

All Fired Up

A typical Saturday morning usually finds me trying to snooze in 'til at least 8:00 am or so. I used to be able to push that further, but like so many other stereotypes about aging, I do find myself waking up earlier and earlier as the birthdays go by. 6:00 am is a little extreme, though. Within moments all the mental gauges are in the green, so I give up any hope of trying to nod back off and trundle downstairs, power up my computer and check out what's new in the world. An e-mail from Kevin. Can't be, it's too early. But it is. The bonus locations for the 2010 Rendezvous.

Yeeeeaaaahhhh baby!

Those of you who have followed along from my last episode on the Rendezvous, or RdV for short, know that I've been waiting a long time to redeem myself for my rodeo escapades and scoring table space-outs. As discussed previously, you can plan the best route in the world, but if you time it to hit traffic or don't fill in the details ever so precisely in your scoring book, it will all be for naught.

But to even get to that point, you must indeed first hatch your Killer Route. And that means knowing what's up for grabs. So it was no lie to say that I lit up like a Christmas tree when I discovered that Kevin's e-mail did contain the magical location list. This year's version contained only three columns of data: A cryptic three or four letter code, a point value, and a map coordinate. Thankfully the coordinates were in a form that my Garmin Mapsource software readily digested, so in about 30 minutes I was able to enter all 50+ locations with the point value beside each. I then scaled back the map and looked at it the way someone does a hidden pirate treasure scroll... "Arrrrggghh, there be gold on that there screen, matey, but ye best have yer wits about ya if yer expectin' to find it!" Screw you, imaginary peg leg, one look and it nearly jumped off the monitor and grabbed me.

My first thought was that it was very odd that all of the big scores – with one exception way far to the south - should be grouped in such a reasonably neat loop. It was also odd that nearly everything of consequence was located all on the U.S side of the border. In years' past it was a pretty even split. Kevin surely must be up to something with this.

I connect the dots around all the big numbers, click "directions", and hold my breath... 950 kilometers, 12 hours. To the minute. Booyah!

This of course did not include any stops, but it looked like I could rack up some pretty impressive numbers by hitting only 10 or 11 places and, as I had hit 14 over the course of 1020 km the previous year, I knew it was possible. I spent the next hour trying to find some overlooked alternative to this setup, but absolutely nothing else even came close. Very suspicious. There's got to be a catch.

I desperately wanted to call trusted pal and fellow competitor Pete and get his take on it, but he had headed off down to the states for a convertible cruise with his woman. Knowing he likes to do the polar opposite of me and hit legions of smaller, closely grouped targets, and being far more knowledgeable

about every nook and cranny of the northeastern states, I was curious to see what he would make of this. But it would have to wait.

As it was still just after 7:00 am and not a soul was yet stirring, I thought I'd try Zenning-out on the deal, so I slipped on my headphones, hit random on iTunes and sat back to contemplate my inner RdV. Within seconds my all-time favorite Pat Benetar tune appeared, a cranky little number called All Fired Up. I sat back and let the guitar blast and Pat's melodic voice wash over me...

*Now I believe there comes a time
When everything just falls in line
We live and learn by our mistakes
The deepest cuts are healed by faith!*

It is no exaggeration to say that the hair on my arms stood on end. A sign. This is good. Very good. I sit back and air-drum and guitar along, knowing that the Rock Gods have blessed my route. There can be no turning back now.

Over the course of the next few days, I keep staring at the route in both Mapsource and Streets & Trips, making sure that it still made sense, and it always did. I send some probing e-mails to Kevin to see if he'll betray any evil secrets that would dash my plan but he was cryptic as ever, toying with me as a cat would a mouse.

I also spend a fair amount of time Google Earth-ing the bonus locations on my route to see what I might be looking for, and in no time at all evidence for Kevin's theme for this year, Think Big, becomes readily apparent. Nearly every stop contained something of monstrous proportions, a giant globe, huge lumberjack statues, big cows, you name it. So I went ahead and programmed every bit of information I could into both the title AND comment waypoint fields of the GPS to be sure that at least something relevant would appear on the screen, unlike last year's fiasco. I then went so far as to perform a full blown GPS simulation run around my home town by creating a bunch of local points and a little route to hit them. Sure enough, the comment field titles appeared, and it was then that I realized that the little GPS lady in my ear would read word-for-word whatever I had put in. Such as at one point going down a particularly twisty bit when she blurted out with great affirmation in her sexy Australian tones "Big cow on right says mooooo". I laughed so hard inside my helmet I nearly drove off the road. Good thing I hadn't programmed anything more provocative.

