

## ***Back In Black***

It's 11:30 am on Friday morning, September 11th, 2009.

I am in my backyard. Staring at my motorcycle. It is in many pieces.

The windshield, front fairing panels, headlight assembly, handlebars and upper trip clamp are all lying in various spots scattered about the stone walkway. One critical component is missing.

The ignition switch lock cylinder.

It is sitting somewhere on a work bench in a little neighbourhood locksmith shop while a very diligent young lady performs incredibly meticulous brain surgery on it in an effort to try and produce, from scratch, a suitable key that will unlock it.

Which would allow me to start the thing and drive it to the one of the biggest events I've been waiting to participate in all year; the annual Rendezvous 12 hour long distance motorcycle endurance rally.

I have spent a lot of money in anticipation of this day.

The clock ticks away.

I have waited a long time to get this close.

If I don't have a key in the next 5 hours, it's all over.

How do I get myself into these situations?

It all started one perfectly ordinary morning some two and a half years ago when an e-mail appeared on my screen from closest pal and fellow bike nutter Peter Schaefer.

It was as simple as they come...just a web link, and the following cryptic line:

"It's what the Blackbird was MADE for!"

Huh?

Of course I clicked it, and what showed up next amazed me. It revealed a website for a long distance bike rally, the type I've yearned to try for years, but was discouraged by the fact that they always seemed to be based in some location half a continent away.

This one was happening right here in St-Jean-Sur-Richelieu...

By the time my half-liter barrel of coffee was guzzled (a 30 second prospect at best on an average morning) my mind was made up.

Where do I send the cheque?

The story of what happened on that fateful day in September 2008 has never been told in print, but suffice it to say I had weeks' worth of amusement relaying the joys and horrors of what transpired to anyone within earshot who would listen.

Long stretches of giddy highway blasts. Death defying balancing acts on gravel roads at speeds no sane person should ever attempt on a decent trail bike, let alone on a 500+ lbs tarmac missile. Fantastic scenes of rolling hills, valleys and rivers laced with twisty roads carved by God's own hand.

Sun. Cloud. Rain.

Hard rain.

Rain so hard it felt like BB pellets smashing your face through the tiny slit propped open at the bottom of your visor so you could at least see the painted lines on either side of

the road instead of the misty, opaque wall inside your expensive, supposedly fog-proof helmet imported from Ze Fahzerland.

Oh, and did I mention the rodeo?

On my last leg heading north to La Tuque, just when a podium-sized points total appeared to be within reach I flew into a small town quite literally in the middle of nowhere, St-Tite-De-Bagot.

Like many of the obscure destinations on my route, it had a population of 13, perhaps 20 if you counted pets.

Except on this day that figure had swelled to approximately 100,000.

OK, so the 13 was a fictitious figure selected on my part. The 100,000 was NOT.

That was very real.

Needless to say, with at least half that number wandering about in the middle of every street in the town, and a seemingly like number of horses doing the same, a traffic jam occurred of absolutely monumental proportions.

What should have taken 140 seconds to pass through took more than half an hour.

Effectively ending any possibility of me reaching my biggest bonus point destination of the day, La Tuque, in time.

With any hope of a decent finish now torn from my grasp, I did at least make it back in time to post a score, which turned out to be more than some of my poor fellow comrades could claim. The traffic getting through a construction-plagued Montreal at the end of that day was horrific and caused several to be disqualified when the clock ran out. After 11 and half hours on the road, I clocked in with a mere two minutes to spare before the penalty window.

Despite getting lost countless times, sliding around on horse doody, getting soaked to the bone, having little feeling left in my right hand or wrist and turning in a lousy score, I knew one thing.

I was hooked.

So when the time to sign up for the 2009 edition came around, my hand was primed and ready to fire on the entry form print button.

This year was going to be different. Very different.

For one thing, I had already begun amassing the technology necessary to mount a serious offense.

