

the history of the

Iron Butt Rally

part three

By Bob Higdon



Prologue: Meeting Walt

I rolled into the Denny's parking lot ten minutes before our scheduled meeting, but he was already there. I stuck my hand out. "Thanks for seeing me. I hope you haven't been waiting long." "I can't help it," he sighed. "No matter where I'm going, I want to get there as fast as I can."

"Not me," I laughed. "I just slop down the road, listening to Spanish lessons or digital books."

He grabbed a wire attached to an ear plug on his bike's dash. "The only thing I ever listen to is a radar detector." He shook his head with a trace of long-forgotten pain. "These are things the '86 rally drilled into me."

We tell riders that the Iron Butt Rally will change their lives. It sure changed Walt Deck's. After 25 years his hair is *still* on fire.

Walt Deck (hat covering flame).



Gentlemen (and Fran), start your engines: August 26, 1986

For the third running of the IBR, organizer Gary Patterson, the general manager of Montgomeryville Cycle Center in the suburbs of Philadelphia, conscripted George Egloff to be rallymaster. Egloff had tied for the win in 1984 and had won outright in 1985. Now he had set up the basic route for the 1986 ride, which differed from the earlier routes in almost no material respect whatsoever. And that would become a problem.

A television crew from WFMZ (Channel 69 News!) scurried through the parking lot, interviewing anyone who would stand still for a sound bite. The rally's official starter, global financier and Harley poseur Malcolm Forbes, downplayed his billions. "All the money in the world, the fun is in living, and there's no living like being on a motorcycle." He arrived at Montgomeryville that morning in a helicopter. That's living too.

What did one of the rally widows think of her husband's proposed adventure? "Well, he does what he wants anyway, and I figured that this is the best way to show him that he's nuts." So observed Lori Vickery, wife of rookie Mike Knee-bone, with a large smile.

Sixteen riders shuffled about, including Fran Crane, the lone distaff entrant. She made up in raw speed and stunning endurance what she lacked in height, weight, and testosterone. "You can ride with her," Walt Deck told me, "until she decides to leave you. There's not much you can do after that."

Two riders, John Shuck and Gary Johnson, wouldn't be worrying about staying with Fran. They were on beater Tri-



"So what was that strategy about how we're supposed to win this thing?" Dave McQueeney, Mike Kneebone, and Fran Crane consult at the start of the '86 IBR

umphs with a top speed of maybe 80 if you dropped the bikes out of an airplane. Shuck had withdrawn the year before due to a family illness. Now he was back, just hoping to finish. He would be lucky even to get out of the parking lot; one mile from departure his Trident would short out. It was the birth of both the Hopeless Class and an endless stream of British bike jokes.

At 10:00 Forbes waved his hat, sending Canadian Ross Copas on his way. He'd drawn position #1 in the rider lottery the night before. It suited him. He'd broken down on the '85 Butt, but he'd lasted long enough to know that on the first leg up to Maine, you didn't look back. WFMZ viewers that night saw Copas' maroon K100RT bolt out of the starting blocks. Its rider wasn't waving or smiling. And he sure wasn't looking back.

It wasn't just the miles on the first leg — over 500 altogether, but a lot of them local and slow and near large cities — or the nine hours available before penalty points began kicking in. The crucial problem, one that would haunt the rally's outcome before the sun even set on that first day, was the 101-point bonus at the

Sullivan Brothers Warehouse 25 miles southeast of Boston. To nail that one the rider would face backtracking and maneuvering through an ungodly number of the worst rush-hour traffic miles that New England could devise.

Only four riders — Copas, Deck, Kneebone, and Jim Plunkett — took the chance, and what a chance it was. They had nothing but an address and a paper map of Massachusetts as a guide. If they guessed wrong at any point along the long, endlessly-congested way, they'd be time-barred before sunset on Day #1. But if Lady Luck might kiss their eyes, they'd be in the top four spots at Reynolds Motorsports, the first checkpoint in Buxton, Maine.

And the Lady did just that. They were all late, but the bonus value had outweighed the penalty points. Copas, the least tardy, took the lead on the first leg and continued not looking back. Deck and Plunkett tied for second place. Mike Kneebone lay fourth, but irritated. "The guys at Sullivan Brothers had put out a mighty spread for us. I sat down, ate a sandwich, drank a Coke or two, and schmoozed with these nice people. Then Ross comes in, gets his thing signed, and is out the door in 19 seconds. I'm just saying . . ."

