

## **The 2013 Iron Butt Rally: Epilogue**

### **Oh, Canada, Wherein the Scribe Confesses Moderate Error**

We were watching an episode of *Downton Abbey* last night --- the one in which Lord Grantham's virginal and socially progressive youngest daughter elopes to Gretna Green to marry the family's chauffeur, Branson, an Irish Bolshevik so self-righteous that every time he appears in a scene you want to smack him in the face with a pie --- when the answer to the unified field theory appeared to me.

I wrote in the last post, "There are a lot of debatable points in this rally but whether riding to Canada on the final leg was a good idea is clearly not one of them." That statement is not entirely accurate. True, for three of the highly-placed riders at the end of leg two --- Matt Watkins, Alex Schmitt, and John Coons --- the northern route would prove to be a loser. Each of them dropped a few positions on the concluding leg. But twelve other riders also ventured north, and nine of them gained ground on the field in so doing.

It is probably fairer to say that if you were not in contention for a high finish, riding to Canada didn't matter much one way or the other. The problem was that in order to sweep up every possible bonus you'd have to ride almost 5,100 miles, cross into and out of Canada, and spend nearly four hours on a ferry. Only two riders on the last leg had mileages that high, Bob Lilley and J. P. Mountain, and the latter's was a monster, well-focused ride to Key West that jumped him seven places on the last leg to a 2nd overall finish.

Bob Lilley, however, is the kind of rider we try to warn rookies about: He went to Canada, true, but he skipped the biggest bonus up there and then rode to the finish by way of Arkansas, Mississippi, and Alabama. Only two riders, 63rd and 65th overall, were more inefficient on the last leg than Bob. I admit that he gained 20 places on the last leg, but he is such a talented rider that if he'd thrown darts at a map to select his route he probably would have finished higher still.

So if Canada was such a Venus fly trap, why did three top ten guys go there? Matt Watkins from Washington and John Coons from Minnesota headed north to avoid the southwest's mind-numbing heat. They are physiologically not made to endure it. Their route was not a choice; it was the absence of choice.

Alex Schmitt said that in past rallies there usually had been a time-sensitive bonus that was reachable only if the rider acted as quickly as possible after receiving the route package. He saw the eight big bonuses in the northwest, immediately eliminated Key West as a sucker, and took off without another blink. He figured that the remainder of the route would become apparent to him as the rally unfolded. This sort of routing by revelation and intuition is practiced by the Zen master Rick Morrison, so don't be too quick to dismiss it out of hand. In this

instance it didn't quite gain Alex the edge that he hoped, but that may be because Tom Austin, who picked the bonuses, is an engineer and not a mystic.

We don't focus enough on the problem facing Alex and the other 89 riders as they were handed the bonus listing for the final leg of the rally. A lot of smart people who had access to endless sources of rally data may not have figured out the perfect path through that last leg even now, days after the rally's conclusion. I myself have spent a couple of weeks wrestling with combinations and permutations through spreadsheets, mapping software, and scientific calculators until I grow dizzy at the thought of spending another moment at it.

How then can a rider like Alex Schmitt be expected to come even close to a competent solution when he is given but 30 minutes or so to unravel the puzzle? Let us not forget also that he is laboring in a motel room with the clock ticking and his adrenal glands growing to the size of softballs. I don't know how they do it; I doubt that most of them do either. Might this remain one of the unexplained mysteries of the universe, like why men have nipples?

For the last 30 years of his life Albert Einstein sought to integrate his theory of relativity and electromagnetism into what he called a unified field theory. It would explain everything, including the ideal route from Rancho Cordova to the Marriott in Cranberry Township with 81 optional stops along the way. As I mentioned above, the solution to Professor Einstein's quandary came to me last night as I was preparing to throw another pie at Branson, but I seem now to have misplaced my notes. I am sure they will turn up.

### **Returning to Reality**

For the two weeks of the rally Lisa Landry's ICE book, *in case of emergency*, was never more than an arm's length away. It has the telephone numbers that she must call when a rider is down, out, or both. She wouldn't be concerned with people like Eric Jewell and Tom Loftus. They've got 15+ Iron Butt rallies in their wakes, and nothing ever happens to them. No, she would be thinking about rookies, and Hopeless Class rookies above all.

Kurt Worden was aboard the rally's smallest bike, a 250cc Kawasaki Ninja. That's a tough row to hoe. He wouldn't finish. Robert Koeber's '86 Honda XBR500 single was the second oldest and second smallest machine in the field. The German rider picked it over newer, bigger machines because it had never failed him. In Sacramento it finally did. Scott Thornton was almost a DNF after losing his camera on the second leg; his '78 Yamaha XS1100 lost only a little oil.