When Pete finally returned from his trip, it was a wonder he could understand anything I was saying over the phone: "OhmygodcheckoutthisrouteIgotit'slikesoincrediblykickassit'sworthlike10billionpointsandIjustKNOWitstheone..." I didn't bother mentioning my Pat Benetar divine intervention as Pete thinks I'm borderline insane as it is. And he should know, he's been watching me behave like this for more than 30 years. He agreed to look at the stuff over the next day and we would discuss the following evening.

Sure enough, he could instantly deduce two things:

1. My route was indeed quite points heavy
2. I was nuts if I thought for even a second that I could pull it off

In other words, it was perfect. Now I just had to wait until the start. This would be the longest week ever.

After the pre-rally hell I experienced last year, I was loath to touch the bike in any way, shape or form lest I disturb its karma. But there was no avoiding the fact that the tires were completely squared and needed to be swapped. I had been running a Michelin Pilot Power 2CT front and a Pilot Road 2 rear, a popular combo for the Blackbird, but wasn't happy with the way the Power had cupped in the front. This had never happened when I used a Pilot Road 2 front, so I decided to go back to the PR2 all-around formula. *Warning: The following contains a shameless plug for both Michelin and a local good-guy retailer. Consumer discretion is advised.* I cannot say enough about the Pilot Road 2's. They turn in at the merest thought, offer great mid-corner adjustability, stick like glue on just about any surface and are flat-out phenomenal in the rain. And they wear like iron. Even with the tons of highway commuting I do, they only really start squaring towards the end of their life, and that's typically 15K – 16K km in the rear and over 20K for the front, despite the heavy sport bike and a heavier right hand. I can also heartily recommend a great place for incredible pricing on virtually any brand or type of bike tire, Pete's Superbike in Vaudreuil. I am embarrassed to say that I had just learned of this place through my friend John Thompson who lives in Guelph, despite the fact that I can nearly see the building from the back of my workplace.

With fresh rubber on and the chain adjusted and lubed, I took her out for a test ride. Mint. Now... just don't touch ANYTHING.

I then made a comprehensive mental list of everything I would need and packed it into my baggage days in advance. This is largely thanks to my sweetheart Brigitte's long and painful beating into me – er, I mean training – to convince me of the merits of actually having your stuff ready more than five minutes before you have to leave. I even bought one of those really slick all-in-one tire repair kits that have all the tools, plugs and CO2 inflator cartridges, lest the worst happen to one of my fresh black donuts. Now onto the cameras.

A major change for this year was the introduction of the Photo Bonus system. Long used by other LD rallies in the states, this involves you taking a picture of your objective with either a digital or Polaroid camera rather than answering a question or bringing back physical evidence. In most ways I really liked this idea, makes it seem much less ambiguous, just snap a pic and go. But like everything else in this event, I've learned that the LAST thing you want to do is take anything at face value. I read and re-read the photo bonus rules over the course of the next few nights until I could practically recite them from memory. I remember reading in other rally reports that competitors would often bring a back up camera just in case, and knowing my luck this sounded like a really good idea, so I did. I charged them both up, checked to make sure they were both set to the correct time, the recommended resolution –

1600x1200 or less – and packed them away. Or at least I was sure in my mind that I had done all of the above. More on that later.

On Thursday night, I take one last look at everything, and satisfied that all is well, I head for bed. Until I am intercepted by Brigitte.

“Where’s your key?”

“What are you talking about? It’s in my jacket pocket. C’mon...”

A firm stare is all I get back.

“OK, OK...”

I go to the closet and reach into the pocket... a familiar slim shape greets my fingertips.

All is well in the world.

I pop a sleeping pill to try and calm my brain down, which is still somewhat engaged in multiple “what if” scenarios that might pop up during the riders’ meeting, and manage to get something approaching a normal night’s rest.

