

The Ninety-Nine Percenter

If you've ever been absolutely, positively sure that you'd filled your gas tank, fixed your motorcycle or were looking for a lost rider in the right spot, then you know what this story's all about. By Ed Hertfelder

● AT ONE TIME MOTORCYCLISTS WERE plagued with one percenters: a strange breed of nitwit who submerged in respectability when blue jeans became fashionable. For all we know they're probably running around now in double-knit slacks, turtleneck pullovers and short hair just to be different.

I knew a ninety-nine percenter.

He rode an eight-speed Husky with enough skill to bring tears to your eyes, but when it came to timekeeping he couldn't tell the big hand from the little hand on the best day he ever had; he thought seconds were what you used at a duel. His name was Brad and he'd come up from West Virginia years ago—he goes back every year on his vacation but has never been able to find it again.

When I met Brad he was sharing a house with Ken Lather—a reasonably bad rider who's a tri-sexual. Men, women and sheep are all fair game. Ken had gotten himself in a jam with the SPCA when he had some sheep handcuffs made in a sex shop in Pennsauken. What really bent Ken out of shape was that the complaint was signed "ANIMAL LOVER."

I picked up Brad one morning when I was in a bucks-down frame of wallet towing a homemade three-rail trailer with a 1956 Volkswagen sunroof beetle which had leaking front brake cylinders and smelled like an emergency ward. Brad loaded his bike while I topped up the brake reservoir and Ken stumbled around like he'd spent all night in bed with two girls because he'd spent all night in bed with two girls. Ken's driveway is pitched like a ski jump and I'd given the brake two pumps (it takes three) when I had to cut a sharp left on Clement's Bridge Road. Brad's Husky never made the turn.

"Darn," he said, "I was ninety-nine percent sure I'd tied that thing down." Then he got out and walked back to get his motorcycle up out of the gutter. I should have helped him but my hand-brake was lying in Woody's garage and I didn't want to shut the engine off and park it in gear as the flywheel teeth were in need of some root canal work. The Barrington police car pulled up behind and started its big roof lights flashing to warn the heavy traffic: two cars an hour. Judging by the way the officer was writing on his clipboard, this was the most excitement since the victory parade after the Second World War.

"Brad," I asked as we got under way again, "did you hear about the girl who said she was ninety-nine percent sure she *wasn't* pregnant?"

"No, I don't think so."

"She called him Mandrake." I could tell he didn't understand so I added, "The baby, she called the baby Mandrake." The puzzled look on his face indicated that they don't have a lot of newspapers in West Virginia, so I asked, "That machine going to jump off again boy?"

"Nosir, nosir. Got her tied down like a John Deere on a flatcar." And that, as they say, should be good enough for government work.

When we reached the event, Sandy Lane, and unloaded, Brad made another ninety-nine call. He worried his tank cap off, looked in and said, "I'm ninety-nine percent sure I filled this yesterday," then went ahead and poured half of a five-gallon can of mix into a two-and-a-half-gallon tank. Thankfully, he had his own because I was so broke I was using Burger King ketchup pouches on my fried-egg sandwiches to keep the stale bread from catching in my craw.

It turned out to be one of my "square root" performances—late one minute at the first check, two minutes at the second, four at the third, eight at the fourth and like that until I exploded the rear tire by jumping the Jersey Central tracks and catching a rail right on the crack in the tire carcass I'd been trying not to notice the last two months. In case this has never happened to you, the bubble on the tube will "squawk" its way past the swing arm twice, then let go like a cherry bomb the next time around. It's sort of a neat explosion, but not 44 dollars' worth.

At the next narrow spot on the trail I parked it so as not to impede anyone because they tend to get testy and more than a little homicidal. The last of the "on-time" riders hustled past about the time I was putting the second coat of Chap Stick on my lips, and then Steve Seitz limped by with his bike locked in low. Steve circled around through the brush, stopped, faced me, and just sat there shaking his head. He looked down at my flat tire, shook his head some more, then motored out revving his engine somewhat higher than its design team had intended. Four times in the last year I'd broken down for one reason or another and each time Steve was in sight and broken also. The odds against this

are astronomical; that explains why Steve was struck speechless. No matter, Steve might be speechless right now, but he'd catch up on it later.

After I'd wobbled my way out to the next road crossing, I sponged a lift from two fellows who had been running an observation check, which is the check they give to the stupid fellows. You don't have to write numbers at an observation check—a simple checkmark is all you use. They dropped the tailgate of their station wagon and loaded my bike flat side down while it wept gas out the tank cap. Five minutes later it became obvious that station wagons were not designed to be driven with the tailgate down on a road paved with gravel and talcum powder; what we needed was windshield wipers and squirters on the *inside*. For some reason the driver slowed down, which meant we got slightly less talcum to breathe, but more time to suffer.

Back at the firehouse I offered the two guys some of the melted ice water from the bottom of my cooler and when they looked in and saw that all I had was melted ice water, they disappeared.

