

The 2015 Iron Butt Rally

By Wes Fleming #87301

MOTORCYCLE RIDERS DO A LOT of weird stuff—and I'm not just talking about farkling this and rewiring that. Why, right here in this very magazine we've got Chris "Teach" McNeil, who does things on an S 1000 RR that I'm sure make the honchos in Germany shake their heads and exclaim, "It's not designed to do that!"

There's a group of us who think 200 miles before breakfast is a mere warm-up and that it's no problem to ride to a diner in the middle of nowhere to grab a burger with old friends only to turn around and ride the same 600 miles back home. I myself have a friend who woke up one morning in Jacksonville, Florida, then rode to San Diego, California, and back to Jacksonville in 92 hours.

She did it on purpose, too. You might think she's crazy, but I assure you she's not – she's just been bitten by the long distance bug.

The truly hardcore among long distance riders gather in the summer of odd-numbered years to engage in what is surely the most grueling motorcycling contest ever conceived by man or beast, the Iron Butt Rally. It never starts in the same place twice, and it doesn't even always end in the same place it started.

It's important to know that the Iron Butt Rally isn't a race, and while I'd be lying to you if I told you the competitors never exceed the posted speed limit, it's the kind of competition where being the fastest might not notch you a win. It's the kind of contest where riding smart is more likely to bring victory than riding hard, but if you

don't ride hard enough, you'll get left at the back of the pack.

In essence, it's a scavenger hunt. This year's rally took one of the Iron Butt Association's certified rides and compressed it into just 11 days. The National Parks Tour requires a rider to "collect" at least 50 national parks, monuments or battlefields in at least 25 different states. Normally riders have a full calendar year to attain this goal, but in the 2015 Iron Butt Rally, just to qualify as a finisher, riders had to do it in 11 days. While one of this year's finishers, Rob Jaime, completed the challenge on his 2014 Honda NC700XD in a mere 7,569 miles, the winner, Eric Jewell, and his 2007 Honda ST1300 did 11,087 miles. The high mileage rider, Will Barclay, did 12,900 miles on his 2014 Harley-Davidson Ultra Classic, but he finished in 25th place. Barclay, if you're



Chris Comly and his 2006 Harley-Davidson Sportster.

keeping track, averaged nearly 1,173 miles a day for 11 straight days. I think we can put the rumors about the poor reliability of Harleys to rest.

If you're not familiar with the Iron Butt Rally, you may not know that Harleys aren't the only bikes that have credibility issues related to reliability. BMWs do too, and that largely comes from the 2001 and 2003 rallies, when a good half-dozen K 1200 LT riders dropped out after their final drives or drive shafts died mid-rally. It was a blight on BMW's reputation of reliability, and two-time finisher Roger Sinclair being known for taking a brand-new final drive and drive shaft with him when he rode his R 1150 GS didn't do much to bolster people's opinions.

This year, though, BMW's reputation for reliable bikes was marred by only two bikes being forced out of the rally for mechanical issues. It's not a huge surprise that the 2003 K 1200 LT ridden by Allen Hatcher lost its drive shaft near Cheyenne, Oklahoma—especially since that particular LT's drive shaft had over 225,000 miles on it, right



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along with the rest of the LT. Normally, you'd think a rider whose bike suffered a mechanical failure as significant as that would be out, but Hatcher finished the rally on a Yamaha FJR1300 loaned to him by a rally finisher he'd never met. He lost half his points—a 50 percent dock is the penalty for switching bikes mid-rally—but he finished nonetheless, going down in the record books as dead last (75th place).

Married couple Sam and Sydney Liles suffered a heartbreaking DNF (Did Not Finish). Sam bought his dream bike, a 2015 K 1600 GTL Exclusive, just a few months before the rally, putting about 4,000 miles on it before heading to the starting line in Albuquerque, New Mexico. A mere 2,576 miles later, the Liles were out of the rally. Their Exclusive had been dogged by unusual electrical faults. After a frustrating morning and a lack of a meaningful diagnosis from a BMW dealership in New Mexico, the bike's main computer failed completely, not just putting them out of the rally, but stranding them almost 2,000 miles from home.

One of my part-time jobs is working for an independent BMW motorcycle mechanic. Mostly what I do is



Lynda Lahman aboard a C 650 GT and Terry Lahman with his R 1200 GSA prepare to hit the road on Monday morning. Lynda would finish 43rd; Terry, 42nd.

look, listen and learn, but I also act as a secretary. I answer the phone, get customers checked in and out, manage the used parts inventory, and yes, I occasionally get to work on a bike—my own, mostly, or one belonging to my brother or one of our riding buddies. My boss at Beemers Uber Alles, George Mangicaro, has been fixing BMWs for 20 years and is something of a motorcycle whisperer. Just last week when a customer rode up, George turned to me and said, “That bike needs at least one pencil coil.” It needed two, but I think you see what I’m getting at here. The man knows motorcycles.