I started with the absolute best motorcycle GPS I could find, the hot-off-the-press Garmin Zumo 660. Fully waterproof with a glove-calibrated touch screen, built-in MP3 player, full cell phone integration and stereo Bluetooth audio transmission, this would be light years better than trying to work off bits of maps and lists of pre-calculated turns based on odometer readings, which went right out the window the minute you made one wrong move.

To that I added an Autocom Super AVI Pro intercom system that would auto-regulate the phone, music and GPS volume levels based on the ambient noise level inside the helmet, and also offer active noise-cancelling circuitry to make any phone calls from inside the helmet crystal clear even at high triple-digit speeds.

The bike itself was already pretty well equipped to handle the rest.

My ride of choice is a 1999 Honda CBR1100XX Super Blackbird. When it appeared on the scene in late '96, its power and top speed (290 km/h) made it the fastest production bike in the world, and this performance eventually led to the creation of a new category of bike, the Hyper Sport. Soon though the other manufacturers offered their replies and it lost the crown to the Hayabusa, which in turn got pushed aside by the ZX-14... bike technology seldom sits still.

But the 'bird found a legion of loyal followers who discovered that with some tweaks it made a great two-wheeled bullet train, able to cover long distances at high speeds with great ease, a Hyper-Tourer if you will. As Pete pointed out, this is why the Rendezvous really is the gig this bike was made for.

The only mods I've done to enhance this ability further are a set of Converti-bar adjustable clip-ons with longer control lines that allow virtually any handlebar setup imaginable with the twist of an allen key, and a custom-tailored Corbin seat to greatly reduce posterior pain.

I had also wanted to add an electronic cruise control system to relieve the right wrist strain experienced last year, but time was running out of time to get that into the schedule, and in any case, careful tweaking of the bars since the previous year's run had resulted in a wrist position comfortable enough that this was no longer an issue.

RDV-day minus one.

A new chance to go for the gold.

I look at all my gear one last time before for bed. Everything is ready.

Except for one small detail.

No ignition key.

An epic search of the house, cars, jackets, yard, driveway, you name it, ensues. It's gone. My only thought was that two nights' prior, I might have put the key in the small side pocket of my jeans, and it could have worked its way out when I got in or out of the car at the Angrignon shopping center. I race over to Angrignon, but a thorough search of the parking lot area where I stopped reveals nothing.

I awake on Friday morning feeling ill. There's got to be a way to fix this.

I start by calling Honda Canada, hoping there's a key pattern on file for the bike, but because they don't have me down as the "registered" owner, no dice.

Only choice now is to pull the lock assembly and head to the locksmith.

The girls who run the local place in Chateauguay are quick to react. They scour the shop looking for a suitable blank, but find none. It seems the Honda bike blanks are a real one-off deal. Not to be discouraged, they finally come across a 1970's Datsun blank that is close enough that they can mod it to work. They think.

"How long?" I ask with a clear look of desperation on my face.

"Hmmm, a few hours for sure. Can't guarantee anything, this is not an exact science".

I go home and wait. Minutes seemed like hours. I try calling the Quebec region Honda office to plead my case, but unfortunately there's nothing further they can do either.

Tick tick tick tick...

At 2:00 pm, the phone rings.

They've done it!!

I blast over, pick up the lock and new key, and the race to re-assemble begins.

By 3:30 I have a working bike. Pack the bags, give everything one more look, and it's off to the start at The Auberge Harris in St-Jean-sur-Richelieu

Organizer / Rallymaster / Chief Torturer Kevin welcomes us courteously as usual. Pete and I register and head out to the local Cage to get a bite and then return to catch the riders meeting. This is really the moment I fear most.

