

The 2009 Iron Butt Rally – Day -2
Saturday, August 22, 2009

Today was the primary day for tech inspection and rider check-in for the 14th running of the Iron Butt Rally. Several minor problems with auxiliary fuel system venting were identified that riders were able to correct. There are a few problems with registration and insurance paperwork that will hopefully be corrected before the start Monday morning. As expected, several riders lost their way on The Odometer Check From Hell, but, to my surprise, everyone eventually completed the course in no more than two attempts.

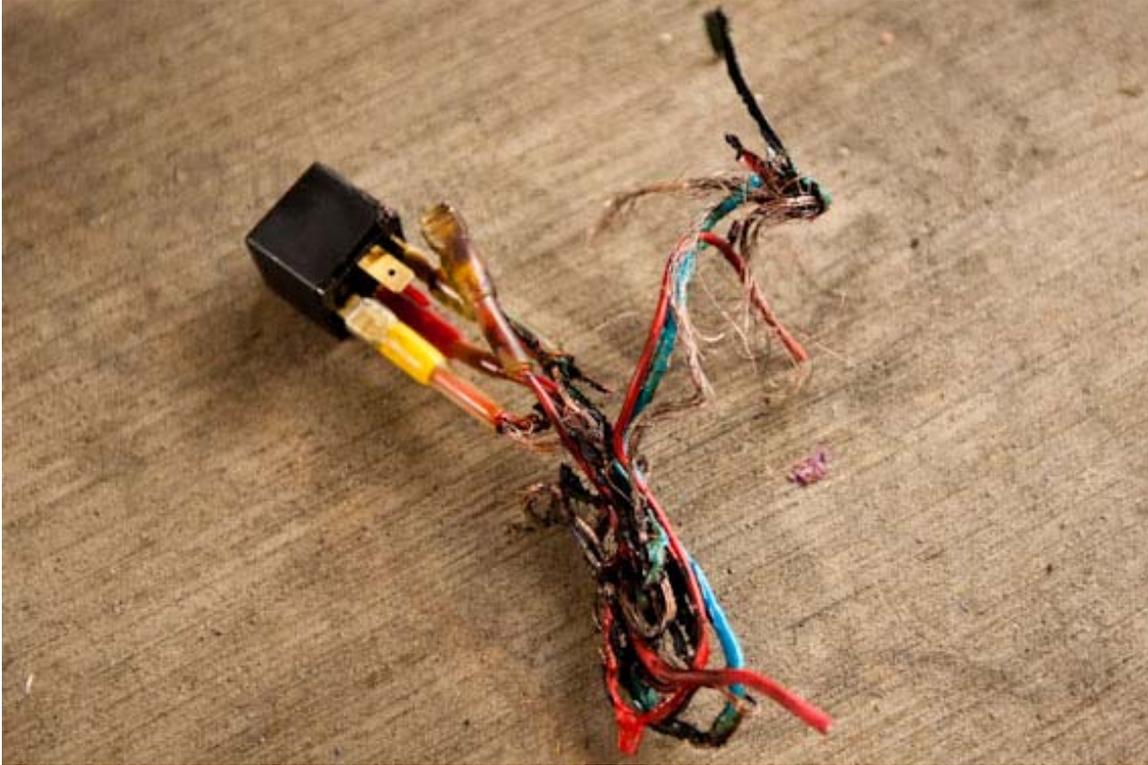


Lisa Stevens Checks the Odometer Reading as Bob and Sylvie Torter Prepare to Start the Odometer Check from Hell

The most serious problem identified so far showed up last night before the start of the official Tech Inspection process. Jim Owen, 2nd place finisher in the 2007 Rally, wanted to make a last-minute adjustment to the top case on his BMW R1200RT that required him to remove the seat. To his horror, he found the auxiliary electrical system in the middle of a melt down. Sparks were arcing, insulation was burning, and an electrical relay was melting. A wire from the positive terminal of the battery was poorly routed causing insulation to be worn off and resulting in a short circuit. (Owen's unparalleled reputation for routing clearly doesn't apply to electrical systems.) Fortunately, this

problem appears to have been caught mere seconds before irreparable damage had been done. With the assistance of Tom Sperry, a more mechanically inclined fellow rider, an all new wiring harness was fabricated and the bike is no longer emitting sparks or smoke.

