

Darkness

Darkness may come in many forms. The darkness being considered here cannot be pierced by the best LED driving lights or an infra-red FLIR unit. Although tonight, the remaining riders will be hoping their lumens will last long enough to burn a hole through the darkness and lead them home. No, the darkness being considered is different from just turning away from the sun.

Families and friends may be in the dark. Even with trackers and cell phone calls, they can't know everything happening with their loved ones. Fans and spectators are almost always in the dark. Unlike family members and rally staff, they do not have access to the actual rider locations and tend to resort to speculation on the time delay and random number rotation on the public Spotwalla page. They may also be in the dark as a result of the scribe being unable to reveal much in the way of rally details. A frustrating reality for everyone, but considered necessary as a result of the architecture of this rally to avoid undue influence on the outcome.

Riders may be in the dark because of the lack of knowledge regarding what other riders are doing. Speaking from experience, riders can be in the dark physically because tonight will seem to be an interminably long ordeal as they focus to remain alert and finish safely. The anticipation of sweet relief calls them home. The tension and pressure may increase for some as they get close to the finish and their mind begins to think about all the things that could go wrong to thwart their dreams. Others may already be transitioning into celebration mode as they are about to realize a dream come true.

Some riders may be in the dark mentally because they know by this point in the rally they are not going to be finishers. The past 14 months of planning, excitement, anticipation, and more planning have faded as the hoped-for outcome is evaporating with each tick of the clock. This is perhaps the worst of the potential dark states. Some may find a way to shake it off, as they look back on their rides and realize they gave it their best shot and it just did not work out. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Some will carry a portion of this darkness on their shoulders for two years, especially if they have not yet earned a 3-digit number, until they hopefully get a chance to redeem themselves.

The minimum target to be a finisher of the IBR is 80,000 total points. For Leg 1, the threshold target was 16,000 points. Of the riders remaining in the rally as of last Sunday and departing Kennewick, there were 23 riders below the 16,000 point target. Those riders desperately needed to find a way to get more points during the time remaining in the rally. How many will be successful?

Disappointment

The Thursday morning reports from the field are not what the rally staff wanted to hear. Kit Chunhawong is out of the rally. He is OK and his FJR is fine, but he called to acknowledge he was too tired and too far from the finish to make it in time. He is heading home to Utah.

Marc Bialt is out with a failed BMW fuel pump on his 2017 BMW R1200GS. Not even a warranty helps when the parts are not available for a timely repair under rally conditions. There is speculation that

perhaps BMW has changed the design service life for some components to be only slightly longer than the 36 month warranty.

JD Smith's 2015 R1200GSA was reported to have blown up. One might dismiss the terminology as hyperbole, or possible embellishment in the overheated moment. However, the video posted online showed steam pouring from the bike and a puddle of dark liquid under the dead bike. Not sure if it was water or oil.

Chuck Snyder saw the call for help from JD. Chuck asked his boss if he could take off work to go and help. He got the OK to go. Chuck went home, loaded his Yamaha FJR on the trailer and hauled it to where JD was waiting with the smoking, leaking BMW. The FJR was off-loaded, the broken BMW was loaded, JD departed on the FJR to try and salvage his rally. Chuck hauled the BMW back to his place. This generosity and quick thinking resulted in JD being back on the road within 3 hours, avoiding any backtracking or further delays.

Wolfe Bonham's BMW GS sounded like a washing machine with large rocks bouncing around inside. We know this because he sent a video. He is heading to the barn and we hope he makes it before the noisy internal parts become external parts.

FJR aficionado and IBR vet Matt Watkins observed this may be shaping up to be the second rally in a row where more FJRs have finished than started. One might wonder if he had a hand in some scheme to distribute spare FJR's around the country...as one seems to be located within four hours of any IBR rider in need of a replacement bike.

Chris Rooney is still on the Gaspé Peninsula and unfortunately is out of time to get to the finish. He still hasn't called it yet, but the ticking clock is not his friend.

