

The 2007 Iron Butt Rally - Day -3

Friday, August 17, 2007

On the outskirts of St. Louis, the Doubletree Hotel in Chesterfield, Missouri is serving as the headquarters for the 2007 Iron Butt Rally. Riders have already begun arriving. On Saturday and Sunday, before facing the obstacles of the 11-day ride, they will be running a gauntlet of technical inspectors, document checkers, videographers, and public relations advisors. Today, many riders will be anxiously awaiting last minute maintenance and tire changes on their motorcycles which they have scheduled to have done by local motorcycle dealers that they are unfamiliar with. Others will be trying to fix problems with last minute modifications to their motorcycles that cropped up on their ride to St. Louis.

Facilities available to riders here at the hotel include two steam saunas. One is located in the Fitness Center; the other is in the parking lot. Yesterday, it hit 100° F with the humidity near 100%. Today, the high was only 94. Tomorrow, during tech inspection, it's supposed to drop all of the way down to a chilly 90°. There is a chance of thunderstorms this weekend, but the forecast looks good for the start of the Rally on Monday.

Unlike in previous years, riders will not be visiting checkpoints spread around the country. There is only one checkpoint and it's right back here in Chesterfield. After the riders leave at 10 a.m. on Monday morning, they will be on the road for about four and a half days before returning Friday night, August 24th. At 4:00 a.m. the next morning, they will receive their bonus listings for Leg 2. They will then be on the road until Friday morning, August 31st when they will once again return to Chesterfield for the finish. For the next two weeks, between now and the finishers' banquet, I'll be monitoring the Rally and preparing daily reports.

Two years ago, on the last day of the 2005 Iron Butt Rally, veteran Rally Scribe Bob Higdon wrote, "I think the time has come for me to move over and let someone else take over the scribbler reins." I remember thinking, "I pity the poor bastard who has to replace Higdon; that's a tough act to follow." It's going to be made even more difficult by the fact that there is only one checkpoint in this year's rally, giving me only one opportunity to see all of the riders between the start and the finish. The fact that the second leg of this year's rally is almost a week long will make it difficult to quickly prepare a written description of what transpired on leg two based on information collected at the finish.

Although a number of riders randomly call Rallymaster Lisa Landry's cellular phone during the course of the rally, I need a more systematic source of information that will let me know how everyone is doing, not just the riders who think they have the time to chat with Lisa. I remember reading about one rallymaster's attempt to keep tabs on riders by having them check in by telephone during the course of a 24-hour rally. It was an unmitigated disaster. Having dozens of riders calling the same phone number

resulted in lots of busy signals, missed messages, and hard feelings. I experimented with whether leaving messages in a cellular phone mailbox might work. In theory, a big cellular service provider would be able to accommodate dozens of people leaving messages in the same voice mailbox at the same time, right? Unfortunately, things often go haywire between theory and practice.

As explained by the comic strip character Dilbert, "The goal of every engineer is to retire without being blamed for a major catastrophe." To achieve this goal, engineers learn that you have to test things before you put them into service. After convincing myself that the Verizon Wireless voice mail system was developed by Lucas Electric, I've set up and tested a more reliable system to receive periodic reports from riders while they are on the road. 24 separate telephone lines are serving an IBR-dedicated voice mailbox back at my office in Sacramento. On three separate occasions, riders will be given the opportunity to earn big bonus points just by calling the number and leaving a brief message telling me where they are, where they have recently been, and where the next bonus is that they are heading for. I'll be including summaries of that information in my daily reports.

I will also be reporting on information I collect from Rallymaster Lisa Landry, IBA President Michael Kneebone, and numerous other IBR staff who make this event possible. Chief Technical Inspector Dale "Warchild" Wilson will undoubtedly have some amusing stories of rider efforts to get through tech inspection this weekend. Assisting Dale this year, will be LDRiders Listmeister Joe Denton, Art Montoya, Jim Peterson, and Bob Broeking. It always makes for some high drama when a motorcycle flunks tech inspection while the clock is ticking toward the end of the tech inspection window on Sunday.

