

Rough Riders ; Huge temperature swings, varied terrain, changing elevations and cycle and cyclist mishaps marked this year's Alcan 5000--and the finishers wanted more; [Chicago Final , CN Edition]

Paul Duchene, Special to the Tribune. Chicago Tribune. Chicago, Ill.: Oct 10, 2004. pg. 1

Abstract (Article Summary)

[Ned Marandino] rented a Kawasaki KLR 650 from Whitehorse outfitter [Jamie Gleason] for the Canol Highway journey and wanted to buy it. But Gleason had other rental commitments, so Marandino got to Whitehorse and plunked down \$3,000 for a 10-year-old Kawasaki 650 from a dealer. Gleason's rental bike was taken over by [Mike Stram], whose noisy KTM had conked out.

Full Text (1919 words)

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When the eight-day Summer Alcan 5000 Rally wrapped at the Pan Pacific Lodge in the ski village of Whistler, British Columbia, in August, the 12 surviving motorcycle riders agreed on one thing-it wasn't tough enough.

They'd ridden 4,000 miles from Kirkland, Wash., to Skagway, Alaska, and back in eight days, almost 1,000 of the miles on dirt roads and trails. Temperatures ranged from 28 degrees to 95; weather from brilliant sunshine to intense rain.

Four motorcycles had been trashed and an injured rider flown back from the Yukon Territory to California. Many had fallen-one into a river.

Ned Marandino, at 67 the oldest entrant, bought another bike in the Yukon after his BMW 650 died in British Columbia.

"You only go around once," said Marandino, an old-time racer with two artificial hips. "I'm dipping into the IRA."

And a planned Inland Passage ferry trip from Prince Rupert to Vancouver Island, which would have given a 13-hour respite, had to be canceled when BC Ferries wouldn't guarantee everybody a spot. A fallback plan that added another 400 miles of riding, including 135 miles on logging roads, was warmly received by the riders.

"We couldn't really show up at the dock and then say: 'By the way, four of you aren't going,' " said organizer Jerry Hines, whose wife, Colleen, often accompanies him.

Seattle-based Hines has been organizing Alcan rallies for 20 years, mostly concentrating on cars and winter, which is much less forgiving. The mercury can plunge to 60 below, which limits bikes to the summer event.

(Check out www.alcan5000.com for history and details.)

Dual-sport motorcycles dominated the lineup, with three of the 1,000-1,150 cc BMW twins preferred by world travelers. There were five BMW 650-cc singles, two KTM 640-cc singles, a V-twin 950-cc KTM Adventure and two 400-cc Suzuki DRZ dirt bikes. Riders' ages stretched from 34-year-old Gary Orr and Michael O'Keefe to Marandino at 67. Hometowns ranged from Howey in the Hills, Fla., to Escondido, Calif., and included Cabot, Ark.; Apex, N.C.; San Francisco; and

Gresham, Ore. Two riders had completed long-distance Iron Butt events.

Californians Orr and O'Keefe are married to sisters and ride together a good deal. Jeff Brisendine, 39, from Clarksville, Tenn., came with Paul Garner, 53, of Cabot, Ark., who used to ride with Brisendine's father. Kelly Shane, 47, and Dennis Moore, 50, are friends who were in the construction business in Northern California and husband and wife team of Brad, 50, and Angie, 40, Washo traveled from Florida, where they run a motorcycle safety school.

Angie was the only woman rider, and two years ago, she lost a leg above the knee to a hit-and-run driver who side-swiped her bike. She had 12 operations and declined offers to save some use of her leg.

"Take it off, I told them. At some point I know I'll be healed. If I keep it, I'll be bent over and walking with a stick."

She now sports a titanium leg with a carbon fiber and urethane foot.

"It's amazing," she says. "It was specially made for me by Otto Bock and fitted by Saunders Prosthesis in Orlando who spent 80-90 hours getting it so I could stand up on the pegs."

The Alcan 5000 had a dozen timed sections, separated by transits as long as 500 miles. In a rally car, one person drives, another navigates; on a bike you have to do both "and that takes some practice without falling off," said Jim Robertson, 57, the riding partner of Marandino.

In timed sections, riders must vary their speeds as directed and hit checkpoints to the second. You get one point for every second off, to a maximum of 60 per checkpoint. Most riders used a Global Positioning System, which gave them speed and location, and a computer such as the Checkmate, which can show if the rider is ahead or behind schedule. Others, such as the Washos, used a GPS and their bike's odometer.

Chris Witzgall borrowed a complex trip computer from winter rally competitor Glenn Wallace but found it hard to use with a gloved hand.

Mike Stram rode from Oregon on a KTM 640, which sounded like a roll of quarters in a dryer.

"Oh, it's always sounded like that, and I've got 6,000 miles on it," he said cheerfully.

The first day saw temperatures as high as 95 degrees in Cache Creek, British Columbia, and the heat zapped Marandino's BMW 650. He limped to Quesnel, British Columbia, where fellow competitor and BMW service manager Gary Orr checked it out. "It has a lot of issues," Orr said, so it was left behind.

Marandino elected to ride with the rally's support crew to the Yukon Territory. There he'd buy another bike from Jamie Gleason's Arctic Motorcycle Tours in Whitehorse, which had set up a "technical" (read: difficult) 40-mile, off-road enduro course.

On the way north, fog at Summit Lake on the Yukon border cut visibility to about 20 yards, though drivers who knew the road didn't slow down much. Then a thundering downpour drowned the riders for about 100 miles.

"Joe Rocket's gonna get a letter," said Paul Garner at the Ft. Nelson lunch stop, as he opened a soggy jacket by the manufacturer to expose a soggy T-shirt. San Francisco bartender and mental

health counselor Brad Metzger was equally dismayed: "Oh no, I thought I was closing my helmet air vent," he said.