For those of you that have never competed in such an event, I need to elaborate. The idea behind a typical IBA (Iron Butt Association – the world's authority on all matters of long distance riding) style event goes something like this:

An organizer spends months combing the countryside for hundreds of kilometers around searching for cool places to visit. He/she then makes a list of these places, with the necessary details about their locations, and assigns each a "points" value. This list is then sent to the riders a few days or so prior to the start. Its then up to each rider to get out their map or mapping software, look up the locations on the list, and then based on how far each one is and how many points can be scored, decide on a route to follow. It sounds all nice and simple. But if the organizer has done the job right – and Kevin sure has – then there's no obvious winning formula. You can and will agonize for days, trying out every combination and permutation to see which will yield the highest score in the eleven and a half hours allotted.

The reason I dread the Friday night evening meeting is this is when the route books are handed out, and the organizer then proceeds to lay down the REAL dirt. Extra bonus locations. Extra rules. All sorts of evil last-minute stuff that means you can basically take your carefully crafted route and throw it out the window, 'cause it's now a whole new game. Or not. But you won't know 'till you sit down and find out.

Thankfully there were no major surprises. A few cool tricks are added to the mix, but they don't change things so much that my route is scrap.

Pete and I ride back to his place in Chambly, a convenient 15 minutes away, and bust out the computers. Each of us fiddles with his route some based on the last minute announcements, and then make the final adjustments in our GPS's.

As I am still relatively new at this stage to the intricacies of the GPS, I had taken the opportunity a few months earlier to program all the same type of details for a car rally I was organizing into the unit to try it out. I actually went out and ran as course-opening vehicle on the day of the rally with my bike, and the Zumo worked perfectly. I could see all my checkpoint locations appearing in the exact spots they should, with comments on the name and times for each location. Perfect. So I went and did the same thing this time, typing in all the necessary info so I could quickly see what I was looking for at each stop, saving me from having a bunch of papers flying around on my tank bag. But something was about to go horribly wrong with this setup, and I wouldn't discover it 'till it was too late...

Satisfied that we had it all figured out, we finally got to bed sometime around 11:00.

As like the year before, I sleep on Pete's living room couch, which is reasonably comfy, but the night-before jitters combined with the constant feline patrol make for fitful sleep. When the alarm goes at 4:00 am, I feel like I'm coming out of a coma. Ugh. Someone please remind me why I'm doing this?

We check the weather – cool in the am, mid 20's for the pm with chances of rain to the south - and head out. After a 6 minute stop to inhale a few Tim's breakfast sandwiches and coffee, we haul it to the start. Kevin gives us his very last words before heading out, a few little extra bonus ideas and a reminder to be safe, and we're off.

The bikes are started in groups of three every minute; I am in the fourth group, so I'm out at 5:34. I lower my visor, check all the gauges, and when the sign is given I wheel out of the parking lot and hit the MP3 play button. Suddenly my ears are filled with the staccato opening notes of AC/DC's Back In Black. All the horror and angst of the last 24 hours suddenly evaporates, and a smile finally cracks on my face.

As Beavis and Butthead might have said... Uh-heh-heh, uh-heh-heh, this is gonna be, like, the coolest day ever.

Or so I thought.

Our first stop was a very clever one. Kevin had dangled a nice big 1000 pointer (which to give you an idea represents about 20% of the total value of a decent score on this event) right next door for us in Chambly, but it was only open for the first hour of the day, so if you wanted those points, you had to haul over there first thing. We are to get a picture taken of ourselves with something that says Rendezvous. I arrive at the address to discover it's the Rendezvous strip club!! And sure enough, there is already a sea of riders lined up to get their shot next to the club's official car. I grab mine and run back to the bike. I think I have filled out what I need to log the stop. Key word here is "think".

More on that later.

Next stop, Quebec city.

Yes, you read that right. We're not fooling around here. My route is scheduled to take me over 1000 kms in 11 hours and 30 minutes. This does not include stops, of which I need to make about 14 to find stuff, and another 3 for gas. Nor does it include time to eat, rest, cross the border – which I will need to do twice – or any other, ahem, critical function.

