredible feat. We can only imagine what his score might have been had he chosen even a mediocre route on what was for him a disastrous second leg of the rally. In sixth place, a modest drop from his third overall finish in 2003, was one of the Minnesota Wrecking Crew's bright lights, Marty Leir, who survived a deer strike on the last night of the rally. He too will be back.

Calm, quiet, methodical book publisher Jack Savage, consistent from start to finish, regained fifth following the drops in position of Jewell and James. He had good route selections and no mistakes of any consequence, which is about all you can hope for in an endurance rally of this sort. Mark Kiecker, taking fourth, proved that his second place finish in 2003 was no fluke. He lost a 1,000-point gas bonus on the first leg. That stuffed him down in 29th place. Riding hard and smart on the second leg pumped him up to tenth. In the final four days he rode 5,485 miles, winding up with 13,354 miles altogether, three miles short of being a new record for the rally. The Crew's t-shirts proudly read, "Ride Harder/Not Smarter." It is perfect truth in advertising. But if Kiecker, Leir, Mills, and Conway can figure out how to

reverse that slogan, perhaps following the brilliant example of Jim Owen, they'll be dominating the podium at the finish of the Iron Butt for the next ten years.

Jeff Earls never faltered. Steady to the very end, he took the third spot overall. His route selection was superb on each leg. With exceptional efficiency --- he rode almost 2,400 fewer miles than Kiecker yet picked up 662 more points --- he vacuumed up more bonus points with fewer miles ridden than any other rider in the top ten. He has improved every year since 1999 (we're not counting a blown rear end on his BMW in 2003). That can spell only bad news for his long-distance brothers and sisters in 2007.

And then there were two, Chris Sakala and Shane Smith. From the first day to the last night they couldn't turn around without bumping into one another. In Maine Sakala led Smith by 787 points. That night Smith booted a bonus in New Brunswick, dropping father behind his rival. In North Carolina Sakala, hurrying for a ferry connection, had to bypass a lighthouse. His lead had dwindled to just over 500 points. Slowly Smith began putting distance between himself and Sakala. One hour's lead. Two. Three. Soon it became clear to Smith that with an extraordinary effort he could pick up two ferries and a lighthouse before dark of the last night on the road. As hard as he rode, Chris might get one of them, but he'd never get all three. By nightfall Smith had finally nailed down second place for keeps, just as he had done in 2001. Then Jim Owen, with an insurmountable lead, ground to a halt in Elko, Nevada, his transmission in hot pieces. Nearly a dozen hours remained, but the rally was over.

I mentioned a comment one of the riders made to me last Monday in Maine. "The guard is changing," he said, looking at the rider standings after the second leg. It was Andy Mills, one of the Minnesota Crew. He was not at the banquet tonight. Last night his bike went down on I-80 in Wyoming after hitting a tire carcass. Fortunately --- this rally has been absolutely blessed with good fortune --- Andy was not hurt. I was thinking of him tonight as the names of the finishers were called out. The remains of a truck tire on a dark night kept Mills from a top ten finish.

Motorcyclists are aging in the United States. Every study says the same thing. I have not done an analysis of the correlation of rider age and finishing position, but I am willing to bet that the younger riders in the Iron Butt Rally are finishing in steadily higher positions than they used to and that the older ones are taking corresponding lumps. The senior riders may try to jam the door closed, but those juniors are not going to be denied. Mills is right: the guard is changing. I don't have the slightest doubt.

It is changing in the rally's administration as well. Mike deferred the entirety of this event, basically from start to finish, to Lisa Landry. She found every bonus on the rally with the exception of a few trivial ones here and there. She coordinated everything. As Mike watched from the sidelines, his protegee put on an event that was as brilliantly executed as it was imaginative and rigorous. No rider is in any hospital tonight. No major horror story, failure, or oversight ever appeared at any time or at any phase of the event, absent Don Arthur's terrible wreck en route to Denver. Ms. Landry, a veteran manager of the 2003 IBR, can, and does, run this show from the center ring flawlessly. The job is hers for as long as she wants it.

And the guard will change for me as well. Since 1993, at the dawn of a primitive internet web, I first began reporting on progress of the rally to a few friends here and there. This is my sixth time behind the journalistic wheel, and I think the time has come for me to move over and let someone else take over the scribbler reins. I've enjoyed this . . . well, I was going to say "job," but it has never been that. Whatever it is, it's been enormous fun. I've helped the organization grow a bit, have had a chance to

meet some friends I can't do without, and have sat for many years now at the epicenter of one of the strangest games in the cosmos. Who could not yearn for such a bizarre experience? But I'd like to move on to something else before I start repeating myself. There are a lot of talented boys and girls who can stand in for me, just as seamlessly as Lisa has begun to stand in for Mike. We move along, just as the Book of Ecclesiastes suggests we should: seasons, time, and purpose change. We can't, and shouldn't, fight it. And the truth is I'm not going anywhere. I'll be at the rallies and at the gatherings and at wherever these unusual riders happen to be. I am one of them, God help me.

Shane and his fellow combatants will be heading out on a happier, easier ride tomorrow, back to their homes where they will be, as I've said before, welcomed as conquering heroes. It is entirely fitting that they should be. They've all faced down the beast and lived to tell about it. Shane may have the easiest ride of all. He's going back to wife Karen and daughter Sandy, the loves of his life. Hurricane Katrina left their home flooded and pounded. Karen waited in line for gasoline this morning for more than six hours. Life in the little town --- as fate would have it, my mother's home town and where I spent some of the first years of my life --- is unrecognizable these days. Think of the conflicts that Shane has had in this last week, hoping for the best at home and imagining the worst, as if the mental strain of the rally weren't agony enough.

It's almost over now. He can straight-line it all the way from Denver to McComb, just the way he likes it, just the way that he and Fran used to do it, flying through the night without a care in the world. Almost over. Almost.

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