Joe Fisher was one of the Far North riders. It was a valiant attempt, but he ran out of time to get to the finish. Fisher is riding an ST1300 owned by Chris McGaffin. Rumor has it that Chris loaned the bike on the condition Joe was not to ride it to Alaska if that were to become an option during the rally. It also seems the ST1300 spent at least a little time in a ditch somewhere along the way. Oops! Chris is already working on a list of needed parts.

Jesse Lucas had the powered mount for his Zumo GPS fail but has a phone app for backup. He is in his backyard, so electronics are not exactly necessary to get to the barn once he has his last bonus.

Bruce Edwards called with news of his second flat tire of the rally. He was waiting on a tow truck near Beaumont, Texas.

There was one call-in bonus available on Leg 1. There have been two call-in bonuses available since the riders departed Kennewick. During a call-in bonus, riders must report their name, rider number, current location, last bonus collected, and next planned bonus. They have the option to re-play their message to confirm the info was recorded. The call must have all the required info, must be placed within the designated time window, and must be claimed properly on the bonus sheet for it to count.

Most riders only provide the required info during their calls. Some add some commentary, and a few take it as an opportunity to entertain the staff with their vocal talents. Go to the audio link on the IBR

page and click on the links to Justin Long's and Michael Baker's call-in performances. Rally staff are always grateful for a respite from normal life in a hotel conference room.

Ken Cowart called in 24 hours too early on his third of three call-in bonus opportunities. The Texas heat may have been a factor.

Greg Farmer won RenoJohn's Big Money Rally (BMR) in 2018, so we know he can use a phone. But he somehow missed the third call-in bonus window.

It looks like only 5 riders missed the third call-in bonus. Much better performance than the 27 who missed the second call-in opportunity. We need to check with Dave McQueeney to find out if that is a record. Apparently, most of them had difficulty determining the time zone differences.

Michael Baker called Lisa again from the top of Sandia Peak, very much out of breath and unable to find the correct sign. It was a big sign too. Lisa got him to calm down and breathe first, then learned he did not carry his GPS on the hike with him because he was "really good with navigating". The phone connection was lost, but he called back to say he finally found the sign. Michael is a pilot, like many riders in the rally, and is no doubt accustomed to having more normal levels of oxygen at elevations surpassing 10,000 feet.

Marc Beaulac called on Friday evening from the Lake Charles, Louisiana area and reported being stuck in traffic and construction delays for hours. He figured on being past the deadline to arrive at the finish and was considering just going home instead of returning to Greenville.

Kool-Aid

About this time in the rally, every two years, the brand loyalists often referred to as "Kool-Aid drinkers" begin to get a bit thin-skinned when their favorite marque's machines start dropping out with mechanical failures. The comment in yesterday's report regarding BMW failures apparently rubbed some readers the wrong way. We expect the additional Bavarian carnage today has not helped matters.

As a former BMW rider, it is disheartening to see the failures and disappointment affecting BMW riders so often in the Iron Butt Rally. Sure, other bikes have an occasional random failure, but BMWs have the same poorly produced parts failing frequently over the span of years, with no apparent resolution.

When BMWs are working correctly, they are outstanding, fun to ride machines. The camaraderie of the BMW riders' clubs is awesome. But riders who pay a premium should not find themselves beta testing designs or stranded and standing on the side of the road with a \$30K paperweight. Riders who have months of preparation and a metric ton of money invested in the ride of a lifetime should not have their hopes dashed as often as such things have happened to BMW riders in IBRs. Frankly, it is shameful.

Under the Radar

In every rally, there are riders who do not get a lot of press during the event. Some riders prefer to not show up in the daily reports at all, but we try to mention each rider at some point during the rally. They put a lot of time, effort, and money into their attempts to become finishers and they all deserve more than a mention or note about something going wrong.