Other IBR staffers I'll be working with this year include Jim and Donna Fousek, Dave McQueeney, Ed Otto, Dean Tanji, Roger and Karen Van Santen, Verne and Bonnie Hauck, Susan Murphy, Dennis Bitner, Bill Shaw, and my wife Helen Austin. They will be involved in various elements of the rider check-in process. Steve Hobart is also helping out. He told me his official duties consist of being Lisa's go-fer. Higdon is here too, preparing to give the annual benediction on Sunday night.

The IBR staffer who is sure to be the source of the most heartbreaking and amusing stories later in the rally is Ira Agins. Ira is running the scoring table this year. Hopefully, Ira will be able to report that someone has managed to top Michael Smeyers performance during the 2005 Rally when he rode all the way from Denver to Key West and back for a bonus photo that was missing his rally flag.

The ultimate source of the tales of triumph and tribulation during the next two weeks will be the riders themselves; they are an amazing group of people.

Only 326 people have ever finished the Rally since it was first held in 1984. 41 of the riders in this year's rally are returning veterans. More than half of the field will be riding the Iron Butt Rally for the first time.

The returning veterans include 1999 winner George Barnes, who is clearly capable of becoming the first two-time winner of the "modern" version of the Iron Butt Rally that was first run in 1991. (Under the old rally format with two dozen or fewer riders, George Egloff tied for first in 1984 and then won the 1985 Rally.) Another returning veteran is Jim Owen, who was denied victory in the 2005 rally by a mechanical failure only 12 hours from the finish. Other veterans who were top ten finishers in previous rallies include Eric Jewell, Chris Sakala, Jeff Earls, Marty Leir, Dick Fish, and Alan Barbic.

Most of the "rookies" in this year's rally are road-hardened veterans of numerous other endurance rallies and "extreme" Iron Butt Association rides who have worked long and hard for the chance to get to the starting grid. Steve Broadhead is a good example. He has done more than a dozen "Extreme" rides including twice completing a Bun Burner Gold "Trifecta" (riding 1500 miles in 24 hours three days in a row). This ride has also been completed by rookies John Tomasovitch and Curt Gran. They have demonstrated that they can do the miles. During the next two weeks we will find out how well they can handle something even more intimidating than three BBGs in a row: an Iron Butt Rally bonus listing.

Another rookie who is a potential top ten finisher is Alexander Schmitt. Alex won the 7-day Butt Lite rally last year, the rally that comes closer to the Iron Butt Rally than anything else.

At the other end of the experience spectrum, a few entrants have never competed in an endurance rally and never even completed a multi-day Iron Butt ride. Their acceptance into the rally is either the result of the element of chance involved in the drawing for positions or Michael Kneebone's twisted desire for personal amusement.

One of the endurance rally virgins is Alan Bennett, who will be riding the smallest bike in the Rally; a 250 cc Kawasaki Ninja. His lack of rally experience combined with his diminutive motorcycle put Alan in what is known as the "Hopeless Class." (It should be noted; however, that Leon "The Animal" Begeman rode a 250cc Ninja to 12th place in the 2003 Rally.)

Although he has competed in several 24-hour rallies, Mark Collins qualifies as a Hopeless Class entry by virtue of the motorcycle he is riding. Mark will be aboard a 1972 Harley-Davidson Electra Glide, a bike he has owned since 1979. It has 199,000 miles on the clock. The engine has been rebuilt twice; once at 80,000 miles and again at 150,000 miles. The transmission has also been through two rebuilds. Mark has upgraded the Glide with dual plug heads, an electronic ignition, an H4 headlight, and a Russell saddle. But, in keeping with the vintage of his ride, he is one of the only riders in the Rally that won't be using a GPS. He is also one of the few riders not running auxiliary fuel. Mark's bike was already safely tucked away in the parking lot this afternoon. It's out there on its side stand right now, leaking oil, so it's apparently running just like when it was new.

Although some would consider any motorcycle more than 30 years old to be in the Hopeless Class, Joel Rappoport would disagree. He will be riding the BMW R60/6 that he purchased new 31 years ago. It's the only motorcycle he has owned since then. When it crosses the starting line, it will have over 435,000 miles on it, but it's fresh from a rebuild of the engine, transmission, and rear end at 430,000 miles. Joel has also upgraded the bike from the original drum brakes to double disks up front. He has upgraded the charging system to 400 watts, which allows him to run extra lights and heated gear. The stock H-4 headlight bulb has been replaced with an HID low-beam. A long since discontinued Windjammer III fairing will keep him out of the wind. Two pair of HID auxiliary lights have also been added. He's not expecting to have any mechanical problems and he considers his bike "the most comfortable place on Earth." It's possible that the motorcycle is better prepared for the Rally than Joel, who has never before competed in an endurance rally.

