

## THE RIDER'S WORKSHOP

### ALONE IN THE RIDER'S WORKSHOP

Dedicated to The Prince of the Parkway



Whenever I conduct The Rider's Workshop, I stress the importance of creating memorable riding experiences for oneself. You decide what's memorable. By doing so, you will always have motorcycle memories to recall and share with your friends. Decide to ride this way and make it a habit. Otherwise, if

what you normally do is mostly "ride around," then riding around becomes your habit, and, like the saying goes: "Habits are too light to be felt until they are too strong to be broken." Since riding around is mostly what you do, and since this usually means riding around to the same places, before long you'll get bored with motorcycling and (pardon the pun) cycle off toward something else. I've seen this happen many times.

So get in the habit of pulling out your maps and/or firing up the GPS and create some interesting motorcycling for yourself. That's how you'll keep in the game, and that's how you'll continue riding.

I have always admired the Iron Butt types. It takes a tough guy (or gal) to muscle a motorcycle through one of their sanctioned endurance tests. Imagine compressing a coast-to-coaster into 50 hours or less! I know I am not that tough. But I have always thought that riding 1000 miles in less than 24 hours would be a memorable motorcycling experience to undertake.

At the Wisconsin BMW National Rally, I gave my seminar called "The Art of Riding Smooth." Among the many faces looking back at me was John Zurawski from Long Island, NY. His buddies call him "Z." Both Z and I shared a friendship with a wonderful fellow, Dan Rodriguez. Z grew up with Dan. They went to grade school together. After the seminar, we chatted and he told me of a recent and quite awesome 1000/ 24 Iron Butt type ride he finished. While Z didn't say it outright, I think his ride was partially to pay tribute to our friend Dan. You see, Danny Boy is no longer with us. Sadly and tragically, he was killed in a motorcycle accident on Father's Day 2003.

The seeds of my friendship with Dan were planted one January morning in 1999 at Bob's BMW

where I had worked in sales. It was typically cold and wet outside, and sales were correspondingly slow inside. I saw this nice looking fellow browsing around the showroom. Dan was six feet tall, handsome with dark wavy hair, blue eyes, and an engaging face. I walked up, introduced myself and naturally started talking motorcycles. He responded in kind by introducing himself as Dan, disclosing that his bike was in for service. Before too long it was clear that Dan was an enthusiastic high-miler. There was a certain something in those blue eyes that spoke of many curves, and this big grin saying he'd like to see more. And, like many high-milers, he knew it's all about curves. Warming up to him, I knew I'd met a junkie like myself -- a fellow curve junkie. Our conversation ramped up animated and lengthy.

Not long after, his bike was rolled out. It's a clean enough '78 R100S. I saw it had some 8000 miles on the meter so I gave Dan the benefit by saying, "Wow, you've got 108,000 on the bike?" He smiled and said, "Naw, that's 208,000." Big Grin.

I query, "So you've had the bike since new?" "Right out of the crate" said he. Again, Big Grin. At the time, I had about 130,000 on my bike. After this very nice conversation, we shook hands in implicit appreciation of high-mileage motorcycles, curvy roads and easy motorcycling fellowship. We promised to hook up.

Over the years, Dan and I would hook-up along the fabulous Blue Ridge Parkway at a crossroad named Meadows of Dan. That's where he lived. We'd rendezvous at one of two places: either at a motorcycle friendly mountainside store, The Poor Farmer's Market, where Dan shared a cosmic connection with the owner, a graceful filly named Felecia, or at Willville, a T.W.O. (Two Wheels Only) campground. The owner, Will, hand-built it for us motorcycle types to enjoy. Will's a very cool guy, a Connecticut Yankee sort, who gave up the Eastern "fast lane" to settle in the mountains. Anyway, we'd meet and greet and share a cup of Joe. Two Big Grins. Then we'd wheel our ponies around and in a blue puff of smoke be gone. Dan's style was smooth. Never overly fast, he'd pick a line and hold it rail-like through hundreds of crooked Appalachian curves. He had a unique look too. As



he'd lean that R-bike over, his helmet would remain ramrod along the longitudinal length of his body. His head wouldn't tilt. His entire being would lean clean.

Maybe you've heard the saying that "it's more fun to ride a slow bike fast." It's true. Dan's 100S had a 65 hp engine. Yet through the curves, the confluence of skill and experience trumps raw horsepower, and I've seen many pilots on much newer, bigger-bore bikes flag, unable to keep up.

Like a couple of mountain sprites, we rode miles together...

... But God does in fact work in mysterious ways, and now our friend is gone. Only memories remain to be shared by the friends who knew him.

That gets me to John Zurowski's "Dedication to Dan" iron butt, which was inspiration indeed.