What’s more than that, he understands long distance riders, and he especially understands Iron Butt riders. He worked

closely with Roger Sinclair (mentioned above) in prepping a pair of R 1150 GSs to cross Europe and China, and Iron Butt riders from all over the East Coast bring their Beemers to him to prep for various contests and competitions.

This year, we had three customers in the Iron Butt Rally—the aforementioned Allen Hatcher and his doomed K 1200 LT, Kirsten Talken-Spaulding and her 2009 R 1200 RT, and the husband-and-wife team of Jon Good and Ande Bergman on their 2013 K 1600 GTL. We spent a good amount of time getting their bikes ready for the rally, and when I say “we,” I mean that George did a ton of mechanical work, and I cleaned and polished the bikes with an eye out for any fluid seepage or bolt or panel out of place.



Allen Hatcher on his borrowed FJR 1300, Wes Fleming, George Mangicaro (inside trailer), Ande Bergman, Jon Good.

Hatcher's bike took the most work to get ready, but not because it's a 12-year-old K 1200 LT. During the overnight hours of the MD 20/20 rally on Memorial Day weekend, Allen hit and killed a deer with his LT. The entire front end was mangled, but the bike still ran and all his LD farkles were on it, so we repaired it and got it ready for the Iron Butt Rally.

To support our customers, our friends, and anybody else riding in the rally that might need some mechanical assistance, we decided to travel to the second checkpoint in Kingsport, Tennessee. The first leg of the rally began and ended in Albuquerque, but as you can gather from looking at a map of the United States, there are only so many states of the 50 you can gather out that way. The second leg ended in Kingsport, which has access to a lot more states, including all those tiny, close-together ones up New England way. Leg three ended back in Albuquerque.

Riders coming into Kingsport would have between eight and twelve hours to eat, hydrate, shower, get scored, get their bikes prepped for the run to the finish, and sleep. We were there with fluids, filters, tires and all of George's expertise, ready to help whomever rolled up to our workshop on wheels (aka "the trailer").

First to arrive were Good and Bergman on their K 1600 GTL. While George changed the engine oil, oil filter and final drive oil, I got started on one of their wheels. George brought a trailer hitch-mounted No Mar tire changer with us, and we'd spent an hour or two in the afternoon practicing using it. My job was to break the bead; George took over from there, as getting a tire off a wheel with an air pressure monitor on it is a surprising delicate operation. Once George got the new tire on, I aired it up and he put it back on the bike.

Working as a team like this, we were able to turn the GTL around in less than an hour—just enough time for Jon and Ande to go through their tub of supplies I'd brought with me in the back of my van. Beef jerky, protein bars and some fresh clothes went into their bike's luggage; trash and unbelievably smelly clothes went back into the tub. Your clothes and gear would smell bad, too, if you'd been through seven straight



George Mangicaro breaks the bead on a tire.

days of torrential rain and blazing sun like they had.

Next up were Kirsten Talken-Spaulding and her R 1200 RT. Same routine as the GTL, but we had our rhythm now, and we got her turned around in about 45 minutes. Kirsten had already been scored by the time we worked on her bike—and as a matter of fact, we couldn't work on her bike until she returned. The rules of the rally are such that no work can be done on a bike without the rider present.

With Hatcher on a Yamaha and R 1200 GSA rider Chris Sakala dropping out before we could change his tires at the checkpoint, we were done with all the BMWs we'd planned on working on. We loaned some tools to Tonie Cowan's boyfriend so he could swap out the rear wheel on her Yamaha Super Ténéré with one that had a fresh tire on it. Yamaha FJR1300 rider Perry Karsten heard we had tires and stopped by to see if we could swap out his front tire, as his bike wasn't handling correctly in right turns. After spinning his front wheel a few times and checking out the front tire, I determined that there probably wasn't anything wrong with his tire, but his front wheel was definitely mangled. It wasn't just the wheel, though – even the brake disc was warped. Karsten borrowed a replacement wheel from a local FJR rider, but even that didn't solve his handling issues completely. It must have been one hell of a pothole he hit.

Once it got dark, we helped out two more riders. Will Barclay rolled up on his 2014 Harley-Davidson Ultra Classic and said, "I heard you guys are changing oil." Indeed we were, and after a questioning glance at each other, George and I rolled that big Harley up into the trailer. Barclay had everything we needed to change the oil except some bits of crucial information. While George crawled around on the ground under the Harley, I used my iPhone to scour the internet for a photo of exactly where the oil drain plug was. Once we got the oil out, I looked up the torque for the drain plug and how much oil needed to go back in the engine, and we got Barclay headed off to get some sleep with fresh oil in his bike.

The last rider of the night we'd expected to see sooner, but Erik Lipps had been held up in scoring and then fell asleep. He was a little anxious that we were packing up by the time he arrived, but we brought along a Pilot Road 4 120/70ZR17 for Lipps' 2012 FJR1300, so we knew he'd come along sooner or later. After getting his fresh tire mounted, balanced and back on the bike,