Friday morning. The Day Of Reckoning.

Well, maybe not, that would really be tomorrow. But tonight is the meeting when we would discover if Kevin was really planning any evil changes to upset our well laid plans. I attach the baggage and have one last look around before heading off to work, and realize that I completely forgot about installing the new gel grips I bought earlier in the week.

Hmmm.

This only takes about 10 minutes, but if you do it wrong, the things will continuously twist and slide around all over your bars, meaning your hands will slowly turn into withered claws trying to hold the throttle and steering steady for 1000 km. But it sure would be nice to have the fresh padding on the palms tomorrow. I then remember an old trick I read about on the Blackbird forum about using hairspray to install them. It’s greasy enough to let them stretch over the bars, but then quickly dries to glue them in place. Being that I live with two world class coiffure prima donnas, I figure this should be an easy score. I run in the house and madly plow through the astonishing variety of products that occupy three full shelves a foot deep in our bathroom, but no joy. Figures. I toy with the idea of trying mousse, but something tells me this would be bad. I could just see the Sunday headlines ...

“What happened to Ian?”

“Didn’t you catch the story in Le Journal? Says some guy on a Blackbird went through a barn near Coaticook at 250+. They suspect a throttle issue involving some kind of styling gel product...”

Not wanting to be a flattened monument for How Not To Install Your Grips, I decide on a 50-50 mixture of carpenter's glue and spit. Yeah, I know. But let me tell you, works like a charm. Went on in seconds and haven't budged since.

The work day comes and goes, thankfully without too much drama, and I head out for St-Jean. After a long battle with south shore traffic I grab a quick bite, meet up with the gang at the Auberge Harris. A camera crew is here too. RDS - Quebec's TV sports network - will be filming the proceedings this year for an episode of Le Show De Moto to be aired next March. Must remember not to do anything too stupid...

While waiting for the riders meeting, we are instructed to get our cameras checked out by RdV photo guru Luc. He first checks the time setting, which turned out to be wrong by exactly an hour. Oops. When mucking about with daylight savings button I must have saved it in the wrong position. With that fixed, he snaps a pic of me. This now seals the card as "mine". But what if I want to use my backup camera? "No problem" says Luc, "but the pictures must all be shot on this card, so make sure they use the same type!" I know for a fact they're both SD, as I've swapped cards back and forth between the two cameras on different trips gone by, so I'm not worried.

The crowd is abuzz in conspiracy theories about what Kevin has in store. One I share is that the Olympic Stadium bonus currently valued at a measly 19.76 points (get it?) will be announced as really being worth 1976 points. That would be a serious game changer. But it wasn't to be. In fact, once again he is surprisingly gentle on us, focusing more on putting us in a safety-oriented frame of mind rather than throwing any major wrenches in our plans. We get our route books and rally "flags", individually numbered paper plates with a Christmas motif that have to appear in our photos to prove each of us was really at the claimed locations. I then ask some dumb questions, because that's what I do at these things.

Pete and I head off to his place to digest the contents of the rally books and make sure everything is in fact what it seems. The books carry no surprises either, there are a few healthy "dual" bonuses, meaning that if you bag both locations you get an additional couple of hundred points, but none of the pairings are of help to either of us. Pete, having made no firm plans until now, decides to stick with a concentrated Vermont-New Hampshire route, with the possibility of hitting some Maine targets.

My route still stands as planned, but with one important exception; instead of starting south and running the loop counter-clockwise, I have to run it in reverse. This is because the rally book indicates that my first planned stop, a large railroad spike monument only a few kilometers south of the hotel where we start in St-Jean, can only be logged between sunrise and sunset. Because we start at 5:30 am, this means I would have to sit there for some 45 minutes to be able to grab it. But if I do it last, it's an in-out deal. This is still a hell of a risky strategy though because it's worth a staggering 1836 points, nearly a third of my planned total, so if I cut it too close on my arrival time I could throw it all away. Ugghh...