See, I had a small problem with a 1000 in 24. It seems most Iron Butt routes favor the Interstate, and like I say, I'm a curve junkie. I compare motorcycling to riding a two-wheeled snow ski, so riding the Interstate is like schussing a bunny slope, a long bunny slope! It's not my style. John's inspiration solved my routing dilemma, and I determined to complete exactly the same ride.

After some important pre-ride planning, I arrived at my point of embarkation at 5:30 one recent afternoon and pressed the stopwatch. I had 1000 miles to ride in less than 24 hours. The math was a cinch: Maintain 50 mph for 20 hours, and I'd cover my distance. In daylight I would have no problem; after dark would be a different story.

Motorcycling on the street is never about speed of the excessive kind. Riders often get that confused. Motorcycling on public roads is about being smooth. As I've written before, a motorcyclist riding a road is like a musician playing a song. The good ones play smooth, not fast. Do you think Stevie Ray, God rest his soul, played "Cold Shot" or "Pride and Joy" fast? No. Or how about "Crossroads?" Do you think Clapton ever speeds through such a fine piece of song? I don't think so. A song has a groove to it. So does a road. The musician feels the groove and lays it down smooth. Together, the musician and song mesh and real music is made. It's the same thing with riding a great piece of road.

My piece, 469 miles one way, demands meshing, no questions asked. So as I start to motor, I do my best to set down a smooth groove. It's not a mental

thing as much as a kinesthetic thing. I feel the groove with my whole body. I'm feeling the engine reverberate; I'm feeling the quality of my shifts; I'm feeling how smoothly I roll on and off the throttle; I'm feeling the tires' traction; I'm feeling my lean angles. I'm determining whether I'm smooth in all phases of motorcycling, all the time. Sometimes I'm pretty good, other times I'm not. I can always be better.

For maximum safety given the risks, I read the road continually. All the time, I am thinking ahead of the motorcycle, absorbing all the visual cues, anticipating what is likely ahead. I place my focus on that point before me where the road literally disappears from view. This makes perfect sense. By focusing on this Vanishing Point, I have the maximum time and the maximum distance to react to hazards or surprises.

Through the curves, I position the bike for the clearest view of the road ahead. Approaching left curves, I am to the right of my lane; approaching right curves, I am to the left of my lane. On the straight-aways, I place the motorcycle barely to the right of the centerline too. Now I have cushioned myself with the most pavement on either side of me and where oncoming traffic is also most likely to see me. Both my eye and motorcycle placements are important conditioned, disciplined habits. By developing these habits, I don't need to think about it. After being distracted, my eyes and motorcycle fall back into place naturally. I become naturally safer.

Dusk descends and I see the first of many deer. A lone standing deer is both a sentinel and a warning. Beware there are others. My eyes are pinned to the Vanishing Point as the ghost of Larry Grodsky flickers red across in my mind. Three times over the course of this night ride, deer bolt directly across my path.

I'm alone in my own Rider's Workshop, and I practice what I preach.

By staying in my head, by keeping focused, arms relaxed and hands light on the controls, my fore and middle fingers covering the front brake lever, I was ready all three times as these deer and others broke and ran. Other critters -- a black bear, a bobcat, turkey and weasel -- were spotted in my line of sight as well. It's amazing what you see at night. And, come to think of it, I don't think I ever rode beyond my headlight beam.

Into the night I continue, ready for anything, including fog masquerading as clouds.

In pre-ride planning, I determined that a broken cloud layer would stretch across my route at 4500 to 6500 feet. Since my route is entirely mountainous, I knew I would encounter clouds all along the way.

As the night wore on, these clouds would envelop me in their white murk requiring so much laser focus my mind hurt. Then in an instant, it would clear before being absorbed yet again.

It'd never been so black. There is no light to be seen anywhere. The miles slip by. I'm grooving smooth. Insects wobble toward me like night flak. They splatter my windshield. Other times I'm uncertain what's in front of me. When in doubt, downshift.

That's my motto. Remember - the key to precision control of your motorcycle is high RPM's. So downshift! Train yourself to downshift so well that you can do it whenever, and wherever you want. Do it. Do it until you're satisfied. Now you're in precise control!

Suddenly, from around a curve, and from out of nowhere - hard rain is falling. This is a Suck Monster. I am taken utterly un-awares and am startled by the splashing, cold, water. I downshift. I had done my pre-ride planning. I was thorough. The very end of July was calling for a full moon and broken clouds. Rain?? Say it ain't so, Joe!

Confused and, angry in the sopping, gloomy darkness, I pull over to an unsteady stop, lean the bike over on its side-stand. Unfortunately, the road-bed is on-camber and slanted away from the bike. I almost tip over.

