

The Iron Butt Daily

July 15, 2025

Epilogue

It's been a couple of weeks since the finish of the 2025 Iron Butt Rally, a time for a little reflection.

This year's event was both a homage to the IBRs that came before and a look at what the future holds. It was a melding of the days of riding hard, riding smart, and twenty-first century supporting technology.

From the rally mechanics point of view, efficiency was the watchword. Prior rallies needed at least a couple of dozen volunteers at the start, the checkpoints, and the finish. Riders were ushered through a series of stations, checking auxiliary fuel systems, vehicle registration and insurance, camera and photo storage hardware, exhaust noise levels, and odometer calibration. Riders spent a lot of time in hurry-up-and-wait mode. The process took the better part of the Saturday and Sunday before the Monday morning start. Riders would begin to show up at the host hotel the prior Wednesday or Thursday to prepare for the ordeal. Not this year.

Instead, most of the pre-rally work was completed weeks or months in advance of the rally. Fuel cell capacities were certified by Lincoln Seals and his company before the riders even showed up. Because a new scoring app was going to be used on smartphones, there was no need for separate cameras and camera memory cards. Other than signing a few documents and meeting with Paul and Nancy Oswald (for which the riders were given appointment times), the only time-consuming activity was the odometer calibration check and other required rider meetings.

As a result, all pre-rally check-in activity was essentially done by the end of Saturday. The effect was to significantly reduce the number of volunteers needed to a handful. It also meant that riders could show up on the Friday before the start, saving a couple of days in hotel expenses.

The mechanics of bonus collection and submission saw an even greater transformation from previous IBRs. In all prior events, riders would go to a bonus location, take a photo (in early rallies with Polaroid cameras and later with digital ones) or obtain a receipt or other item, and turn them in to a scorer at the next checkpoint or the finish. In this year's event, riders used a scoring app on their smartphones to collect and transmit their bonus information to the scorer in near real-time. Although this is new to the IBR, Paul has been using it for several years in the rallies he has put on. It is a pretty mature product and, despite never being used at the scale of the IBR, it nevertheless performed extremely well. Over the last couple of weeks, I asked the riders for their comments regarding the app. They were uniformly positive, with some saying how hard it would be to participate in rallies that used the older way of doing things. The riders had a few suggestions for improvement, but in general they could be classified as relatively minor.

Where the app paid off big-time was at the checkpoints and the finish. Formerly, a rider would clock in, get their odometer read, and prepare to sit down with a scorer. They would then go over each bonus they were claiming, and the scorer would either confirm they met the bonus' requirements or not. We normally would have around a dozen scorers. That said, it would still take hours to score the riders and compile the scores into a standings list. And naturally, riders were again spending valuable time at the checkpoints better spent eating, sleeping, or repairing their bikes.

With the scoring app much of this went away. Because the scorers were receiving rider bonuses as the riders collected them, a rider's score was tabulated before they ever got to the checkpoint or finish. The only discussion at those times concerned any bonuses where the rider and scorer disagreed. If there were no disagreements, the rider would sign off on the score and they were done. Again, no lines, no waiting, no need for herds of scorers. The final standings were known by Paul about fifteen minutes after the finish deadline. Not the hours and hours it took in the past. From the perspective of this observer who has seen

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a lot of IBRs (Paul calls me his AARP hire), it was like witnessing the first jet plane after seeing nothing but biplanes for the last 25 years.

In terms of rally mechanics, I also saw something else of note. And that is a much higher level of interaction between the riders in the field and the rally staff back at HQ. I'm not just talking about phone calls to clarify a bonus or to provide information on closed roads – these have been common over the years. I'm talking about a significant use of email and texting to add a dynamic element. For example, in past rallies there were call-in bonuses where the rider was required to state things like name, rider number, last bonus obtained, current locations, and next bonus planned. These were stated in each leg's rally book the riders received at the beginning of the leg. In contrast, each day this year Paul would send out an email with an audio bonus and also request a photo to accompany it. It might be something like "What do you have on your bike that you wish you hadn't had taken?" (As an aside, the strangest response we got was "a pool noodle."), or "Take a photo of a real American flag flying from a flagpole." I think these were a wonderful addition to the rally. The greater use of communications tools also allowed for changes to bonuses and road and weather conditions to be sent to all the riders as needed and in a timely manner. All of this is a far cry from the past when little information about the rider was known until they arrived at a checkpoint or the finish. Those following the rally felt much more a part of what was going on.

