

the
history
of the

Iron Butt Rally

part four

By Bob Higdon

So the Last Shall Be First: The 1987 Iron Butt Rally

Years after he'd slogged in at close to last place on the '86 Iron Butt Rally on a beater Triumph Trident, John Shuck reminisced about the rider who'd led the event from start to finish. "Ross Copas obviously had the tricks down to go the distance. At the finish, I asked him how he had prepped for the ride the night before the start. He said, 'In the bar at the motel.'"

Copas had returned, with ever-present beer in hand, for the 1987 running of what organizer Gary Patterson and rallymaster George Egloff liked to call "The World's Toughest Motorcycle Competition." With him were the 2nd through 5th place finishers from 1986 — Barry Norman, Fran Crane, Mike Kneebone, and Paul Persinger — as well as veterans Al Greenwood, Gregg Smith and Dave McQueeney. Five rookies had also responded to the call: Harold Brooks, Richard Frost, Robert Gerberich, Paul Persinger, Jr., Frank Kujawa (at 27 the youngest rider), and Bill Pharness (at 57 the eldest).

As indomitable as he'd been a year earlier, the defending champion was no longer Barry Norman's primary worry. "Ross didn't seem quite as competitive for some reason. I thought Fran was the one to beat. She was clearly the quickest rider in the field."

Kujawa, a protégé of Copas, was a molten screamer in his own right. "He was a better rider than I was," Ross admits today,

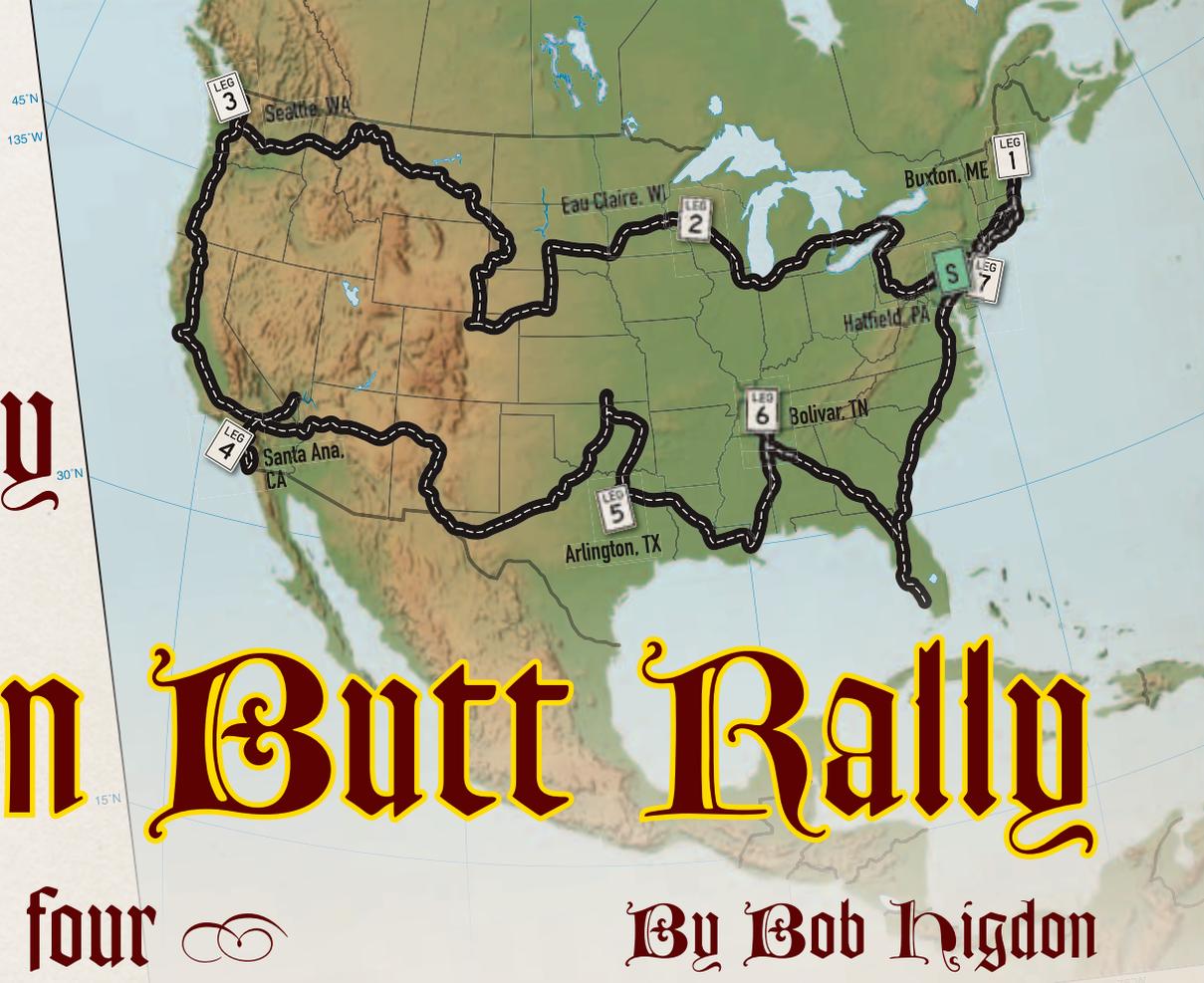
"but he would make a lot of mistakes." Still, you couldn't count Frank out. His determination, endurance, and knowledge of U.S. geography were staggering. I once heard him describe off the top of his head a route description from Seattle to Miami on the interstate highway system without missing a single turn. That, from a laughing, shaggy-haired kid from Ontario.