I clean-and-jerk the bike up and roll it slightly forward, all the while getting wetter and wetter. Of course to reach my rain gear I need the ignition key. I'm left with no headlight. The darkness is black like my mood. I feel waves of discouragement. "It's late, it's scary dark, and I'm tired. What in the fa-fa-fa am I DOING??"

Luckily I stowed my rain gear so that with touch alone, I can tell what garment I have, and where I have it in my hands. Quickly I slip into my rain suit then cover my tank bag telling myself, "Man! I'm having the most awesome motorcycle adventure in my life, THAT'S what I am doing." In short order I am battered down and rev off into the dark gloom.

Yawning, and after midnight my low fuel light shines its amber warning. I've planned easily enough and find fuel where I expected it. As a prophylactic, I swallow a No-Doz. I like caffeine pills. I use them in lieu of coffee. (Fewer bio-breaks, if you know what I mean.) Just half a tablet taken with water, and the cobwebs blow gently out of my mind. And that's not all—a No-Doz chased with a couple, three or four of your favorite analgesics, and pointy joints and muscle aches soften and melt away.

Definitely night smells are more pungent. They are both quite sweet and rather rotten. My nostrils keep very entertained.

It's into deep night and I arrive at an overlook called Craggy Gardens, a rhododendron field some 4000 feet atop of a rocky bald.

Craggy Gardens is contrarian. The weather being often opposite of what's back down or up the road. Sure enough since I've been experiencing fog since nightfall, it's crystal clear now. The full moon is a celestial coin in the starry firmament above.

I glide to a stop in the empty parking lot, lean the bike over and stiffly slide off the seat. I've ridden this entire road before but never on a nighttime non-stopper like this. Pensive with remembrance and longings for Danny Boy, I munch a sandwich and pull from a lukewarm bottle of water.

At 4 AM I complete the last of 469 miles. My amber fuel light greets me again. After two attempts at fuel and frustrated to learn the pumps have been turned off, I finally gas up, and at a quarter to 5, pop another No-Doz, and return up the road from whence I came.

Back in the high country, I pass a certain highest point and notice a pale violet in the once black sky. With daylight low on the horizon, I now feel sure I am going to accomplish my 1000 in less than 24-hour challenge. Confident in my endgame and since I often ride with an Ipod plugged in, I pull over and take a moment to scroll down to select a certain track. Now I'm basically a rock 'n roller. This track obviously isn't but like this adventure, it's exciting and singular. It's from the "Immortal Beloved" soundtrack, a film about Ludwig Von Beethoven. The last track is Sym-



phony Number 9 in D Minor. Opus 125 (whatever that means.)

The piece includes a section known as “Ode to Joy” and soon the Hallelujah Chorus arrives in all its triumph. There is majesty to this music, there’s majesty to this road and quite honestly, I am feeling triumphant, so I’m glad to be experiencing them both simultaneously.

An hour goes by, then another. The fog and deer have disappeared. With full sunup and the Ipod cranked, I spin 4th gear up high in the power band. I’m feeling unstoppable now locked in the propeller-propulsion tempo of Stones’ maestro, Charlie Watts. There’s an excellent breakfast place two hours up the trail, and I beeline for the barn! I stop in and have myself a Big Old Country Breakfast. Yum-yum and most excellent!

More miles and memories slip by. I have ridden this fabulous road every year by myself, and have headed up groups of twos, threes, fours, and more since my first year in motorcycling. Like the back of my hand, I recognize its distinctive characteristics and eagerly welcome what I know to be coming next.

Knowing your road really well is a good thing too when you’re riding a motorcycle. I knew I’d encounter neither a spec of gravel nor a nasty decreasing radius curve. Instead, I experienced a masterwork of road

engineering and continuous Appalachian beauty. It’s my great joy!

I complete my 938-mile roundtrip at 3:35PM the following afternoon. Again the math is easy. I’m 62 miles short of accomplishing my goal. I have nearly 2 hours so it’s practically a lock.

Danny Boy, one time I called you the Prince of the Parkway. You rolled your eyes and you laughed - - but this one is for you. Once more I swing my ’02 R1150GS around and ride back 31 miles. The miles are easy to count off since each is marked with a cement milepost. At Milepost 31, I carve a sweet U-turn and savor the return to the beginning from where my adventure began the afternoon before.

Later on, you know it! I call my friend Z to say, “Guess what Brother... I’ve got something to share.”

I don’t necessarily recommend compressing the fabulous Blue Ridge Parkway (<http://www.nps.gov/blri/planyourvisit/upload/blrimap-2.pdf>) into 1000 miles in 24 hours for everybody. On the other hand, if you’re a bit of an iron butthead like Z and me and want to own a sense of motorcycling accomplishment, then ride smooth and go for it! You too are certain to have motorcycling memories to share for a long, long time.

—Photos and Article by Jim Ford  
The Rider’s Workshop