Legs 2, 3, and 4: The Usual Suspects, the Usual Grind

Goal #1: Go to the checkpoint in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Nick Nichols' Harley, Enola Gay II, blew up a rear cylinder in Vermont. He became the first (but not the last) rider to DNF in successive years. Barry Norman and Gregg Smith selflessly towed him to safety. An unclear bonus — Grand Isle, Vermont or Grand Island, New York? — caused Copas, Deck, Plunkett, Kneebone, and Paul Persinger to take a useless detour of more than 300 miles at night in a driving rain almost to the Canadian border. They came across the actual bonus at a toll booth northeast of Buffalo purely by accident. But for the wasted time, it didn't matter. At the second checkpoint Copas remained in first, Deck continued second.

Goal #2: Go to Lynnwood, Washington. It rained and turned bitterly cold coming through the northern plains. Gary Johnson tried to keep warm by sleeping on a throne in a men's room stall at a rest stop. When someone opened the door, Johnson slumped onto the floor, banging his helmet on the tile, but even then didn't wake him up. Thinking he'd stumbled upon a dead Martian, the man screamed. That woke Shuck up in an adjacent stall. There is always great farce in the Iron Butt Motel. The next day in Montana the temperatures would soar above 100°. Standings: Still Copas, Deck, and Kneebone on top.

Goal #3: Go to Costa Mesa, California. By the midpoint in the rally, as happens every year, the Dog Days had arrived. More than



Malcom Forbes waving the hat to Ross Copas at the start.

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half the riders' days and nights were spent in cold rain. Bikes were coming unglued. The leader board, however, remained static.



Mike Kneebone at work Costa Mesa. Backtracking for a receipt had cost hours of needed sleep. He would drop three places to sixth overall on the leg to Oklahoma.

Unraveling a Knot

Copas and Deck rolled in to the fourth checkpoint in Muskogee, Oklahoma, having picked up the four bonuses on the leg and still in 1st and 2nd. Barry Norman, Fran Crane, and Gary Moore were inches behind. Moore, one of the slower riders in the field, ironically was one of the few who could keep up with Fran; not only did his moderate pace produce excellent fuel efficiency, he could get by with less sleep than anyone else. So while Fran ran like the proverbial wind, at the end of the day Gary had the same number of points in his bag.

As in the two earlier rallies, there simply hadn't been enough bonuses, which meant that the field wasn't separating itself. Now and then a contestant would make a mistake, lose a receipt, or break something. Kneebone wasted eight hours returning to the Golden Gate bridge for a receipt that he thought Persinger, with whom he'd been riding, had picked up. Fran Crane inexplicably went to the north rim of the Grand Canyon instead of the south, ran out of gas, but was saved, like Blanche DuBois, by the kindness of strangers. Copas made it to the correct rim just as the Bright Angel gift shop was closing for the night. Ross blocked the door with his foot and wouldn't remove it until the cashier sold him a trinket.

Leg after leg Copas and Deck held onto the top positions, hitting every bonus on the list. There were never more than five on any leg. Between Wisconsin and Washington there were but three. Even the Triumphs, almost bonus-free and routinely running late, were still muddling along. "Virtually everyone had hit every bonus since Maine without much trouble," Shuck wrote.

This evidently was a steep learning curve for the organizers: they had bunched contestants at the top with one leg to go in

each of the previous two rallies. Mike Rose at least had added a couple of last-minute bonuses in 1984 in an attempt to break up a four-way tie. Here once again Patterson seemed to be counting on mental, physical, mechanical, and magical attrition to filter the riders. Ordinarily, that's a good bet; in 1986, however, it hadn't been paying off at all.

Then the riders opened the bonus listing that would inspire them from Muskogee to Jacksonville. The game was back on. Egloff had tossed in a bonus in Kansas City, requiring an enormous diversion from the base route to Florida. Only Copas, Crane, Moore, Norman, and Joe Tracy on his turbo-charged BMW made the loop north. Kneebone and Persinger opted for a more modest route, hoping to recover some sleep before making a charge on the final leg.

The remainder of the field headed for receipts at the Lake Ponchartrain causeway north of New Orleans and a smaller bridge in Eastpoint, Florida with varying degrees of success. Dave McQueeney smashed into a pothole in Mississippi, breaking a rib and left foot peg. It was hard to tell which was the more annoying problem for Dave in the rally's last 2,000 miles: wincing with every breath and bump in the road or riding with his left foot on the passenger peg.