Donald Jones rounds out the Hopeless Class entries. He has only finished one 24-hour rally and he is going to attempt to finish the Iron Butt Rally on a 1978 Honda GL1000 "Old Wing." In his application for the Rally, Don explained his choice of this bike by saying, "I like working on old things."

There are 10 women entered, 5 riding pillion and 5 piloting their own bikes. They are far from hopeless. The veteran pillion riders are Rosie Sperry (riding with husband Tom) and Donna Phillips (riding with husband Jim). The rookies are Silvie Torter (riding with husband Bob), Lisa Kappenberger (riding with husband Reiner), and Lynda Lahman (riding with husband Terry). All of these two-up entries have rally experience, but after their 11th place finish in the 2005 Iron Butt Rally, the Phillips would seem to have the best shot at a top ten finish.

Of the women riding their own bikes, Rebecca Vaughn, Karol Patzer, and Vicki Johnston are Iron Butt Rally veterans. The 2 rookies are Maura Gatensby and Lisa Stevens, both of whom have significant rally experience. Lisa, who finished second behind Jim Owen, in last year's 5-day SPANK rally, and Vicki, who has twice finished among the top 25 in the Iron Butt Rally, would seem to have the best shot at a top ten finish.

The wide range of rally experience described above is consistent with the wide range of life experiences represented by the entrants. The riders range in age from their late 20s to their early 80s! Based on my review of the applications, the youngest rider appears to be Andy Mills, who is 28. Andy is a Powertrain Test Engineer for Polaris Industries, the company that builds the Victory Vision he will be riding. Andy has been riding motorcycles for about 17 years, longer than many of the riders in this rally that are decades older. He's done well in many endurance rallies, including taking first place in the Minnesota 1000. He was doing very well during the 2005 Iron Butt Rally until a tangle with a tire carcass on the very last day.

The oldest is 81 year old Hans Karlsson, who will be piloting a 900 pound Gold Wing. To give you an example of how his age has been slowing him down, in the last 5 years Hans made a 32,000 mile trip from his home in Louisiana to the tip of South America and back; a 12,000 mile trip to Prudhoe Bay, Alaska and back; a 7,000 mile trip to Nova Scotia and back; a 16,000 mile tour of all 49 continental states; another 16,000 mile tour of Australia and New Zealand, and a 26,000 mile ride around the world, during which is rode in the U.S., Canada, Japan, Russia, Mongolia, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland, France, England, and Ireland. Just last year, he rode 25,000 miles while touring in Canada, Europe, and Africa.

The range of professions (or past professions for those who are retired) represented by this year's crop of riders is as broad as the range of ages. It includes accountants, advertising professionals, aircraft mechanics, airline pilots, air traffic controllers, architects, automotive parts and service department managers, chemists, chiropractors, college counselors, electricians, engineers, financial planners, firefighters, flight instructors, general contractors, geologists, graphic artists, gynecologists, heating and air conditioning contractors, information technology (IT) professionals, interior designers, investment advisors, janitors, journalists, lawyers, log home builders, machinists, management analysts, massage therapists, mechanics, military officers and personnel, motorcycle dealers, physician's assistants, pig farmers, police officers, portfolio managers, psychologists, psychotherapists, railroad workers, realtors, restaurant owners, sales managers, salesmen, software developers, stone masons, teachers, and truck drivers.

What brings this diverse group together is a common desire to compete in what has been billed as "The World's Toughest Motorcycle Competition." For some of them, the goal will be just to finish. Many others will be trying for a top 10 finish. More than a dozen riders probably think they have a shot at winning this thing. Some riders will undoubtedly have lowered their expectations by the time they are scored at the first checkpoint. Many riders will have lowered their expectations by the time they read the bonus listing for the first leg on Sunday night.

Tom Austin

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