Egloff had pre-ridden the route, but he could have phoned it in and saved a lot of time. There were but few modifications of any substance from the '86 IBR: virtually the same checkpoints, practically identical bonuses, and the same casual air of administration. If you have difficulties distinguishing the '86 and '87 rallies, you aren't alone; some of the riders who rode each confuse them even to this day.

Leg 1: Montgomeryville, Pennsylvania – Buxton, Maine

Veterans had known that it would always be a flat-out race from Montgomeryville, Pennsylvania to Reynolds Motorsports, the first checkpoint in Buxton, Maine, but with this fourth rally in the series, word had finally filtered down to the new guys: *get on your horse in this first leg and stay on it.* With just five potential bonuses on the route, and none of them of trip-stopping difficulty, there was a nine-way tie for first in Maine.

Missing from the lead group were Dave McQueeney, who was always more interested in smelling roses along the way than trying to crack a sound barrier, and rookies Brooks, Frost, and Gerberich. These latter three were gentlemen of similar age,



riding style, and temperament who'd early fallen in together and would ride carefully for much of the remainder of the rally. You may appreciate the difference in intensity between those in first place and everyone else by this illustration: by the time Richard Frost arrived at the Maine checkpoint, Copas had already had his oil and two tires changed.

Leg 2: Buxton, Maine – Eau Claire, Wisconsin

The one rider who should have been tied for the lead but instead was wallowing in last place with a 17-minute late penalty was Barry Norman. His Yamaha Venture's clutch had begun to slip shortly after leaving the start. Egloff had arranged for a replacement to be sent to a bonus stop in Aurora, Illinois on the second leg, but it would not be until Norman reached the second checkpoint in Eau Claire, Wisconsin that the parts could be installed. He had been hoping for a win; now he wished merely to finish in the top half of the field. For the '86 IBR runner-up it was no way to start any day, much less the most crucial eleven days he would have in the entire year.

Al Greenwood was the first to drop out, his bike the victim of an electrical failure shortly after departing the Buxton checkpoint. Everyone else made Eau Claire on time. It hadn't been a particularly stressful leg, four easy bonuses along a route of 1,700 miles at barely a 40 mph pace. There remained a seven-way tie for first, and Norman at last had a functioning motorcycle.

Leg 3: Eau Claire, Wisconsin – Seattle, Washington

Four bonuses were available for the third leg to Seattle. The first was a restaurant in Minnesota due west of Eau Claire. No one could miss that. The next two — Mount Rushmore in South Dakota and Estes Park, Colorado — presented a possible routing problem. If you went straight to Rushmore, you'd arrive at about one in the morning, giving you some time to sleep until the visitors' center opened. At that point you'd pick up the bonus, ride 375 miles southwest to Colorado, grab that bonus, and head to Glacier National Park for the final bonus before the Seattle checkpoint.