The rally rode north into Fall, and tree colors brightened. It's 220 miles to Ross River on the gravel Campbell Highway, which required gas from a fuel can in the middle of nowhere and dodging Yukon-sized earth movers on the road.

The next section was even better. The Canol Highway is part of the abandoned oil pipeline route into the Northwest Territories, built during World War II. It cost \$38 million, but was used for only six months. It twists around mountain lakes and bounds alongside the Ross River toward Whitehorse, every hill crest hiding a sudden change in direction.

"We've all got bits of road like this where we live--but a whole 155 miles?" said Marandino.

BMW rider Metzger lost his rear luggage at the start but Paul Garner picked it up--then carried it the whole way, because he couldn't catch Metzger.

Marandino rented a Kawasaki KLR 650 from Whitehorse outfitter Gleason for the Canol Highway journey and wanted to buy it. But Gleason had other rental commitments, so Marandino got to Whitehorse and plunked down \$3,000 for a 10-year-old Kawasaki 650 from a dealer. Gleason's rental bike was taken over by Mike Stram, whose noisy KTM had conked out.

By the halfway point, Gary Orr had a commanding lead on his BMW 650 over similarly mounted Jim Robertson.

The high point of Gleason's rocky enduro the next day was probably the Wolf Creek crossing, which challenged (and cleaned) a number of muddy riders. Stram mis-read the river and charged across without seeing that the path led downstream. He climbed six feet up the opposite bank, then slid back, getting water in his engine. It refused to start and he borrowed a bike from a worker to finish.

But what would Stram ride the next day? BMW rider Michael O'Keefe solved the problem by breaking a bone in his foot and having to fly back to California for surgery. Stram took over O'Keefe's bike for the rest of the journey.

The other victim of the enduro was Gleason, who managed to put a hole in the crankcase on his new Kawasaki KLX 400 on the rocky trail. He stopped to wait for the other riders to catch up when Jeff Brisendine noticed Gleason had oil all over his foot.

"I thought it sounded different, but I had ear plugs," said Gleason glumly.

Brisendine pushed Gleason two miles to the highway, one foot on Gleason's footpeg.

The day's destination was the Gold Rush port of Skagway, which proved to be a ghost town; taking a breather before 8,000 tourists due to arrive on cruise ships the next day.

The road out of Skagway climbs steeply over White Pass, circling brilliant blue lakes amid barren mountains. The famous Chilkoot Pass is slightly north, where thousands of gold rush miners climbed the 1,000 foot "golden staircase" in 1898.

Heading south to Watson Lake, traffic stopped for 20 minutes at the Teslin bridge while a crane swung workers into the 500-foot gorge. "Does it bother you they're welding the bridge we're about

to drive over?" said Alkema.

Further on, Brisendine and Garner got speeding tickets for 135 kilometers (about 83 m.p.h.) in a 100 kilometer (62 m.p.h.) zone.

"It was only \$80 Canadian," said Brisendine later. "The guy said: 'Do you know we're the only two patrolmen in the south end of the Yukon?' I watched them head off the other way and I thought: 'That makes it easy. Let's go!'"

Three hundred miles later, dinner was served at the bottom of the Stikine Gorge, Canada's Grand Canyon. A gravel road snakes into the gorge and ends at the Indian village at Telegraph Creek, 70 miles west of Dease Lake. There sits a cafe, and the three sisters who run it prepare salmon in dill sauce that's worth the trip.

The Cassiar Highway stretches south for 300 miles, twisting through the immense Coast Range. Snow-capped peaks soar to 13,000 feet, glaciated even in summer. Fir trees overshadow the road, and glassy lakes of periwinkle are undisturbed..

The 135-mile Blackwater forest road cuts the corner to Quesnel, eliminating Ft. St. John and Prince George. It provided the biggest scare of the trip (apart from certain bar bills) when a 50-m.p.h. straight stretch hid a 100-foot sandpit beyond a crest.

"I saw that and thought, 'oh no!,' leaned back and cranked her open," said Metzger, explaining the only way to survive soft sand is to stand up on the pegs and accelerate, unloading the front wheel.

By the time the rally reached Whistler, much talk concerned how to make it harder. Hines said he's open to ideas for the next summer rally in 2006.

Gary Orr scored a minuscule 64 points for the 4,000 miles, edging Jim Robertson who had 99 and Jeff Brisendine with 186. At the other end of the scale Dennis Moore had a lock on the 10th spot with 1,141 points, 400 more than his nearest rival. Angie Washo was eighth, two places behind husband, Brad. Marandino and Stram both won Press on Regardless Awards for their determination, though they weren't scored after the first bike change.

Accepting his trophy in the wake of multiple toasts and ad-libs Orr said: "Thanks, it wouldn't have been any fun, except for you guys."

Which sounds like the best thing about banging your head on the wall: It feels great when you stop.

[Illustration]

PHOTOS 7; Caption: PHOTOS (color): The Summer Alcan 5000 Rally offered riders a variety of vistas and challenges. Jamie Gleason (top, waving) directs other riders, while Paul Garner crosses Wolf Creek (main image). Two riders pause by a lake in British Columbia and several work to free a motorcycle from the muddy banks of a river (right). PHOTO: Angie Washo (left) was the only female rider in the event. She competed with the use of a prosthetic leg that had been heavily modified so she could stand up on the pegs. Ned Marandino (above) was the oldest rider and had to buy another bike in the Yukon after his BMW 650 failed him. Photos for the Tribune by Paul Duchene.

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Subjects: Tournaments & championships, Motorcycle racing
Article types: Feature
Section: *Transportation*
ISSN/ISBN: 10856706
Text Word Count 1919