

The 2013 Iron Butt Rally: Day 1

On Your Mark

Iron Butt Rally starts are in two stages: 1) At 0800 the rider's I.D. card and starting odometer are recorded by the tech crew; and 2) At 1000 the first rider departs. Since 1999 Dale Wilson's instructions to the troops at the riders' meeting on the afternoon before the start of the rally have never varied: "Be at your bike at 8:00 a.m. tomorrow morning with your rider I.D. card and the keys to the bike. We will record your odometer. Remember: your card and your keys."

Four years ago Mark Crane was by his bike, keys in hand, at the appointed time. Wilson asked for Crane's I.D. card. "Yes," Mark replied, "that would be in my hotel room." For that abridgement of the rules Mark was placed in the penalty box, which meant that he was not permitted to leave the start until five minutes after the last rider had departed.

This year he sailed through Step #1 without a hitch, but when the riders were warming up their bikes at 0955, Mark's machine was still covered and he was nowhere to be seen. Dale Wilson wasn't about to interrupt his starting drill. He turned to seven bikes that sat in a column in the middle of the hotel's parking lot. They would be the first riders out of the gate. To achieve that honor the seven men had agreed a few days ago to have their heads shaved in varying horrific designs by Wilson and his staff. The two . . . er, winners --- each with reverse Mohawks and other spectacularly ugly touches --- were Matt Watkins and Rex LeGalley.



Matt Watkins and the author



Rex LeGalley

Precisely at 10:00 a.m. Wilson pointed at Watkins and motioned him forward. Ira Agins, one of the IBR staff, took a video of Wilson dancing around the wet lot like a Filipino traffic cop during the next 260 seconds:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Lh2piuQg9U&feature=youtu.be>

A few minutes after the last rider had left the flight deck, Mark Crane sauntered out of the hotel, helmet in hand. Where had he been? "Well, I had a choice," he admitted with a smile. "I could be five minutes late or I could have a divorce." He's used to adversity. Two years ago one of the few requirements for being considered a finisher of the rally was to get a gas receipt from each of the 48 contiguous states. Inexplicably, Crane came within 100 yards of entering Mississippi but somehow managed to miss it altogether. The mistake turned what would have been a third overall finish into a DNF.

As he walked unhurriedly toward his bike this morning, some people began to chant: One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi. It's part of the game. When you screw the pooch on the Iron Butt, people tend to remember it for a long, long time.

Get Set

As rallymaster, Lisa Landry's principal job, once the rally is underway, is to field distress calls from anxiety-stricken riders. Three hours into the event today she had already received 18 of them. The first was from Donald Jones. He said that he assumed that Lisa was in possession of his camera and rally flag. "Why would I have them?" she asked. He replied that he had carefully loaded them into a pocket of his jacket with hook-and-loop fasteners in the hotel room last night, that they could not have come out of the pocket during the ride, and that therefore they must be in the hotel room. Lisa checked with housekeeping. Nothing was in the room. Lisa called Jones back and told him to take his coat off, lay it on the ground, and go through each pocket, one at a time. He protested that he'd already done that. Landry, who raised four children and knows something about obdurate behavior, told him to do it again. "Oh," he said a few moments later. "There they are."

The next ten calls were from Alex Schmitt. He had initially called because the ship at the Erie Maritime Museum that he was supposed to photograph was not there. Lisa reminded Alex that the object in question --- a tall ship that participates in Great Lake regattas --- would not be available until July 4th. "And today is not July 4, is it?" she asked. Alex agreed that it was not. The other nine calls from him are apparently due to some sort of Bluetooth malfunction that we hope he will be able to rectify while he waits for the ship to show up.

In mid-afternoon Steve McCaa --- pronounced "McKay" --- called Lisa to advise that one of the exhibits at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan had

been placed in storage. “No worries, Steve,” Lisa said brightly. “You’re in great shape as long as no one else finds it.” The museum is clearly a must-do on the first leg, a bonus worth 1,666 points. More than 80% of the field seems to be heading for it. Once there the riders have to find and photograph 25 different exhibits, including such things as the Oscar Mayer Wienermobile and a Douglas DC-3 airplane. The museum is roughly the size of the island of Guam. Screw up one photograph and you are docked 10% of the available points. Miss two of them and you get nothing. Seventeen minutes after his first call, McCaa called back to say that he had found the mislaid object.

I could go on, because with 96 bikes running around today like hydrogen atoms in an empty universe, there really is no appreciable end to the trouble they can unearth. But I need to save a half-dozen things for tomorrow’s report.

Go

Most of the riders are carrying Spot tracking units that reveal their locations to the rally staff. All of the riders yesterday were issued memory sticks that had the map coordinates of all the bonuses in the rally. The staff is thus able to see not only where riders are at any given time, but can guess with pretty fair certainty what bonuses they’ve picked up and where they will be heading next. In the worrisome case of a rider whose track suddenly stops moving, we are theoretically capable of initiating some sort of response.

During part of the afternoon I began to watch Mark Crane’s bread crumb trail creeping through Pennsylvania. True, luck hasn’t been too kind to him in recent rallies, but he’s now on almost everyone’s list for a Top Ten finish. It seems that Tom Austin’s array of bonus locations does not include a single site in the State of Mississippi, and that can only be good news for the rider who is usually the last one out of the gate.

And the clock ticks on. One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi ...

Bob Higdon