But, for the sake of argument, suppose you picked up Colorado first, then backtracked north for Rushmore. It's hard to see how this could make sense under any conceivable set of circumstances. One, you don't get to sleep, so you're going to miss any chance of grabbing Glacier. Two, you're needlessly adding almost 200 miles to your overall route. Yet each one of the rally leaders went this way; not a soul picked up the easy 50-point bonus at Glacier. What happened?

"I blame Frank Kujawa for this," Mike Kneebone says with the wisdom gained from endlessly rehashing in his mind a single rally bonus for 25 years. "We'd all arrived at the Minnesota restaurant at about the same time but by different routes. We were talking about options. Frank was running around saying, 'Sleep? Who needs sleep?' He was incandescent, ready to ride anywhere for the sake of riding. And so we followed him to Colorado. To



At the halfway point in Santa Ana CA on 9/7/1987. Left to right: Frank Kujawa, Ross Copas, Harold Brooks, Fran Crane, Mike Kneebone, Robert Gerberich, Barry Norman, Richard Frost, and Dave McQueeney. Photographer unknown.

Iron Butt Rally

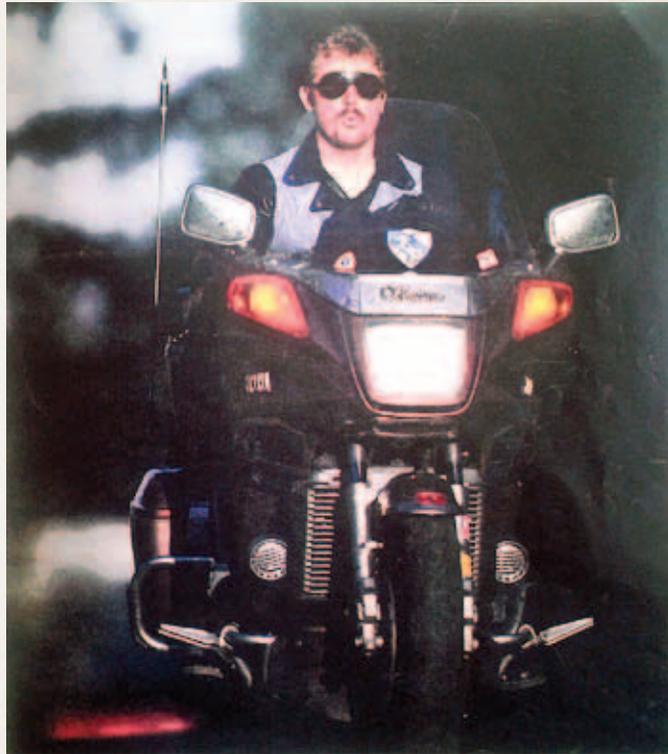


PHOTO BY CHARLES FOX

Rookie Richard Frost relaxing in Seattle.

this good day I don't know why I did it that way."

I think I do. Yesterday you were tied for first with six other people. If they all decide to go one way and you opt for another, you're betting your steaming ass four days into an eleven-day event that you're right and everyone else is wrong. And you're not only gambling against a guy who is younger and faster and more wired than you are, he's also the guy who has a Rand-McNally atlas of North America imprinted in his frontal lobe. And that's not the worst part: the worst part is that a guy like that is willing to do *anything* to win. So you follow him until he crashes out or until you can't keep up any longer. What else can you do?

The clump of ties atop the leader board in Seattle had been reduced to five — Kujawa, Crane, Copas, Persinger the Elder, and Pharness — by the retirement of Gregg Smith (out in Wyoming with a broken fuel pump) and Mike Kneebone's mechanical delay (a rain-flooded fuse box on his Venture near Sturgis, South Dakota). Persinger the Junior lay 6th. Barry Norman had moved from 14th and last to 7th overall in the two legs after Maine. If nothing else, he seemed poised to achieve his revised hope of finishing in the top half of the field.