No choice, there is no way I can afford to blow that kind of time waiting around for the sun to come up. Having made the call, I then realize that this actually offers another advantage; I now hit highway 10 to

the Eastern Townships before dawn, rather than at the end of the day. This is much better for two reasons; no traffic, important if there are lanes closed at some point (and there ALWAYS is on that damn road) and less chance of radar traps, so I can be a little looser with the right hand and hopefully get some breathing room early on. The down side is that the last leg will largely be made up of I-89 coming back up north, and slabbing-it is no fun when you're already 9 – 10 hours into the ride. But this looks like the only way to go.

11:00 pm, off to bed. When I say I really planned ahead this year, I wasn't kidding. I even went so far as to haul a spare mattress over to Pete's the previous week so that I could sleep in his downstairs office in relative comfort and free from any risk of cat attack. Despite the cushy accommodations, I awake at 3:00 am, an hour ahead of schedule. But I actually feel pretty good, so rather than try and force more rest I quietly go about gathering stuff up and getting into the combat mindset. Soon we are off for the start, and as last year we make a stop at the Timmy's for a quick bite. We park both bikes right outside the window, sit down and eat. While we're doing this, Pete notes some slightly suspicious kids checking out our bikes, but since we are indeed an odd sight at this early hour he doesn't think much more about it. We climb back on and continue to the start, but at the first traffic light Pete suddenly pulls a U-turn and heads back. I'm already a few hundred meters ahead when I notice, and my first reaction is that he's forgotten his passport or something. We're still ahead of schedule though, so I'm not worried.

I stop to gas up, and by the time I arrive at the start Pete is already there. But he doesn't look happy.

"What's up?"

"MY GPS IS GONE!!!!"

It takes a second to register.

"...WHAAAAATTTT??? Are you SERIOUS?"

It looks like our shady little friends pulled a fast one while we had our backs turned. Pete had noticed that their van had circled the parking lot once before leaving, and thinks it may have passed right by the bikes at one point. I am absolutely amazed they had the balls to pull that off, as it was in the top pocket of his tank bag. I am even more surprised that they didn't grab mine, which I had left sitting in its mount, something I virtually never do.

Pete of course is absolutely furious and has pretty much decided that he's done, as that was the only record of his route. I try my best to calm him down and get him back in the game, because the truth is he really does have at least 90% of his route and stops more or less memorized, and a simple area map with some pencil marks on it would likely be all he needed to turn in a very good run. He knows this, but he's just steaming over the deal, and I don't blame him one bit. At this point fellow rider and all around good guy Perry Karsten walks in and finds out what happened. Without missing a beat he instantly offers to lend Pete one of the two GPS units off his bike (a stunning Iron-Butt-proven FJR1300 equipped like no other bike I've ever seen), ready to go with every single bonus location pre-programmed. All he would have to do is pick his spots, press "route" and he'd be good to go.

You have to realize that this is one of the truly great things about this event, it is a gathering of some of the best folks I've ever had the privilege to ride with. I had no doubt that the minute somebody heard of Pete's situation that all manner of offers would flood in, and it took about all of 90 seconds for me to be proven right. With a little cheering on from the crowd, Pete accepts and is now back in the hunt.

Speaking of fellow competitors, one is most definitely conspicuous by his absence; Cameron Sanders. RDV's reigning three-in-a-row champion was competing just weeks ago in the Iron Butt Association's IB5K, a 5 day / 5,000 mile run when about half way through the event he was running on a dark back road near O'Neill Nebraska in the middle of the night and struck a Black Angus cow. Thankfully some 45 minutes later a passing motorist found him in the ditch and he was medevac'd out to a hospital in Sioux City Iowa, where they treated him for a concussion and cracked ribs. This was an incredibly sobering reminder that LD rallying is no trivial pastime; the risks are very, very real, even for someone as skilled and experienced as Cameron. Thankfully he's reported to be doing fine, but it won't be the same today without him.

5:00 am

Kevin calls the morning meeting and throws out a couple of last minute wild card bonuses; get a picture of your bike with a Wal-Mart sign for 35 points, and pick up a Mr. Big chocolate bar for another 23. I'm really beginning to think he does this every year to collect the free sweets. We have yet to be asked to pick up any cans of tuna.

5:25 am

Helmet on, comm wire plugged in, key on, GPS on, thumb the starter... While I'm waiting for the wave-out, without me touching a thing, the mp3 player in my GPS spontaneously turns on and what should come up but AC/DC's Back In Black. I'm not kidding. Maybe the bike wants a do-over for last year? Or maybe she's just decided this is her RdV theme song. Who am I to argue?