Jim Owen's Auxiliary Wiring System



The Bikes

After the smoke cleared from Jim Owen's wiring mishap, it could be seen that the parking lot of the Marriott Hotel in Spartanburg, South Carolina, was filled with motorcycles awaiting technical inspection. These are not the same motorcycles usually seen at events where large numbers of motorcyclists gather. Although "cruiser" -style motorcycles are currently the best sellers, none are entered in this rally. There are also no motorcycles with obnoxiously loud exhaust systems. The Iron Butt Rally is about efficiently riding long distances and cruiser-style motorcycles with loud exhaust systems are ill-suited for this task.

The most popular motorcycles among long distance riders are in the "touring," "sport-touring," or "dual sport" category. Among the pure touring bikes, the most popular model by far is the Honda Gold Wing; a total of 20 GL1800 Gold Wings are entered. One 1981 vintage Gold Wing is a touring motorcycle that now fits into the "Hopeless" class. Other pure touring models include 5 BMW K1200LTs, a Victory Vision, and a Harley-Davidson FLHT.

In the sport-touring category, the most popular model is the Yamaha FJR1300, which is the choice of 19 riders this year. The second most popular sport-touring model is the Honda ST1300, the choice of 11 riders. Three riders will be on the older, but still competitive ST1100. 15 riders will be on BMW sport-touring models, 4 on K1200GTs, 7 on R1200RTs, and 4 on R1150RTs. Two riders will be on Kawasaki Concours 14s and one on an older Concours. The lone Moto Guzzi (Norge) and Triumph (Trophy) are also sport-touring models.

The most popular dual-sport models are the BMW GSs. 10 riders will be on R1200GS or GS Adventure models and 3 on the older 1150 cc GS. One Kawasaki KLR 650 is entered, the only single-cylinder motorcycle in the Rally.

There are just a few bikes that don't fall into the touring, sport-touring, dual-sport mold. There are two sport bikes, a Honda CBR1100XX and a Kawasaki ZX12R. There are two 1970's vintage Suzuki RE5 rotary engine models that are probably best classified as "standard" models, but now fit solidly in the "Hopeless" class.



1976 Suzuki RE-5 Rotary Engine-Powered Motorcycle

The oldest motorcycle entered this year is a BMW R60/6 that was purchased new by its rider 33 years ago. This was marketed as a touring motorcycle back before any production motorcycles were sold with fairings. When it crosses the starting line on Monday morning, it will have over 512,000 miles on the odometer. Most would consider

this bike hopeless, but I think it has a good a chance of finishing as any other BMW entered in the rally and all of the IBR staff are rooting for this bike and its rider.

The two makes that have the most dramatic difference between their U.S. market share and their percentage of the bikes on the starting grid are BMW and Harley. Harley, which has about 30% of the highway motorcycle market in the U.S., is the choice of only one rider. In contrast, BMW, which has about 1% of the U.S. market, is the choice of 35% of the riders.

There are two reasons for the lack of interest in Harleys among this crowd; the ergonomics of most Harley models are all wrong for long distance comfort and the company doesn't enjoy the same reputation other brands have in the areas of handling, braking, reliability, and performance.

BMW's over-representation on the starting line is also due to a combination of factors; BMWs are relatively light weight motorcycles with great brakes, great ride and handling, excellent ergonomics, and good fuel economy. The company has also enjoyed a reputation for durability and reliability. But that reputation is fading among long distance riders.

The four BMW final drive failures that occurred in the 2007 Iron Butt Rally are having an effect on hardware choices this year. Another K1200GT rider, Jeff Earls, will actually be carrying a spare final drive with him. Long time BMW rider Eric Jewell has taken an even more effective step to minimize the risk of having his ride end with a final drive failure; he sold his BMW and purchased a Honda ST1300. Tom and Rosie Sperry, who have been riding BMWs 2-up for many years, have adopted the same strategy. After experiencing a final drive failure on their K1200LT following the last Iron Butt Rally, they switched to a Honda Gold Wing.

While BMW continues to claim that there is no significant problem with its final drives, a number of long-time BMW riders disagree and are switching brands. BMW's reputation for building the most reliable motorcycles has been damaged within the long distance riding community. More long distance riders now consider motorcycles made by Honda and Yamaha to be inherently more durable than those produced by BMW. How many riders show up on BMWs in 2011 probably depends on whether there are DNFs caused by mechanical failures this year.

The percentage of Iron Butt Rally riders on BMWs has dropped to 35% this year, down from 43% in 2007. Due in part to several BMW riders switching to Hondas, the percentage of riders on Hondas has increased from 28% to 36%. Yamaha has 19% of the entries, up several percent from 2007.