Leg 4: Seattle, Washington — Santa Ana, California

When the riders opened their bonus envelopes at the start line for the leg from Seattle to Santa Ana, California, most of them laughed when they saw a two-point bonus for a gas receipt in Bellingham, Washington, 110 miles due north on the interstate highway. With bonuses in Las Vegas and San Diego,

it promised to be a brutal leg through the desert in mid-summer even without a loop to the north of more than 220 miles. Forget it.

But imagine you're Fran Crane. Can you do this bonus? Without a doubt. Even your competitors admit that you're the best road rider in the rally. But *should* you? At the nationally-mandated 55 mph speed limit that prevailed in 1987 you'll waste more than three hours. Sure, you'll break out of the pack, but caution was in order here. There would certainly be another chance to separate yourself from the pretenders to the throne. Prudence dictates that you bide your time, that you wait, that you lurk.

Fran went to Bellingham anyway. So did Frank Kujawa, of course. They were first, foremost, and always long-distance riders, so they rode long distances.

Richard Frost meanwhile was trying to cut off a chunk of distance from his route to the California checkpoint. Mike Kneebone had picked up a bonus at an agricultural inspection station near Barstow when he saw Frost on the other side of the road, talking to every car arriving from Las Vegas. "What are you doing?" Kneebone asked. Frost admitted that he was trying to buy a souvenir casino chip from one of the tourists returning from the gambling resort. Mike explained to the rookie that the purpose of the bonus was for the contestant to ride to Las Vegas, not to have Las Vegas ride to him.

Fran Crane had wanted to make a statement on the leg and she'd done just that. She hit every bonus, the only rider to do so, including the difficult 51 points for the airport in San Diego. The tiny Bellingham bonus had put her into first place with 1,767 points. Copas was second with 1,765. Barry Norman had continued to grind it out, clawing his way into third overall with a score of 1,748. Mike Kneebone was 4th with 1,725. Frank Kujawa stood 5th. He'd ridden 220 miles for two points but had been unable to ride 165 miles at the end of the leg for the 51 points in San Diego. At least he was a little more rested than Fran.

Paul Persinger and his son had more rest than anyone. They'd spent the night in Seattle at Junior's home and slept — overslept, really — eight hours. It was an expensive rest. They sank into 7th and 8th overall.

Leg 5: Santa Ana, California — Arlington, Texas

The fifth leg to Arlington, Texas had three easy bonuses more or less along a direct route, but Egloff had also tossed in two 50-point bonuses for the Kansas and Oklahoma turnpikes. Going for those would add close to 700 miles to the base route. They didn't look remotely doable.

But they were. Norman and Kujawa nailed them both, taking over 1st and 2nd places with 2,049 and 2,017 points respectively at the Texas checkpoint. "I thought Barry was too tired to make it," Fran Crane said in an interview with the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in May 1988, "so I took a gamble and lost." She wasn't out of it, lying 3rd and 81 points behind Norman, and the effort had taken everything the two leaders could manage. Norman, especially, had been running (in his words) "on pure adrenaline." It was far from clear how much more he would be able to take.

Copas and Kneebone held 4th and 5th places. Bill Phar-

ness had been run off the road near the airport in Los Angeles. Despite having sustained a broken collar bone, he kept going until his bike quit near El Paso. "Nobody will ever know how bad I wanted to finish," he said.

Leg 6: Arlington, Texas – Bolivar, Tennessee

As they awaited their departure time for the next leg, Fran and Frank must have spent some rueful moments thinking about the true cost of those two bonus points they'd bagged in Washington. She might have been rested enough in Santa Ana to run with Norman had she not wasted that time. And Frank, had he gone to San Diego instead of Bellingham, would now be leading the rally by 17 points. Decisions, decisions.

The sixth leg would run about 1,100 miles over 25 hours to Bolivar, Tennessee and hit three bonuses, two of them in the suburbs of New Orleans. It got ugly early. Paul Persinger crashed on a rain-slick road but was able to continue. Some hours later, near the Lake Pontchartrain causeway bonus, Ross Copas was upended by a large piece of lumber on the highway, shattering one of his BMW's wheels and badly denting the other. Barry Norman, who had ridden with Ross for a large part of the rally, saw the accident unfold in his mirror. He stopped to help his dazed but very appreciative friend. "There was none of this 'I gotta go' crap," Ross said. "He stayed with me until I was set."



