

The 2026 LDX Rally is over, as is the 2026 Heart of Texas Rally. Things have changed.

Although OUTLAWS was a fun event with Jesse James, Billy the Kid, Bonnie and Clyde, and all the rest, the roster of rally riders keeps getting shorter. Rallying in general is changing.

Ever since the AMA stopped supporting the long-distance community by advocating on our behalf with their primary insurance broker, rally organizers have found it extremely difficult to secure rally insurance that is both economically feasible and, most importantly, worth the paper it's written on. That's honestly how I stayed in the picture. I called everyone and their dog looking for insurance, submitted numerous applications, and wrote several multi-page documents explaining exactly what it is we do and how we mitigate risk.

The second issue rally organizers face is finding riders willing to attend their events.

Twenty-five people finished the LDX Rally. Yes, there were a few mechanical failures and a handful of routing miscalculations that ended in DNFs, but there were barely 38 motorcycles on the start line in Dodge City, Kansas on May 2nd.

Why?

Because the sport is changing. The riders are changing. The rallies are not.

And I have nobody to blame but myself.

The original Heart of Texas Rally I rode was in 2013. It was a 12-hour event that finished at a hotel somewhere in... well, the heart of Texas, I guess. James Stovall, forgive me, because as I sit here typing this, I honestly can't remember where it was.

Either way, it ended at a hotel and we were scored. The "finish banquet" was breakfast the next morning held at a nearby church, I think. I didn't attend because I had to be home for church the next morning. Or work. Or both. I was security at the church.

Nobody cares, Paul. Move on.

The Heart of Texas started more as a glorified ride-to-eat in 2010. It didn't really become a "rally-rally" until the next year, and by 2012 it had become what most people would recognize as a true motorcycle rally.

I rode in 2013 and 2014. I helped in 2015. I planned to ride in 2016 but I think I couldn't get off work at the last minute.

Those rallies were short. Most were only 12 hours, a couple were longer. I call those "sprints" because you have to stay moving. There's no latitude for error. You can't "make it up on the next leg" like you might in a longer rally.

But those 12-hour, 24-hour rallies were the heart of what rallies had been for the previous 20-plus years, at least from everything I could find online. Most had entry fees that barely covered the cost of a t-shirt. The hotel was usually some fleabag place, and dinner might be BBQ served in the parking lot.

And riders LOVED them.

People reminisced for years about the weird places they finished and the crazy bonuses they chased.

I haven't done anything special. I just started running rallies the way I wanted them run. That's my right, right? Don't like it? Go start your own rally.

The problem is that I started small but quickly developed a taste for bigger, more elaborate events. I can't leave good enough alone. I always have to test something. Try something new. Poke the bear.

Troy Martin and I started the NIITWIt Rally in 2015 with a 12-hour event finishing at Queen Wilhelmina Lodge in Arkansas. The next year we expanded to a 36-hour rally ending at Mount Magazine.

By 2017, I had discovered the structure I truly loved: a rally built around a central theme where nearly every bonus tied into one core idea.

Sure, there were occasional one-off bonuses, but from that point forward my rallies became highly themed and intentionally structured.

When James Stovall decided to step away as rallymaster in 2016, he graciously handed me the Heart of Texas Rally.

In 2017, I built a rally around the Camino Real stretching from Louisiana through Texas and toward Mexico City. It wasn't 100% theme-focused, but close.

In 2018, the Six Flags Over Texas theme was completely dedicated to the central concept. Every bonus tied into it. That became a three-day rally.

2019 became four days with a checkpoint.

2020 was four days again and reached all the way into Canada.

The closest we came to returning to a shorter rally was the 2022 Heart of Texas Rally: Days of Thunder, and honestly that was only because there simply weren't enough bonuses available to support the theme over a longer duration.

The rallies were fun. Really fun.

But they kept getting longer.

They also became more technical because I was constantly trying to defeat the better routers and the consistent podium finishers.

Meanwhile, riders were traveling for days just to get to Texas for a three- or four-day rally. They were burning one or even two weeks of vacation time. You can only make the trek to Texas so many times before you start wanting something else, maybe something closer to home.

Granted, we're long-distance motorcycle riders. Part of the experience may very well be the "trek" itself.

Still, there are a LOT of amazing places capable of hosting incredible rallies.

I would argue the quality of my events has not declined, but attendance absolutely has since 2021.

Rallying has changed.

We either change with it or we go the way of the dinosaur.

The rallymaster's attempts to "defeat the spreadsheet" are failing.