Some riders do not get noticed because they are running hard for a win and revealing what they are doing could cause other riders to change their strategy to compensate. Some are just having great rides and no issues or breakdowns.

In this rally, Lisa has heard virtually nothing from Joe Green, 20-year Naval vet Paul Partin, Steve Snell, or Benny Watz. We can only assume they planned their rides and are riding their plans. Lisa likes it when riders do that, sans extraneous drama.

Convergence

Rally Central in the Greenville Marriott is starting to see an influx of scorers, volunteers, and spectators. Rally Staff are busy setting everything up for the returning riders to try and get them scored and done as quickly as possible. Riders are expected to start arriving this evening and continue arriving well into the penalty points on Friday morning. The penalty points begin accruing at 8:00:01 a.m. and any rider arriving after 10:00:00 a.m. will be a DNF.



Second group photo bonus at Cape Disappointment, Washington
(a requirement for one of the options to skip returning to Kennewick Sunday night)



Third group photo bonus at the Nicky Haden Memorial in Kentucky.
Two riders showed up, John Coons and Peter Green.

Design, Opportunity, and Strategy

As we await the return of the riders, we are able to lift another curtain regarding the rally design. This Iron Butt Rally has been different from prior rallies for riders, staff, and even spectators. From the scribe's point of view, it has been a challenge due to the secrecy required by the rally design. It was important to prevent riders from knowing choices made by others and potentially changing their plans due to information being made available online. The vacuum of information was mostly filled by external sources, such as the online comments from fans and spectators. Some were entertaining, some were helpful, some were erroneous assumptions, and some were by my friend Paul Pelland.

No scribe wants to do drive-by news clips from the snippets of information trickling in to Rally Central. Engaging the reader with strategies and bonus descriptions and drama would be the preferred result of 11 days of reports. All of those aspects for this rally, at least as close as your scribe can come to relating them, are going to be compressed into a couple of reports as we approach the end of the saga.

Most, but not all, riders come to the Iron Butt Rally well prepared. Their bikes can pass tech inspection, have new tires, brake pads, and fresh filters. The riders have practiced routing and exterminated the bugs from their software applications. They have read everything there is to read about past rallies, problems, and solutions. At least, that is something they should have done.

They may have even read all the materials provided by the RallyMom to help them avoid a DNS or DNF. They may even have been working out to get their bodies in condition for the physical toll imposed by 11 days in the saddle. For skills improvement, there are opportunities to participate in shorter rallies. These smaller events allow the rider to explore their boundaries, hone their routing skills, and fine tune the ergonomics on their bike.

Modern routing has evolved into a variety of "plug and play" applications. Software tools are readily available for bonus location sorting, GPS navigation computers are on everyone's phone, and internet connectivity is becoming ubiquitous. Many riders rely far too heavily on these canned solutions.

If the bikes, the riders, and the tools are all significantly prepared, how does one create an 11-day event that continues to challenge the riders and capture the imagination? That task falls to the Rally Architect.

In 2017 Jeff Earls took the approach of designing a rally with a bonus structure meant to disrupt the utility of the rider's packaged and practiced routing tools, by making every bonus value variable depending on the order they chose to visit them. This forced the implementation of a thought process beyond simply clicking a button for a macro in a spreadsheet.

For 2019, many riders assumed Jeff would create a more complicated version of the 2017 puzzle. While another rally designer might try that, Jeff took a different approach: create a modern rally in the mold of some of the legendary old school events. Strip away the complexity in route selection. Provide bonus opportunities to make route selection easier, but leave the rider wondering if they could ride the route they created. How much risk would the rider be willing to accept on a tight ferry schedule, crossing a major metropolitan near peak commute time, spending the time chasing down tight forest roads for an afternoon, or traveling far away, knowing that there would be no allowance given for road closures or weather?