PHOTO BY CHARLES FOX

Bill Pharness at the Iron Butt Motel in Seattle.

Norman made it to the Tennessee checkpoint on time, but he looked even worse than he had in Texas. No one believed Barry had a serious chance of riding to anything but the easiest bonuses in the final two days. Perhaps worse, with Copas now out of the rally, he'd lost a riding partner as well. Kujawa wasn't in much better shape. The standings were unchanged. It was going to come down to a duel between a couple of exhausted alpha males and a relatively well-rested alpha female. The smart money was on Fran.

Leg 7: Bolivar, Tennessee – Montgomeryville, Pennsylvania

On the final leg the bottom six riders — the Persingers, Frost, Brooks, Gerberich, and McQueeney — headed for the barn in Montgomeryville. Norman, Kujawa, Crane, and Kneebone aimed for the two Florida bonuses, the bigger one being a receipt from Alligator Alley, the highway connecting Naples to Miami deep in the southern part of the state. Severe thunderstorms were pounding a wide area of the south.

Barry Norman was refueling in Georgia when he heard on his CB radio that Kujawa had gone down in a construction zone. Without a moment's thought Norman scrambled to the Canadian's aid, first helping him file an accident report at the Georgia Highway Patrol barracks, then taking Frank to a local hospital. Only when he knew that Frank would actually be able to continue did the good Samaritan head off again toward Florida.

In the meantime Crane and Kneebone had locked up the 151-point bonus for a turnpike near Tampa. Fran said that she'd decided to go farther south to Alligator Alley. "I tried to talk her out of it," Kneebone recalls. "Neither of us thought that Barry would be able to get the turnpike bonus, much less make it to Alligator Alley. And with Frank's crash, even if Barry could ride to Tampa, Fran had second place locked up. I thought she was taking a chance of not finishing at all. But south she went. And she made it. I turned north."

The last couple of days of the Iron Butt Rally occasionally produce feats of endurance that are inexplicable by normal methods of measurement. I recall the come-from-behind wins of Rick Morrison in 1997 and Peter Behm in 2011. Maybe the greatest close in the rally's history was Shane Smith's last 27 hours in the saddle in 2005, each mile torturously ground out with the certain knowledge that he could not win and that hurricane Katrina was taking dead aim at his wife and daughter in southern Mississippi.

What Barry Norman was about to try after leaving Frank Kujawa in a Georgia hospital would, if he could pull it off, stand with history's epic motorcycle rides. His childhood classmates had nicknamed him "Barely Normal." The final 1,700 miles of the 1987 IBR might prove just how prescient those kids had been.

After midnight on the last day of the rally at a rest stop on I-95 in South Carolina a highway patrolman woke Norman up. He'd been sleeping on the grass.

"Where are you coming from?" the officer asked.

"I don't know," the rider admitted, trying desperately to focus.

"I'll ask you one more time," the cop said, his eyes narrowing. »

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“Wait. Now I remember. Tampa.” He paused. “And Alligator Alley.”

So he had done it after all. He had made a ride for the ages.

The Barely Normal rider crossed the finish line with all of ten minutes to spare, blistered, dehydrated, and practically incoherent. He turned in his bonus receipts. Two minutes later he was asleep, having fulfilled his dream of rising from dead last to finish in the top half of the field and then some. As he slept the scorers added up his points and checked the Venture’s odometer. They were stunned to see that Norman had racked up 12,773 miles, breaking George Egloff’s 1985 total by more than 1,200 miles. Crane and Kneebone had also crushed the previous record. Even Dave McQueeney, finishing last, had accumulated more miles than any of the riders who’d first competed in 1984.

Epilogue

It would be Barry’s last big endurance event. He didn’t sign up for the ’88 IBR. “I thought I might as well go out on top,” he laughs. The Venture, for eleven days once the biggest horse in North America, is Norman’s commuter bike now. I know it’s inanimate. I know it doesn’t even have a name. But still I wonder if some part of its metal soul isn’t aware of its legendary place in the history of the rally.