All in all, I would say the changes to the rally mechanics were overwhelmingly positive by reducing the need for a large staff and saving both the riders and organizers time and money while improving the rally experience for everyone. Bravo to Paul, Nancy, and all those who did the work prior to the rally to make it all possible.

So much for the rally mechanics. How about the rally itself? Did it live up to the heritage and traditions of the Iron Butt Rally? I think it did, and in a big way.

As I described in the first edition of this year's Iron Butt Daily, in the beginning the order of the day was a brute-force approach to a podium finish. Sit here, twist that, and don't get off the bike. But at the turn of the millennium, things started to change. It was no longer good enough to ride the wheels off your motorcycle – you also needed to ride it to the right bonuses. Points-per-mile became the mantra, and one could find a relatively large number of riders in the top ten or twenty with lots of points and a surprisingly small number of miles. The age of the Efficient Rider was upon us. Some would argue that things had gone too far, where good routing skills were more important than putting on the miles. In order to be a finisher, one needed a minimum number of points, not a minimum number of miles. This year, I think we've seen the pendulum swing back the other way, at least a bit.

The theme this year was "Origins," honoring those who came before in this most curious motorcycling activity. In support of this theme, Paul had warned potential entrants there would be a return to big miles. And he wasn't wrong. As a rally design overview, Paul required all riders to complete one or more "loops," consisting of several bonuses, to be a finisher. In addition to completing a loop, riders could also obtain other bonuses to be more competitive. The loops were designed such that a finisher would have to complete no less than about 9,500 miles. Past rallies had finishers closer to the 8,000-mile mark.

There were two types of loops. One type consisted of a loop that would last for the entire eleven days of the rally. Riders would not be required to stop at the checkpoints – they could go out and ride and just show up at the finish. There were two of these loops from which the rider could choose, each with a minimum expected mileage close to the 11,000-mile mark. Taking one of these loops had an upside and a downside. The upside was that if you completed the loop and made it back to the finish on time, you would be considered a Gold medal finisher regardless of your point total. There were a couple of downsides as well. One was that if you missed (i.e., failed to physically get to) even one of the bonuses and therefore failed to complete the loop, you would be a DNF. The other was Paul didn't think it would be possible to score enough points by collecting additional bonuses to win the rally riding either of these eleven-day loops.

The alternative was to ride each leg of the rally, completing a loop on each leg and gathering additional bonuses along the way. This was a bit more forgiving but still required a lot of riding and efficient bonus hunting. Overall, finishers averaged over 10,800

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miles, almost a thousand miles more than the historical IBR average. Eleven days, eleven thousand miles is still the well-deserved motto of this world-class event. Competition wasn't dampened. Indeed, the difference between first and second place boiled down to a single bonus gathered in addition to completing loops on all three legs. One needed to ride both hard and smart.

It is worth noting that the attrition rate this year was considerably higher than in the past. Only about half the starting field finished, compared to the historical average of about 78%. And it's not because the number of IBR rookies was somewhat higher than usual – 49% of the starting field were rookies, but they accounted for 60% of the finishers.

In looking back on the rally, a couple of things defied simple explanation to me. One was the number of mechanical failures. These were not limited to a specific brand - Honda, BMW, Harley, Zontes (first Chinese motorcycle entered), and others. I would have expected over the years for motorcycles to become more reliable, but that didn't seem to be the case. I never heard of a Goldwing final drive or driveshaft failure until now. Overheating, engine lubrication failure, lots of flat tires – there seemed to be no rhyme nor reason to the numbers.

The other thing that I find hard to explain is what seemed to me to be the relatively large number of simple, unforced mental errors by the riders. In what will probably become another IBR legend, not one but two riders failed to go to Trenton, NJ while on a state capital loop. Just plain forgot to go. I don't think they had anything against that noble city. They just missed it. And they only realized it when they were in places like Colorado. A little late to go back.

A common error was failing to include a required item in photo bonuses. For example, meal bonuses needed a photo to include the restaurant menu, the meal ordered, and the rider's rally flag. I don't know how many times one of those items was not present. These go well beyond "reading comprehension." Why it persisted throughout the rally is beyond me, other than riders not having a set routine for collecting the bonus. Another mystery of life, I guess.

The 2025 Iron Butt Rally, despite less preparation time for both rider and staff, was a success and an outstanding example of honoring the past and embracing the present and future of the event. The Iron Butt Rally and its traditions live on.