In addition, some IBR's have left the riders with whirlwind images of locations they barely remember as they sailed along on an interstate highway, following a little pink line on a GPS screen. What about a rally designed to force them to slow down and smell the roses? Choose locations which place riders on slow roads where they can experience the environment for an extended period, even if the bonus location itself is a mundane post office. Where worthwhile, get riders off their motorcycles for bit to stretch their legs, perhaps with a long hike or steps. They might not like the time spent off the bike, or the added unknown of how long to allot for each stop, but being off the bike often pays dividends later in the day, as it forces the body to move and do something other than perch on a motorcycle seat.

In addition, the wording of the bonus listing could be crafted in such a way as to encourage the rider to make the effort to look at the location with available mapping tools to see where it actually takes them...before they commit to it. Lately, and all too often, riders have simply plugged locations into a GPS unit and followed the pink line without checking to determine whether it was routing them up a dirt mountain road or across a farmer's field, until they were stuck.

These ideas were swirling around in Jeff's head as he thought through a design for the 2019 event. Swirled may not be the correct word, Jeff is far too organized with his thoughts to label them a swirl, perhaps a better metaphor would be multiple paths to victory orbiting within his brain.

What were the strategies available for a rider to successfully unlock the 2019 rally puzzle?

On Leg 1 the finisher points target level was based on a path forming a nearly straight line from Greenville to Kennewick with a few diversions to collect points. There were multiple options, depending on a rider's experience and comfort level. For those riders looking to challenge themselves, higher point options were provided in multiple directions. Ride northeast to the tip of Long Island? Ride deep into the Everglades? Zoom across the map to Why, Arizona? Risk a ferry to Ocracoke Island? Ride past Checkpoint 1 to the Olympic Peninsula? Find some combination of those?

Each option contained their own challenges and as the Spotwalla animations demonstrate, almost all options were tried by riders, with the leader of Leg 1 having chosen the routemaster's preferred top choice combination of Ocracoke and Montauk. Tight timing risk, high reward if successful. For an IBR rookie to pull that off was impressive.

The bomb drop at the start of Leg 2 was designed to break riders out of their comfort zone and make them rethink everything they thought they knew. So many choices available. Plan a 2-1/2 day route, grabbing locations in California or British Columbia? Collect some of the components of a larger combo and then scoop up significant additional points for the rest period after returning to Kennewick Sunday night? Skip Kennewick for either an 8-hour head start on the field heading east, or ride northwest to locations above the 60th parallel in the Yukon and Alaska for large points that may or may not be enough to overcome what was available in the lower 48?

For the riders looking to finish, the point target looked like a huge number. But once they calmed down, they should have discovered that a route coming back to Kennewick, getting their rest and call-in bonuses, one big river combination bonus, and few others would net them the points they needed. There did not appear to be any shortcut on mileage to finisher status but it was well within the range of a median IBR pace to accomplish.

For those looking to end up on the podium, it became more complex. There was no single “big rock” bonus to serve as the foundation of an obvious winning route. The point totals in Alaska, Yukon, and NWT were not clearly superior to those available below the 60th parallel. The points available without going to the far north were more distributed, but in combination could net a higher total. Riders could trade the ease of routing to a few widely spaced bonus opportunities on the way to and in Alaska for more much complexity in the lower 48, which could yield higher potential totals if the timing could be made to work.

But what about doing something combining bonuses from both categories? Could a rider visit Homer, Alaska and still run the full Mississippi River combo? What other things could an efficient Alaska rider do on re-entry to the lower 48? How much time would they allow themselves? Would a random receipt bonus for 5 points make the difference? Could a rider collect the big points in Kennewick on Sunday night and still run the full Great-Lakes-to-the-Seaway combination bonus?

In the end, dispersing 100 riders to concurrently solve a common problem is, according to Jeff, much like a quantum computer evaluating all possible solutions simultaneously to arrive at a best result.

The final solution sometimes surprises us all.

Acquainted with the Night

BY ROBERT FROST

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

*John Harrison
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