When GPS units first became common, riders complained about the unfair advantage they created. When computer routing software arrived, some resisted that too.

Now AI is here.

Does it route well? Maybe. I don't know yet. I've played with it some.

But a smart rider — a rider focused on the skills necessary to stand on the podium — adapts. They embrace new ideas and new technologies.

Whether you like AI or not, it's a commercially available tool, no different than a Garmin GPS or Microsoft Streets & Trips once was.

Learn to use it.

I've learned that with enough focused input, AI can actually produce some useful output, but whatever is commercially available to me right now either isn't advanced enough or requires subscription levels I'm not willing to pay for.

The rallymaster can no longer outsmart the highly skilled electronic routing rider the way they once could, so instead we make the puzzle more and more complicated.

Eventually riders stop trying to solve it and just throw a dart at the board.

And that's when people stop riding rallies.

The 2021 Heart of Texas Rally had a fantastic theme: historic churches throughout Texas. Beautiful locations. Amazing scenery.

But the puzzle became too restrictive and too complicated because I was trying so hard to defeat the "big dogs."

And honestly? It scared newer riders away.

For years I've been fighting this internal battle trying to maintain diversity on the podium instead of simply letting the results be what they are.

After 11 Heart of Texas Rallies, 3 NIITWIt Rallies, 1 Diet NIITWIt Rally, 3 LDX Rallies, 1 Iron Butt Rally, plus helping with various others and rally clinics, I've finally learned something important:

In my effort to make the podium difficult, I made the rallies too difficult for the people who just wanted to ride.

The riders who don't care that much about standing on a podium.

The riders who love the game, the riding, and the camaraderie.

To be blunt, those riders pay the bills.

The big bright lightbulbs at the top burn brightly, but sometimes they burn out.

We need to get back to the basics.

We need to get back to what got people interested in rallies in the first place: the riding.

Sure, let's still have some great bonuses. Let's still make it interesting for the riders who want to push harder.

But when I think back on every rally I've ever hosted, I can remember the winners but I have to think about it. Most people would have to look it up. But honestly, do you know who won the 2022 LDX Rally without looking it up? How about the 2019 Heart of Texas Rally? How about 4<sup>th</sup> place in the 2017 Iron Butt Rally?

What everyone remembers are the stories.

The banquet.

The drinks around the table.

The laughter after someone tells the story of how badly their plan fell apart somewhere at 2 a.m.

Adventures are rarely fun while you're actually having them. That's true.

But reliving those adventures after a hot shower and putting on a set of clean clothes at the finish? That's what builds friendships. That's what builds loyalty to an event.

At the 2025 Heart of Texas finish banquet, I publicly said I wasn't sure about the future of the Heart of Texas Rally.

I put a tremendous amount into that rally. I put a tremendous amount into this rally.

Honestly, without Heather Gillihan's invaluable help, I couldn't have pulled it off.

These events take a lot to execute the way I want them executed. It's taxing and I'm finding it harder and harder to bring something new each year to make the experience unique for the riders.

But rallies ending isn't necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes old rallies fade and new rallies appear.

Maybe they begin as a glorified ride-to-eat.

Then they slowly become something bigger.

Sixteen years later, the Heart of Texas Rally became something I never could have imagined.

As for 2027?

I honestly don't know.

I don't know if there will be a Heart of Texas Rally.

Maybe there will.

But if there is, it's going to look vastly different from what people have come to expect.

It will be shorter.

It will NOT be complicated.

And this is likely what you're going to see either this fall or beginning in 2027:

The Dartboard Rally.

Literally.

I'll throw a dart at a map. Wherever it lands, that's where we'll hold a rally.

A 12-hour rally.

Maybe a 36-hour rally, but probably not more than that.

It'll be simple.

There may even be rider classes so rookies can compete among themselves. Some people hate classes because they want everyone competing equally. Others want a more level playing field.

I'm not planting my flag in either camp. I'm simply saying something has to shift.

The giant multi-day rallies with thick rallybooks, formal banquets, and \$500 entry fees can still happen — but they need to become the special exception, not the rule.

I want to hold rallies where the entry fee covers insurance, an ugly rally flag (probably towels again), and a purposely shitty-ass t-shirt that people wear proudly as a badge of honor.

We'll eat somewhere simple where people can pay for their own meal because it'll still cost a third of what hotel banquet pricing costs.

\$100 for a visitor to eat dinner?

That's horseshit.

And it killed me charging that this last time around.

But that's what it cost me.

So something has to change.

And that change may very well be the Dartboard Rally.