Among Kevin's many words of wisdom at the meeting was "If your GPS tells you at the start that you're going to arrive back here at 5:00 pm, you have a problem".

Mine says 5:04 pm.

Hmmm. That can only mean one thing.

Time to let Ms. Birdy sing her song.

I point her down the 20, lean into the right grip, and hold on.

It's cold. Much colder than forecast, can't be more than 7 degrees or so, and as it's expected to be sunny and in the 20's later on, I left all my electric gear at home. Feeling my hands going numb, I stick it out until my first fuel stop – a mere 210 kms due to the bird's voracious fuel appetite at high cruise speeds – and then switch to my insulated rain gloves. Ahhh, relief!

An hour and forty minutes later, I pass the exit for the Pierre Laporte bridge.

GPS arrival time is now 4:25 pm. That's more like it.

My plan all along is to keep the average speed high throughout all the long, lonely stretches, of which there are thankfully many on my route. This way I can afford to take it nice and easy through towns and other high traffic areas. Kevin's words on this are

never far from my mind... “You are all ambassadors of the motorcycling community out there”.

Truth be told, the challenge of balancing the need to travel quickly with doing so safely is probably the thing I take the most pride in doing during the Rendezvous. I don't consider myself as having anything more than average riding skills, but I do like to think I'm pretty good at being able to read the road conditions, weather, traffic density and all the other hazards that one encounters out there and constantly adjust my pace to suit with a good safety margin. And that's probably what I find most satisfying about this event; it's really the ultimate test of riding judgement in every form. The “thinking man's” bike adventure, if you will.

8:03. My second bonus stop is in St-Anselme. Arrival time still showing 4:30ish. Nice.

Let's keep winding that back! But when I look down again at the GPS, I suddenly notice that there is but a lonely flag to indicate the stop, no hint of what I'm looking for...

DAMN! It seems that I somehow screwed up the bonus location note entry, so now I have to haul my route book out every time to find what I'm looking for. A major time waster. Not good. Where's the page!!! Ahh... luckily what I seek here is right in front of me, a tractor dealer sign.

Next stop, The Beauce.

I'm supposed to hit this one a mere 30 minutes later. As I turn up onto the road with the Beauce bonus, I am hit with a sudden wall of fog and have to slow to a crawl. A few kilometers later, the flag appears on my screen. I know I'm looking for a silo but...

there's none here. Stop, pull out the book. Yep. Silo. Keep going. Many kms later, no silo. Stop and ask a local... um not around here, maybe further east a bit?

I spend nearly 20 mins riding up and down the road repeatedly, but no sign of a silo.

Really not good. I attempt to call Kevin, but when the phone connects I hear nothing in my helmet. What the hell?!? Then I realize when I dismantled the front fairing yesterday I must have de-programmed the Bluetooth module that feeds the intercom system...

@#%&\*#!^#\*&!!!!

Pull out phone, put on hands free, and yell into it from my helmet. Luckily Kevin hears me, checks everything thoroughly, and assures me that the silo is indeed on this road. I decide to keep heading southeast, if I find it great, if not at least I'm heading towards my next location. The road ends at a T. I take a left to continue southeast, and not but 2 kms later the road changes names ahead of me... back to what it was called before.

There are TWO segments to this road! As this year's event is almost all street addresses, not GPS coordinates; it's a screw-up waiting to happen. I wail down it, and sure enough, there's my Silo. But it's now 8:59, and the damage has been done, the arrival time has crept back to almost 5:00 pm. And we have many, many more stops to go.

This little escapade has also taken me off my planned route. I let the Zumo re-route me to the next point, down about 10 kms of dirt road. Luckily it's reasonably smooth and I'm able to maintain 80 – 90 km/h, keeping the arrival time demon at bay.

Next up is the town of St-Evariste, some 55 km away, and I make it there in 34 mins.