The Riders

Experience indicates that about 100 is a manageable number of riders for the Iron Butt Rally. More than 100 riders cause unacceptable delays in check-in, scoring, and the all important review of the documentation for the top riders before the final awards banquet. In recent years, the popularity of the Rally has been such that significantly more than 100

riders apply. The process used to select among the applicants has been designed to ensure variety.

All applications are initially divided into five categories, the smallest of which is for entrants selected at the discretion of the Rallymaster and the President of the Rally. Historically, this category has primarily been used to ensure that a few antique or otherwise “hopeless” motorcycles are given a chance. The discretionary category is occasionally used to ensure that an individual considered particularly deserving of a position will be in the field.

Except for the few discretionary positions, all other entries are divided into three categories: (1) Iron Butt Rally veterans, (2) IBA Premier Members, and (3) other new riders. (“Premier Members” are those members of the IBA who pay \$40 per year for a special membership status that includes a newsletter and will soon include a quarterly magazine.) Applications in each category go into separate boxes. About 35 envelopes are initially drawn from the veterans’ box. If more than 35 veterans apply, the remaining applications from veterans are mixed in with the applications in the box for “other new riders.” Next, about 35 applications are drawn from the box for “Premier” members. If more than 35 Premier members apply, the remaining applications from Premier members are also mixed into the box with applications from other new riders. A final drawing of about 35 applications from the last box is then made.

Because of the rider selection process, Iron Butt Rally riders fall into several distinct categories. At one end of the spectrum are experienced endurance riders with the proven ability to maintain a 1,000 mile a day pace, to select a good route from a complicated bonus listing, to navigate the route efficiently, and to avoid making stupid mistakes. Their goal is either to win or place very highly. They will be pushing themselves to their personal limits. At the other end of the spectrum are relatively inexperienced riders, many of whom will end up withdrawing from the rally once they find out that they have bitten off more than they can chew.

Only 364 people have ever finished the Rally since it was first held in 1984. 40 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. Several riders have tried before but failed to achieve finisher status, sometimes because they didn’t score enough bonus points.

The returning veterans include 1999 winner George Barnes, who recently moved to the State of Washington, and 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.) Barnes won the 1999 rally riding a BMW and he will be on a BMW K1200LT this year.

Another returning veteran is Jim Owen from Pennsylvania, who finished 2nd in 2007 and who was denied victory in the 2005 rally by a mechanical failure only 12 hours from the finish. Jim will be riding the same BMW R1200RT he rode in 2007, but with a freshly re-wired auxiliary electrical system for his accessories.

Other veterans who were top ten finishers in previous rallies include Californians Eric Jewell (riding a Honda ST1300) and Alan Barbic (riding a Honda ST1300); Chris Sakala from Maryland (riding a BMW R1200RT); Jeff Earls from Oregon (riding a BMW K1200GT); Mike Evans from New York (riding a Yamaha FJR1300); Tom Loftus from Virginia (riding a Honda ST1300); and Greg Marbach from Arizona (riding a Yamaha FJR1300).

The other returning veterans are:

Paul Allison (United Kingdom) riding a Honda GL1800;
Kendall Anderson (South Carolina) riding a Moto Guzzi Norge;
Jim Bain (South Carolina) riding a BMW K1200LT;
Dave Biasotti (California) riding a BMW R1150RT;
Richard Buber (Florida) riding a BMW R1150RT;
John Ferber (Canada) riding a BMW R1200GSA;
Jim Frens (New Hampshire) riding a Honda GL1800;
Art Garvin (Ohio) riding a Honda GL1800;
Kevin Healey (Florida) riding a Triumph Trophy;
Mike Hutsal (Canada) riding a Honda ST1300;
Vance Keeney (Nevada) riding a BMW K1200GT;
Terry and Lynda Lahman (Washington) riding a Honda GL1800;
John Langan (California) riding a Honda GL1800;
Mike Langford (North Carolina) riding a BMW K1200LT;
Bob Lyskowski (New Hampshire) riding a Harley FLHT;
Gerhard Memmen-Kreuger (Germany) riding a Honda GL1800;
Rick Miller (Maryland) riding a Honda GL1800;
Andy Mills (Minnesota) riding a Victory Vision;
Bob Mutchler (California) riding a BMW R1150RT;
Rick Neeley (Colorado) riding a Honda GL1800;
Glenn Pancoast (Michigan) riding a BMW R1200RT;
Dick Peek (Utah) riding a Yamaha FJR1300;
Dennis Powell (Iowa) riding a Honda GL1800;
Brian Roberts (Nevada) riding a Honda ST1300;
Rick Sauter (Canada) riding a Honda GL1800;
Thane Sillicker (Canada) riding a Honda ST1100;
Tom and Rosie Sperry (California) riding a Honda GL1800;
Bob St. George (Massachusetts) riding a Yamaha FJR1300;
Bill Thweatt (North Carolina) riding a Honda ST1300;
Bob and Sylvie Torter (Montana) riding a BMW K1200GT; and
Matt Watkins (Washington) riding a Yamaha FJR1300.