It's still just a concept. I don't know the where, the when, or even exactly the what.

Will there still be the Heart of Texas Rally?

Sure. Maybe every few years.

LDX Rally?

There will be one in 2028, but the entry fee will be significantly lower. If attendance remains the same, it might be the last one.

There are plenty of riders out there who would absolutely love rally riding but don't need to ride 4,000 miles in four days to enjoy it.

Certificate-worthy rides inside a rally are awesome. They deserve admiration and respect.

But there's also nothing wrong with somebody riding 200 miles a day while taking pictures and enjoying themselves.

Want to scoff at them?

Go ahead.

They're the future of rallies.

We've made ourselves so damn exclusive that we're running out of people either qualified — or motivated enough to become qualified — to join our club.

No, I'm NOT saying rallies should become bar-hopping scavenger hunts.

I'm saying riders need room to crawl before we ask them to run marathons.

The Heart of Texas Rally had no minimum score requirement. All riders had to do was take their mandatory rest bonuses and finish on time.

I'm glad we did that because the qualifying score required during Leg 1 of the LDX Rally absolutely drained some riders mentally and physically.

Those riders earned their LDX finisher status. Even if they spent Leg 2 flower-sniffing and sightseeing, they had already proven themselves.

We need to stop being so exclusive and start becoming more inclusive.

That does NOT mean watering down the requirements for Iron Butt Association membership. I actually think the benchmark for IBA membership has always been set at about the right level.

Besides, I'm not in charge of all of that anyway.

What I *am* in charge of is the Iron Butt Rally.

And to become an Iron Butt Rally finisher, riders are still going to have to ride the miles. They're still going to need the balance of riding, eating, sleeping, and time management necessary to become one of the World's Toughest Motorcycle Riders.

But needing a degree in nuclear engineering to solve the routing puzzle shouldn't be mandatory anymore.

Riders will have the option of following pre-designated routes requiring minimal routing skills.

That does NOT make the rally easy.

You'll still need to "sit there and twist that" to the tune of roughly a thousand miles a day for eleven straight days.

The lowest finisher mileage in the 2025 Iron Butt Rally was 9,364 miles.

That's over 850 miles per day for eleven consecutive days.

The Ultimate Coast to Coast ride is roughly 5,500 miles and riders get THIRTY DAYS to complete that.

Podium riders will still need to master both routing and riding, which makes their accomplishments even more impressive and prestigious.

But we are the World's Toughest Motorcycle Riders.

Not the World's Smartest Route Planners.

You can still be an incredible motorcycle rider, worthy and proud of the title "IBR Finisher," without being a world-class spreadsheet wizard.

The future needs the Iron Butt Rally.

But the future of the Iron Butt Rally requires making motorcycle rallies more accessible again.

Just because the bar to become an IBR finisher is extremely high — and rightly so — does not mean every long-distance rally has to require SS1000 pacing while hunting for bonuses and receipts across half the continent.

I've been told many times that I lack the ability to be concise.

I don't deny it.

But I wanted you to understand what I'm thinking and where I believe all of this is headed.

We're going to keep the tough TOUGH.

But we're going to stop making EVERYTHING so tough.

And no, before anybody asks, we are not handing out participation trophies.

Only LDX finishers received finisher plaques. The Heart of Texas Rally didn't merit that unless you were on the podium.

In my heart, I'd love to give everyone something, but when we do hand something out, it needs to mean something.

Still, we need diversity — not for diversity's sake, but because diversity within our riding community is healthy.

I was incredibly proud of the field at the 2025 Iron Butt Rally and I want to continue seeing that.

Different backgrounds. Different perspectives. Different riding styles.

I rode the Hoka Hey Motorcycle Challenge in 2024 because I wanted to understand their culture.

Honestly?

It's not that different from ours.

They just peel their apples a different way.

Yet for unknown reasons, mistrust of the unknown I suppose, we treat each other like two completely different worlds.

I applaud the riders who have participated in both communities, and I encourage people who view the Hoka Hey skeptically to actually experience it before judging it.

I heard all the stories too.

Then I went and experienced it for myself.

I spent five days in Homer, Alaska with Beth Durham and her crew.

They're good people.

Sure, some of the Hoka Hey riders are a little rough around the edges.

But some of you ain't angels either.

We're still going to have multi-day rallies with thick rallybooks and big banquets.

The Iron Butt Rally will remain something you have to earn.

But we're also bringing back the smaller rally.

And we're bringing it to your neighborhood.

I guess we'll just have to see where the dart lands.