Alright. Things are getting back on track. Johnville, near Sherbrooke, is next, and I manage to cover the 100+ kms to get there on tiny little back roads in under an hour. 20 odd minutes later I'm another 50 kms down the road in St-Venant-de-Paquette. A nice groove is settling in. The weather is now beautiful and sunny, temps are climbing into

the teens and the roads are spectacular. Life is good.

Time to cross over into America...

No one at the border, praise Buddha, but this suddenly seems to work against me. The customs officer is clearly happy that he finally has someone to chat with, and once I tell him I'm participating in a bike rally he turns on the thousand questions, followed by a long diatribe about how one really shouldn't trust these GPS things, "cause you know it can just as easily sent you down some fire lane or power line road and god knows where you end up..."

OMG... PLEASE get me out of here!!!!

What seems like hours finally passes, and I make it into Colebrook, NH at 11:25, with the demon dialed back to around 4:40. Breathe, breathe. Go into a pastry shop and get my bonus, something called a Vanilla Madelaine, which I have to submit for scoring and which by the rules the organizer gets to keep. I think Kevin has a serious sweet tooth issue. Irasburg VT is next, some 120 kms away, and I manage to make it in about an hour. This one was a beauty; spell the family name as shown on top of the barn. Except that the letters vary from upper to lower case in no particular order. Verrrrry sneaky! Apparently Kevin's better half, Guylaine, spotted this one. Morrisburg is next, except that something in my routing doesn't work at all. Once again I find myself racing up and down a farm road looking for a barn that doesn't exist. This time I decide to cut my losses and just keep going. If the demon isn't respected, I'll wind coming in more than 12 hours from the start. And that means a big, fat zero. End of story. Better to cut things short and still post a score.

Time to head to Huntington. The roads between Morrisville and Huntington on my route are mostly dirt. But calling them dirt on this day would be mighty generous. Strong rains earlier on had turned them into the consistency of wet cement. This made for some very eyes-wide-open moments when trying to navigate them on what I suspect might be the worst bike for the task. We wallow and slide in it like Mr. Toad's Wild Ride.

Gently, gently... stay cool... tips of the fingers.

Somehow, I manage to survive and still arrive on schedule. I pick up the desired e-mail address and hoof it towards the Shelburne Museum to look for a motorcycle stand puck. Drop one in the luggage, and we're back out. It's now 2:40, and that means I have but a mere two hours and twenty minutes left to finish my quest and be back in St-Jean. But I still have another 4 stops between now and then. On the road up to Enosburg, I decide I'm playing with fire. The arrival time demon is still not letting me get back under 4:45, and that's too dangerous knowing that some of the roads I'm hunting on back in Quebec are really bad, and I have a border crossing ahead as well. I make the painful decision to cut two of my last four bonus locations, the rougher roads in the Sutton area, but know it's the right thing to do.

3:32 - Enosburgh, done. Head towards home.

The border crossing is a non-event, and I make it to my last stop in Farnham at 4:35.

This is gonna be close.

I turn the bike around and let her loose on the 104, sucking in traffic like a big two wheeled Hoover.

The demon counts down.

Please let there be no red lights!!!



He even had time to stop for lunch. Bastard.  
I had to make do with my liquid egg whites in a thermos. Yum.

The event wrapped up nicely with a great presentation by Jacques and Jennyfer, who just prior to RDV had survived and finished the mother of them all, the 11 day Iron Butt. They regaled us with great stories and pictures into the evening, I suspect making us feel like a bunch of wussies for even thinking about being tired after our one-day sprint.

My eternal thanks to Kevin Craft and the whole Rendezvous crew, who put in a huge amount of work to make this thing possible. This event is top notch in every way, and I will run in it for as long as you put it on.

Post Script: As I finally put the last words on this story (see Kevin, told you I'd finish it... one day), the 2010 edition is less than a week away.  
I have my route figured out. It's long. It's hard.  
Streets & Trips says it'll take 12 hours.  
I say bring it.