We're out. I hit the bridge across the Richelieu river and let the tach stretch up towards the red to get the cobwebs out while the Yosh pipes scream backup to Brian Johnson's lead vocal. It's a great combo.

I back-road it from there up to highway 10 and then head east for my first stop, a double header in Coaticook. The first hour of this event still proves to be my favorite. The light of dawn breaking over the misty fields, the excitement of what the day will bring... this is what it's all about.

Just like last year I somewhat underestimate how cold it will be – as you'll recall I had originally planned on starting off to the south - but it's still pretty manageable with my summer gloves and no electrics. That soon changes. By the time I'm past Magog and onto the 141 towards Coaticook, the fog starts to set in. But it's spotty.

6:47 am

With 145 km under my belt I hit my first bonus, a big statue of a bull that we must photograph with particular attention not to miss his very impressive, um, bull bits . Done.



Eight minutes later I grab no. 2, a picture of the Coaticook pedestrian suspension bridge.



On into New Hampshire. I cross the border without a hitch, but the fog is getting real serious. Not good. By my reckoning it's the roads ahead of me for the next two to three hours that are going to make or break me time-wise. This is because I know them to be pretty deserted at this hour and I can really run here. Later on I'll have a lot of Interstate time, always well patrolled, and the afternoon back roads have many more small towns and will likely be pretty busy with traffic.

But within a few miles the fog gets so thick I have little more than a couple hundred feet of visibility, and a heavy film of water droplets collects on my visor that refuses to blow off. My left glove is now a full time wiper blade. It's also starting to wick through my jacket, but so far the liner is keeping me dry, if a little frosty. I press on. Soon the sun finally starts to break through, warming the bones and the road. I

turn onto route 26 and head into the Dixville Notch. It is a biker's dream, non-stop twisties and elevation changes on simply gorgeous asphalt of the sort we can only dream of at home. This proves to be the best riding of the day. The 'bird is in her element and devours it at a ferocious pace.

7:50 am

Errol, N.H. I arrive well ahead of schedule and actually have to wait, as the bonus here – a big white stuffed moose – is located inside the store and they don't open 'til 8:00. I take advantage of this by immediately buying some gas outside and getting an automated receipt with the time. If I get another one at 8:08 or later I can claim an extra bonus score for a 15 minute rest stop, and it will have only really cost me half that as I'm stuck here waiting anyway. While I go about my business I see a familiar looking BMW GS arrive. Michael Del Brocco appears to be running the same route as me. And this guy looks like he knows what he's doing.

By 8:10 I've bagged my rest bonus, the moose, and am out.



8:57 am

I've covered another 80 kilometers to arrive at the Rumford visitor center in Maine. Answer the question on the statue and as I leave the attendant says a guy was just here doing the same thing. I think I know who. Sure enough, while later navigating the city streets of Auburn I catch up to him and we ride in tandem for a while. Not long after getting out of the town, we hit a closed road. Oh-oh. But the GPS takes it in stride, I simply hit the detour button and it re-routes me around the closure. Michael and I split up, but it won't be long before we meet again...

I hook up onto I-295 and head south to my next stop, the Delorme map store in Yarmouth, Maine, just up the road from Portland. It's screamingly obvious what the attraction here is. Inside the massive glass storefront is the world's largest globe, "Eartha". Weighing in at nearly three tons and measuring some

41 feet in diameter, it is actually larger than the house I live in. And yes, it spins. I need a shot of Florida, and actually have to run for some time to find it, checking off the continents as I go.



As I grab my pic, Michael jogs in. This is going to be the guy to beat today, me thinks. While contemplating this, I suddenly notice something alarming. My camera is flashing "low battery". Huh??? I am SURE I charged this thing. But there was no way of knowing the battery state as the little Canon has no meter. It just tells you when it's about to expire. But no worries, I've got back up, right? And I KNOW I've charged both batteries for my bigger Lumix, 'cause the meter on that one said so. I decide that I'll keep shooting with the little one 'til it dies, then switch. Clock says 10:12. Keep moving.