Still, he made it back to Montgomeryville, which was more than Joe Tracy and Walt Deck could claim. Tracy's turbo rocket, sporting deer whistles, attracted a small one and finished it off cleanly. With a broken arm Joe was finished as well. Walt Deck's Gold Wing alternator died in Louisiana. He'd stayed on Ross Copas' tail for more than a week, holding off riders who would amass nine podium finishes in their collective careers, and in the end he had nothing but a DNF for his struggles. He flew back to the final banquet anyway.

Back to the Barn

If Kneebone and Persinger were hoping that their rest-now/kill-later strategy might vault them up a few places in the standings, they would be disappointed. Egloff had nothing serious in the bonus package for the last leg. One of the sites was the same motorcycle shop in College Park, Maryland that had caused such wretched problems in 1985. It was yet another leg where most riders could pretty much sail through easily, picking up every bonus egg along the way.

All Ross Copas had to do to win the rally after picking up the Kansas City receipt was to stay out of harm's way. Within hours he was involved in an accident with a car at a four-way stop in the middle of nowhere. Miraculously, neither Ross nor his bike sustained anything other than a few cosmetic dents and some embarrassment. He would win the rally in his usual calm style, the only rider ever to take victory by leading wire-to-wire.

In second place, 65 points behind Copas, stood the Good Samaritan and Mercedes mechanic from Ohio, Barry Norman. He would be back in '87 to put his name into the IBR record books. Tied for third just four points behind Norman were the rabbit Fran Crane and the tortoise Gary Moore. Mike Kneebone recovered to 5th, 159 points behind Ross.

Alaska's Paul Persinger, who had ridden most of the rally with Kneebone, finished six points behind him. Nick Phillips, a mechanic at Montgomeryville Cycle, was but four points behind Paul. Rounding out the top eleven were Jim Plunkett, Al Holtsberry (1977 R100/7), Gregg Smith, and a limping Dave

McQueeney. Holtsberry would return to the IBR in 2005 on the same BMW airhead and crank out almost 12,000 miles.

John Shuck and Gary Johnson rolled their stuttering Triumphs into the Cycle Center parking lot to well-deserved cheers, finishing last and next to last. For the Dynamic Duo in their matching wardrobe and painted bikes, keeping them running hadn't been nearly as frustrating as filling up their tiny stock tanks seven or eight times a day.

It had been a familiar, predictable, and even relatively easy — as such things go — rally, one that was effectively over when Copas picked up the bonus south of Boston about seven hours into the contest. It followed in the familiar wake of the '85 IBR where brute speed on the first leg had been the key. After that, with so few bonuses (21 altogether in the five legs after Maine) to pick from, no one was going to catch Ross unless he took himself out of the running. That was unlikely to happen. You can count on the fingers of one hand the number of riders who could keep up with Ross Copas, day after long day, in his prime. The fact remains that he was never seriously stretched by the organizers, completing the eleven days with a modest 10,086 miles, just two more than Holtsberry's 9th place Beemer.

Egloff could see that the endurance motorcycling world had changed, even if the rally had not. In just three years the graph of what was achievable in long-distance riding had gone asymptotic. Mike Rose had not known whether such rides were even possible; now they seemed too short.

The 1986 IBR Finishers (left to right) (Rear): Shuck, McQueeney, Egloff, Persinger (Middle): Norman, Moore, Smith (Front): Plunkett, Crane, Holtsberry, Copas, Johnson, Kneebone, Phillips



Another problem lurked. The bloom apparently was off the rose. The starting grid was down by one-third — 24 to 16 — from the year earlier, in some part due to the rally's persistent problems in consistency and communication. The fiasco of the Grand Isle/Grand Island bonus had been merely the latest and most notorious among any number of examples. For ten days Mike Kneebone had brooded about that 300-mile detour during a cold, rain-swept night. He knew that, given the chance, he could straighten out the administration's errors. First, though, he would have to *become* the administration. For that, he had a plan.

But that's another story.

Epilogue: Retracing Memories

Walt Deck finished off his coffee. The Denny's waitress dropped the check on the table. I grabbed it before he could. "You didn't come back in '87," I said. "Why not?"

"I don't know. Job, money, wife, life. The usual. But I still wanted to see one day what I'd missed seeing on that ride."

"You were out there for eight days. You must have seen something."

"You ran it," he said. "Did you see anything?"

I smiled. He had a point.

"In 1994 I stuck Dottie on the back of the Wing and we set out to follow that route and hit all the bonuses. We did it too. It took us 38 days. Maybe not Iron Butt level, but it was good enough."

"It was better than that," I said. "A lot better." —