Seven riders with previous Iron Butt Rally experience who are trying again to achieve finisher status are:

David Bourdeaux (Indiana) riding a Honda GL1800;
Bob Collin (Maine) riding a BMW R1200RT;
Maura Gatensby (Canada) riding a Honda ST1300;
Chris McGaffin (Ireland) riding a Yamaha FJR1300;

Jim Mulcahy (Oklahoma) riding a Yamaha FJR1300;
Joel Rappoport (North Carolina) riding a BMW R60/6 (512,000 miles!); and
Bill Wade (New Jersey) riding a BMW R1200GSA.

These riders learned a lot in 2007 and stand a much better chance of finishing this year.

54 entrants competing in the Iron Butt Rally for the first time are:

Jennyfer Audet (Canada) riding a Honda CBR1100XX;
Jeff and Milinda Bakker (Colorado) riding a Honda GL1800;
Phil Becker (Minnesota) riding a Honda ST1100;
Peter Behm (Minnesota) riding a Yamaha FJR1300;
Barry Bertram (Illinois) riding a Suzuki RE5;
Tom Bisagni (New York) riding a Yamaha FJR1300;
Charlie Clemmer (Texas) riding a BMW R1200RT;
Bob Collins (Texas) riding a Honda GL1800;
Mark Crane (California) riding a BMW R1200GSA;
Wendy Crockett (California) riding a Yamaha FJR1300;
Derek Dickson (Minnesota) riding a Yamaha FJR1300;
Mark Dieck (California) riding a Yamaha FJR1300;
Kurt Dix (Florida) riding a Kawasaki Concours;
Bob Elliott (Georgia) riding a BMW R1200GS;
Don Fitzgerald (California) riding a Yamaha FJR1300;
Jeff and Carol Fremder (Wisconsin) riding a BMW R1150RT;
Chuck Gittner (Florida) riding a BMW K1200LT;
Bo Griffin (Texas) riding a BMW R1200GSA;
Alex Harper (California) riding a Suzuki RE5;
David Hicks (California) riding a Yamaha FJR1300;
Tony Hudson (South Carolina) riding a Honda ST1300;
Brian Jack (Washington) riding a BMW R1150GS;
Gary Jarl (Canada) riding a BMW R1200RT;
Davo Jones (Australia) riding a Kawasaki Concours 14;
John Jordan (Washington) riding a BMW R1150GSA;
Kent Kidwell (Virginia) riding a BMW R1200RT;
Andy Kirby (Massachusetts) riding a Honda ST1300;
Scott LaShier (Virginia) riding a Honda ST1300;
Kevin Lechner (Georgia) riding a Honda ST1300;
Joseph Leggett (Wisconsin) riding a BMW R1200GSA;
David Legnosky (California) riding a Honda GL1800;
Bob Lilley (Pennsylvania) riding a BMW K1200LT;
Ken Meese (California) riding a BMW K1200GT;
Terry Neale (California) riding a Yamaha FJR1300;
Buford Neeley (Mississippi) riding a Yamaha FJR1300;
David Nelson (Minnesota) riding a Honda GL1800;
Nancy Oswald (Maryland) riding a BMW R1200GS;
Winston Oxley (Texas) riding a BMW R1150RS;
Margaret Peart (Australia) riding a BMW R1200GS;
David Porter (New Mexico) riding a Yamaha FJR1300;