I now have a long haul ahead of me; the next stop is Tilton, N.H., some 260 km away. The choice of route here was agonizing, because both Streets & Trips and Mapsource seemed to waffle between taking the back roads, a good 60 km shorter, or going the long way round on the interstate. The times were identical. The slab was probably less risky, but much less fun. And since when do I take the easy way out? Back roads it was.

Boy did I regret that. The traffic was horrible. Never ending lines of cars on town-to-town shopping expeditions, and the populated areas were much denser than I expected. My only saving grace was that the 'bird excelled at blasting past these long parades when the opportunities did present themselves in the boonies, keeping us relatively on time. At least this stretch of consumer hell bears one gift, a Wal-Mart store. Park bike in front of sign. Click. There's an easy 35 points.



12:17 pm

I reach the Tilton Arch. This has got to be the oddest thing on my route. Village namesake Charles Tilton apparently decided that what this rural New Hampshire town was missing is a 50 foot tall solid granite Roman-style archway, which he proceeded to have built on top of a hill smack in the middle of nowhere.



I grab my pic from the parking lot as instructed, and finally allow myself five minutes to guzzle down my RDV food of choice, liquid egg white. This year I've added cocoa powder and Splenda, so it's muuuuch tastier. A shot of water to chase it, peel off my jacket liner as it's actually getting warm, and I'm on my way.

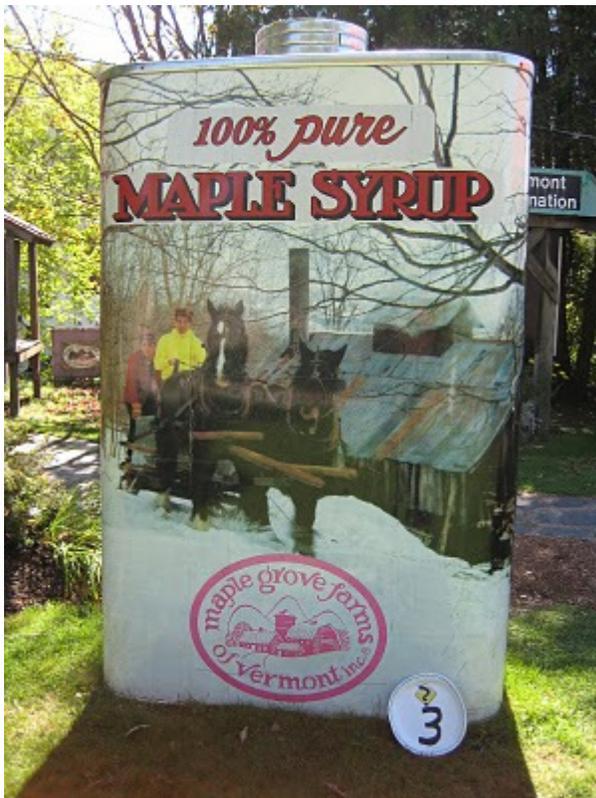
1:26 pm

Littleton, N.H. I'm now nearly 700 km into my run and starting to feel it. But so far things are going exceptionally well, the weather's gorgeous, I'm still ahead of schedule and haven't missed a beat.

The stop here is at Chutter's General Store, whose claim to fame is the world's longest candy counter. I am to go in and ask for something called a Rendezvous Special. The girls inside obviously are in on this and I'm back out the door with my dollar bag of sweets, once again to be handed over to you-know-who at the finish. I hope Kevin has a good dental plan.

For the next little while the bonuses begin to pile up, only some 50 km apart or less, which starts to seriously eat into my schedule. But that's fine, as according to my ever-aggressive Zumo GPS I started the event with some two hours of stop time available, and what little I've used until now has largely been won back on route. So I can now afford to blow a good 5 to 10 minutes per visit and not sweat it.

In fact I even decide to make another stop that I previously thought not worth it, a 50-pointer just off the highway in St-Johnsbury, VT to snap a pic of a giant maple syrup can. Too easy.



2:16 pm

Cabot Creamery, count the stuffed cows beside the tractor... Check.

3:00 pm

Middlesex Center Cemetery. Find the tombstone in the shape of a clothespin, of all things, and snap a pic. This wasn't so easy, I blew at least ten minutes both on foot and on bike circling around trying to spot this thing. At 196 points it would have been a real bummer to miss. But I finally bag it.