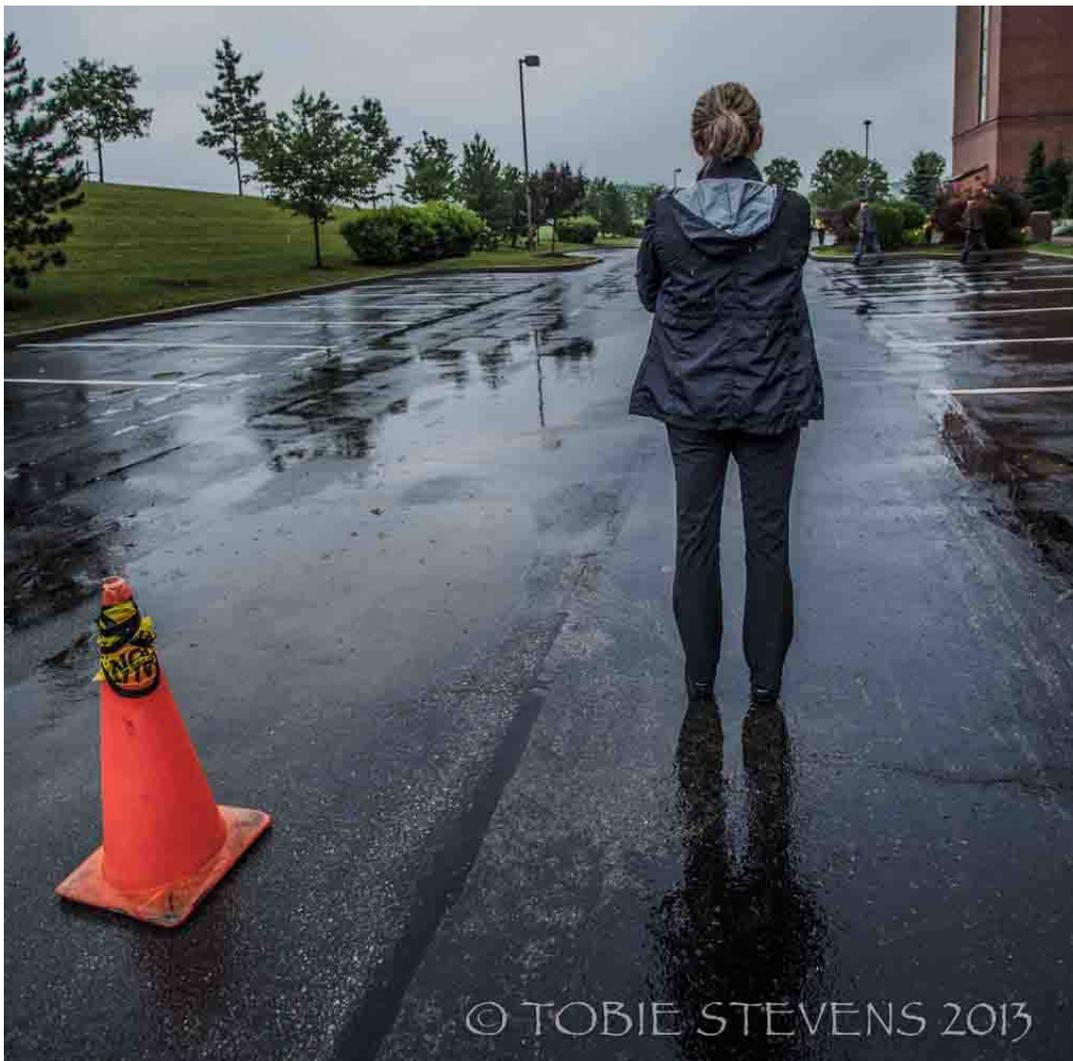
A rider never far from the brink, Sal Terranova, was never far from Lisa's thoughts. No one dodged so many bullets during the rally, yet he gained 31

places on the final leg. I can still hear the cheers and see his futile efforts to compose himself as he received his plaque. It's over, Sal. You did it.

And we can at last stop worrying about Ian McPhee, the Australian who lives and works in Africa. From beginning to end he was the prototypical median rider, like Goldilocks, finishing with a silver medal for his 29th place. Since 1986 he has been putting away money for these eleven days in July, an obsession that can now be put to rest. "Was it worth all you gave it, and all it took?" I asked. It was.

This is a thing unto itself, this rally. A black hole, it consumes everything that foolishly goes near it. How is it possible to long again for something that greedy and all-consuming? I'm not sure, yet we do. And so the next two-year wait begins for the riders, their families, the staff, and especially for Mrs. Landry.

But she, in a way different from the rest of us, is used to waiting.



Bob Higdon