Bill Rauschenberg (New York) riding a BMW R1200GSA;
Greg Rice (Florida) riding a Honda GL1800;
David Riley (New Hampshire) riding a Honda GL1800;
Larry Scalzitti (Illinois) riding a BMW R1150GS;
Stephen Short (Missouri) riding a Honda GL1800;
Roger Sinclair (Virginia) riding a BMW Concours 14;
Kevin Smart (Michigan) riding a Honda GL1100;
John Stanforth (Ohio) riding a Honda GL1800;
Sal Terranova (New York) riding a Honda ST1100;
Jacques Titolo (Canada) riding a Kawasaki ZX12R;
Neil Ward (Canada) riding a Kawasaki KLR650;
Doug Webb (California) riding a BMW R1200GSA;
Jerry White (California) riding a Yamaha FJR1300; and
Chris Whitmore (Maine) riding a Yamaha FJR1300

One of the “rookies” in this year’s rally with a good shot at winning is Ken Meese. Meese was offered a slot in this year’s rally due to his extraordinary string of four victories in shorter endurance events earlier this year. However, Ken is no stranger to multi-day rallies. Last year, he came within an eyelash of winning the 7-day SPANK rally. With more points in hand than eventual winner Matt Watkins, Ken became a DNF (did not finish) when the final drive on his BMW K1200GT failed just over 200 miles from the finish line. Meese is taking a chance on the same bike in this rally. But, like Jeff Earls, he will be carrying a spare final drive.

The Hopeless Class

Alex Harper and Barry Bertram will be riding mid-1970’s vintage Suzuki RE-5s, the same rotary engine model that was ridden to a tie for first place by George Egloff in the 1984 Iron Butt Rally. Bertram’s bike appears to have been meticulous restored. Based on the way it looks, it could finish. (However, looks can be deceiving, and Bertram has never competed in a rally before.) In contrast, Harper’s bike looks like it will be lucky to make the first checkpoint. However, Harper has previous rally experience.

I suppose Kevin Smart also has to be put in the Hopeless Class with his 1982 Honda GL1100. Kevin at least has some rally experience and GL1100s are fairly durable bikes if properly maintained.

In 2007, Joel Rappoport was in the Hopeless Class with his BMW R60/6. This year, Joel will be making his second attempt to become an Iron Butt Rally finisher aboard the same bike that he purchased new 33 years ago. It’s the only motorcycle he has owned since then. When it crosses the starting line, it will have over 512,000 miles on it. It’s probably the most reliable BMW entered in the rally. I’m betting on Joel to be a finisher this year. Neither he nor the bike are hopeless.

Women and 2-Up Teams

There are 10 women entered, 5 riding pillion and 5 piloting their own bike. The veteran pillion riders are Rosie Sperry (riding with husband Tom), Silvie Torter (riding with husband Bob), and Lynda Lahman (riding with husband Terry). The rookies are Carol Fremder (riding with husband Jeff) and Milinda Bakker (riding with husband Jeff). All of these two-up entries have rally experience, but the Lahmans and the Sperrys are the most likely gold medal category finishers.

Of the women riding their own bike, none have ever finished an Iron Butt Rally. Maura Gatensby rode in the 2007 rally, but didn't score enough points to qualify as a finisher. She is determined not to let that happen this year. Nancy Oswald has rally experience, as does Margaret Peart and Jennyfer Audet. Wendy Crockett is the only woman without rally experience, but her 50,000 mile per year average has to be near the highest among all of the riders.

The Media Seminar

The highlight of the day, at least for some riders, was the media seminar at 2 p.m. This is the event at which riders are given advice on how to respond to any press at the checkpoints or the finish and, more specifically, how to avoid being baited into answering questions designed to make it appear as though the Iron Butt Rally is about high-speed riding in a sleep-deprived state. The same kind of information was provided this year, but there was an important addition.

Bob Higdon kicked off the seminar with a few choice comments about the cavalier attitude being demonstrated by more than a few riders who have been planning on doing a series of blog posts during the course of the rally. In his typical diplomatic fashion, Bob gently advised the riders that Rally staff are not pleased with the tone or the content of the pre-rally posts. More importantly, Bob made the point that some of the riders don't seem to understand that safely completing this rally requires 100% of a rider's concentration. Riders were advised in the strongest possible terms to forget about blogging or Twittering until the Rally is over.

Tomorrow

Following the completion of tech inspection and rider check-in, the riders meeting is at 2:00 tomorrow afternoon. The pre-rally banquet begins at 5:30. The first leg bonus listing will probably be handed out by about 6:30 p.m. Riders will then have to make the first important decision of this rally: How much time to spend optimizing their route for Leg 1 and much time to leave for sleep.

Tom Austin

August 22, 2009

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