I'm now starting to watch the clock closely. I previously thought I could throw a few more stops on the heap, but it's quickly becoming apparent that wouldn't be wise. Stick to the plan.

3:16 pm

Last stop in America, the Ben and Jerry's factory. Get a pic of the large ice cream container. No problem there, but as I back up to take the shot, a fast moving toddler makes a run for my numbered dinner plate that's propped up against the container. Thankfully a watchful parent outruns him and intercepts, otherwise who knows how far I would have had to chase this kid in boots and full gear.



I now have exactly two hours to get back to St-Jean, snap a pic of the big spike and hit the finish. Should be just fine. I calculate that I have about a 20 - 25 minute window to get held up at the border if need be, hopefully that will be enough. And it was, only needed about 10. I thus decide that I'll add one more stop, it's only a measly 35 points, but I'm going to drive right past it, so what the hell.

I thus stop at Le Géant Antique to take a picture of, you guessed it, Le Géant. Amazingly my little Canon has still been going strong, so I decide to take an extra shot of the big guy.



Hmmm, still doesn't look quite right, let's try one more...

Silence, then a black screen.

Okay, this isn't a problem, dig out my backup camera, plug in the card, turn it on and...

"CARD READ ERROR".

What?

Turn it off. Turn it back on.

"CARD READ ERROR".

You must be kidding.

Take the card out. Put it back in. Bang the camera against my hand.

"CARD READ ERROR".

Oh no.

This is bad. Catastrophically bad.

I feel the blood drain from my face. I have no idea why this is happening. I've used this card in this camera before. Many times.

If I can't get a shot of the big spike, I'm screwed. Kiss 1836 points goodbye.

Instantly my brain begins to race... what if you try the Canon one more time when you get there, maybe the 30 minute rest from here to there will allow the battery to recover just enough to get you one shot. In fact, I suspect that's what's allowed it to last this long; I've never seen it take so many pics after the warning showed. But it's probably good and dead now. Maybe I can pull some 12V wire off the bike's harness and give the battery a quick blast, just a few seconds ought to be enough to shock it into giving one more shot. No time to debate this, my arrival window closes in just over a half hour. Gotta go and just hope that some divine inspiration hits along the way.

As I blast down the 133 towards St-Jean, I start singing Pat's song in my head...

*Now I believe there comes a time
When everything just falls in line
We live and learn from our mistakes
THE DEEPEST CUTS ARE HEALED BY FAITH!!*

Believe sonny, believe. Sure enough, as I pull into the parking lot the answer hits me. There are a ton of other riders that will surely be trying to grab this huge prize before they head in. They all have cameras. And the SD card is the most common type. SURELY someone will be kind enough to lend me theirs for 30 seconds? And I sure am right. As soon as I pull into the parking lot of the big spike location, I spot a fellow rider packing up to leave. He has a SD card camera, and no prob, I can borrow it. I swap cards and race over to the spike, snap three quick shots and hand it back to him. And yes, I did take my card back.



Unfortunately I am way too stressed out to ask for his name, and with the helmet on I can't see enough of a face for a positive ID, so I didn't get the chance to later thank him.

(Author's note: After reading this report, Kevin informs me that the gentleman responsible for this kind act is Alan Archibald from Nova Scotia. Alan, beers' are definitely on me in 2011!!!)

5:12 pm

I cross the finish line, with more than ten minutes to spare. After my last two finishes, it feels like an hour. Brigitte is there to greet me, I exhale and give her the Reader's Digest version of my day. Now it's off to the last frontier, filling out my route book and... the Scoring Table.

This is where it really counts. As I have well proven in the past, no matter how fried your mind and body are from the day-long ride, you really need to sit down, suck it up and focus here. I carefully lay out all my stuff; route book, receipts, strange things picked up along the way, and get to work. I transcribe every bit of info into the rally book with steely precision, times, distances, answers. I re-read it all twice. Looks good. I'm about to wrap it all up when something tells me I should read it again, and yes, I still manage to make some small additions.

One more read. I think I got it. I put everything in the envelope supplied and hand it over to Guylaine, who will bring it to the scoring room, and Luc gets my SD card for examination and downloading. He sees the two different camera file types.