PHOTO BY ROBERT HIGDON

Barry Norman

As for Fran Crane, once she turned north to Bellingham after leaving the Seattle checkpoint, she gave up any chance of controlling the remainder of the rally. That was the perfect opposite of the strategy that Copas had run the year before. As soon as he had secured the lead in 1986, he never once opened

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the door; he never made a single error. Ross defied the field to beat him, and no one could.

True, the two points had given Fran an insignificant lead over Copas, Kujawa, and Norman in Santa Ana, but it was illusory. Barry Norman had been right to fear her at the rally’s start. She really was his main competition — the proof being that even the mighty Copas had been unable to put together a great leg after California — but she’d let that advantage slip away for two worthless points. Now she had been reduced to *hoping* that Barry didn’t have the energy to wrap up the turnpikes on the way to Texas. But hope is not a plan. Fran had mortgaged her plan for two points, took second place overall, and almost certainly would have been fourth had Kujawa and Copas not smacked into a muddy sandbag and a piece of lumber. I would argue with conviction that she was the finest pure motorcyclist ever to grace the starting line of the Iron Butt Rally; I would argue with equal vigor that she was also one of the rally’s worst tacticians.

Mike Kneebone took a respectable third place. It had been his bad luck in the prime of his long-distance riding career to come up against unstoppable forces of four-stroke nature like Ross Copas, Fran Crane, Gary Moore, and Barry Norman, riders who were more akin to long-distance zombies than actual motorcyclists. So Mike did what any intelligent animal would do in similar circumstances: he co-opted them, first by setting some individual Guinness motorcycle records in his own right and then by acquiring the mailing list of the IBR’s contestants and forming the Iron Butt Association in the fall of 1987. You hold some of the results of his latest work in your hand.

Frank Kujawa, undoubtedly discharged from the hospital in Georgia with a doctor’s order never to be seen near a motorcycle again, lost a couple of spots in the standings following his accident but remarkably finished the rally and held onto fourth place. He continued to dabble in endurance riding for a while, notably finishing second to his mentor Copas in the 1989 Nevada 1100. Then, in his early thirties, he came out of a lifetime’s retirement and found a job, prompting Ross to suggest that his friend was living life in reverse.

The Persingers finished 5th and 6th, junior gaining a modest advantage due to senior’s crash in Texas. The rally would be their last IBR. Richard Frost, the cop hero of the Blue Knights who’d lovingly serviced and cleaned his bike at each checkpoint of the rally, took 7th. To atone for his sin of trying to buy a casino chip, Kneebone would use him as an atonement bonus location in a later rally. Harold Brooks came in 8th but was nonetheless hooked on the experience. He would run five more Iron Butt rallies, once reaching a tie for 3rd, before walking away with a smile and an incomprehensible Virginia drawl. Robert Gerberich slid into 9th overall, just ahead of Dave McQueeney. Gerberich did a few more minor rallies before retiring. McQueeney,

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of course, doesn't know the meaning of retirement. If there's an Iron Butt happening somewhere, Dave will usually be happening there as well.

It had been a magnificent run, this grand idea of Mike Rose in 1984 to do a motorcycle circumnavigation of the U.S. Now, for a variety of reasons, it was languishing. Like any number of clever thoughts gone past their expiration date, this one desperately needed some new ideas and a new direction. Gary Patterson at Montgomeryville Cycle Center had a commercial motive, not any real passion, for continuing to underwrite the event. George Egloff could borrow a Harley and go for a two-week ride each spring, essentially laying out the same route he'd done the year before. It simply wasn't working. When they sent out the announcement for the 1988 rally, there weren't enough positive responses to go forward. In four years the rally had gone from the coolest thing on wheels to a graveyard. Several weeks before the proposed start, the '88 IBR was cancelled due to lack of interest.

Yet a couple of candles still flickered. One was Mike Kneebone in Chicago with a mailing list and an occasional newsletter to the faithful. The other was Jan Cutler, a former university philosophy professor and the co-owner of a BMW dealership in Reno, Nevada. In the next few years their small flames would produce a bonfire and resurrect the rally from the ashes.

In our next installment we'll meet Professor Cutler, whose imagination produced a series of rallies that featured guns, alcohol, motorcycles, and young women you would definitely not want to bring home to meet your mother. ●

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