"You had to use the backup camera?"

"Uh, yeah" I say, not wanting to complicate my story any more than necessary. They said I could use a different camera, right? Did it matter if it was mine? I can't imagine what possible difference it could make, but I'm way too paranoid at this stage to think straight.

Onto The Interminable Wait.

I must now stand guard until the judges are ready to interview me. Yes, part of the process is you have to sit down one-on-one with a scoring judge and jointly examine the contents of your envelope. This way it's clear what you did and didn't do right, and any disputes that crop up can be rectified by the Rallymaster (Kevin) on the spot and a final tally sorted out. After about an hour I finally get called in. Breathe, breathe...

My route book is pulled out, my image file gets loaded, and judge Shelley examines it all to make sure the times, images, mileages and answers carefully correspond. Each time a new picture comes up on the screen, she stares at it with an intensity befitting a CIA photo interpreter at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis. I sit, frozen like a deer in the headlights, waiting... but one by one she circles the points. Circles are good. I can't believe it. Nothing left on the table. I nearly pass out.

The evening moves into banquet mode, stories fly around the tables, and scores are hinted at. My number, 6328, sounds like it's a decent one. But as I look about the place I know there are a number of

much better equipped and more experienced riders here, so I can't really be sure where I stand. I secretly hope for somewhere in the top 5. That would be good. Oh who am I fooling... what I really want is a podium spot. Just once. Gotta wait.

9:00 pm comes and goes, and still no scores.

Sometime between the main course and dessert, Kevin emerges from the scoring room. Is this it? No, he needs to talk to someone. Me. All eyes are on us as I follow him back to his scoring lair. This can't be good.

Once in the room, he points to two laptop monitors. One displays my picture of the Tilton Arch, the other is an overhead satellite image of the same area. He asks me to look at the overhead picture and point to the spot on the ground where I was standing when I took my shot. This is because my photo doesn't really show the precise location from where my image was taken, as the arch was so far away I had to play with the zoom to get both it and my numbered plate into focus.

"Here"... as I point to a spot along the fence in the middle of the gravel parking lot. To my eye, the angle of the arch clearly matches up when looked at in either perspective. But Kevin remains poker-faced, thanks me, and sends me on my way. I can't take this anymore.

10:00 pm.

We head off to a conference room to settle in and listen to a presentation given by Peter Delean about his IB5K ride with fellow RdV'ers Cameron, Perry, Jacques and Jennyfer. I let myself get taken away in his very detailed Power Point, which nicely illustrates the long and intense process of planning, preparing and finally competing in a 5000 mile event.

But only minutes into it, someone appears in the doorway. It's Kevin. He asks if we would mind an interruption to announce the scoring. Eyes wide, we all just nod. Because of the large number of participants this year he won't be able to announce anything more than the top five spots tonight, the rest will be published online later in the week. I sit back and hold my breath.

First, a special award to the top scoring couple of Willy and Sandy Pichler. Yes, you read that right, there was not one but two rider-and-passenger couples who ran this year's event. Talk about commitment. If your relationship can survive 12 hours of this nonsense, then you're definitely good for the long haul.

Now we're down to the nitty gritty.

In fourth place, a tie, the two bike team of Jacques and Jennyfer.

Third goes to Michael Del Brocco – I knew he'd be up there!

Second is Perry Karsten. Who says nice guys finish last?

But does that mean?....

Yup.

I just about fell out of the chair. Incredible. How I managed to pull that off, with the amount of talent surrounding me in that room, amazes me. And as I sit here a week later typing this, I look at the plaque and still wonder. Truth be told, I can't really claim this as mine, since Cameron wasn't there I feel a little like one of those seat-filler people at the Oscars. But you know, I'll gladly take the gig.

A big thanks once again to KC and the Rendezvous Band for putting on a truly superb event.

For more details, pics, stories and upcoming events be sure to visit the RdV site:

<http://www.rendezvousld.org/>

Keep an eye out next March for us at: <http://www.leshowdemoto.tv/>

The best deals in Canada on bike tires: <http://www.petes-superbike.com/>

For anything you ever wanted to know about my ride: www.cbrxx.com