I loaded my old bike on the trailer. The machine was the last living matador; still alive due to my—ahem—superb maintenance and just a little help from Billy Dutcher, who replaced everything that turns or goes up and down because it seemed like a good idea at the time. I left my helmet and boots on the trailer fender, then hobbled across the gravel in my bare feet to the shower room, which is just one of the nice things at Sandy Lane. I'm convinced that a hot shower after a woods ride is the most enjoyable thing you can do—alone. Ten minutes later I "mooned" Chatsworth when another early DNF walked in as I was towel-drying off with one of the VW's terry-cloth seat covers. This fellow was mud from the waist down.

"Looks like that first step was a bitch," I said.

"Yeah, I followed four other guys into one of last year's sections. I don't think *they will ever get out*." Then he tightened his collar, put on his helmet and stepped under the shower.

The entire parking area was almost deserted; most of the support vehicles were out supporting. The odd vans and house trailers around probably contained sleeping jokers who'd over-partied and had cracks in their heads from the sound



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of the first motorcycles starting early that morning.

Boyd Reynolds was taking photos of my car and trailer when I returned.

"Look at this," Boyd said as he swung his arm around in a half-circle. "All these new vans and motorhomes and house trailers, and look at this poor bastard with this old car and old motorcycle!" Then Boyd focused on my boots, which had holes worn in them on the inside of the uppers from constant rubbing on rough Spanish welds. Too embarrassed to stop, I walked on past Reynolds and had a few words with Sal Scirpo, who had enough sense to quit this game before he jarred his brains loose. When the first finishers came droning in we went over to the firehouse and someone shanghaied me to write scorecard receipts for a few minutes—174 to be exact. They relieved me three-quarters of an inch before the chili ran out and the only thing left to drink was coffee made fresh at 6:00 a.m. that morning. I managed to oversalt the chili badly, forgetting that I'd rapped my right hand on a tree and it was still shaking five times faster than normal. Ed Baker, not knowing I'd run most of the first half, began telling me a war story of how treacherous the run was. I listened for awhile then suggested he get his riding boots bronzed in case they wanted them for the Enduro Riders Hall Of Fame. Baker can make a truck backfire sound like the Mt. St. Helens disaster.

Outside the firehouse I'd noticed a lot of activity around the First Aid Squad ambulance and walked over just in case Brad was under the knife and they needed his Blue Cross number before they sewed him back up again. There was no one hurt but there was a fine-looking "Candy Striper" with the crew and the young bucks were peeling last

week's brush-slice scabs off their faces then standing in line to have the girl patch them up while they tried some creative begging. If there were some way to knock 20 years off I would have been in line trying to get her to look at a gas cap bruise I was wearing. There are very few serious injuries at enduros but just having these trained, dedicated people standing by is a wise move.

Four o'clock the scores went up on the boards to begin the protest period and my man Brad hadn't finished yet, but the walking wounded were coming in "on a string" behind anything that rolled. The basic layout of the Lane runs you a mile or more into the woods along the north side of a major highway to the gas stop, then back along the south edge of the same road. Sweep crews get the disabled, depressed or demoralized riders out to this road where the passing support vans and trucks pick up most of them. Some riders, however, borrow a new throttle cable or countershaft sprocket or whatever and return to the trail *behind* the sweep crews, disqualified, but unable to resist the powerful urge to finish the event. A second breakdown or a well-twisted knee can put these troops into the Just How Dumb Can You Get? category. Even when they reach the gas stop, they have nothing to look at but tire tracks, a few cigarette butts and maybe some plastic straws from chain-lube cans.

They presented the trophies at four o'clock to the applause of some 200 people; 10 minutes later there might have been 30 left but I doubt it. Lord knows where Brad was, I'd picked up his empty gas can so at any rate he'd gotten to the fuel stop at 40.8. There was little to be gained by asking the returning sweep crews if they'd seen rider #27C; these fellows had been out since dawn this morning checking to see if the trail mark-

ing was intact, filling in a check crew when it was kidney draining time and explaining to soft-handed people on hard-mouthed horses that it might be wiser to ride the south fork on the trail today. These guys would have trouble remembering their waist size much less the number on a broken-down motorcycle. Instead of bugging the trail riders individually I asked "trail boss" Bill McGonaghy if they'd left any Huskies out there to die on the second half. Forty-five minutes later Bill told me there were four bikes on the entire second half that hadn't been towed out yet; one was a girl who was afraid to be towed but one of his sweepers had fallen in love with her and was helping push the thing out; another was a guy working on his ignition who told the sweepers he was "ninety-nine percent sure he'd get running again."

"Bill, I'm ninety-nine percent sure that the 'ninety-nine percenter' is the one I'm after," I said.

McGonaghy gave me some simple directions to where Brad was hung up and I knew the area sort of reasonably well. Following through on it, Bill walked over to my car with a map he'd drawn on the back of an entry blank. At the time I'd just shifted into reverse and, since my old beetle has clutch springs left over from Panzerkampfwagen Mark 4s and shifting into reverse brings into use muscles that human beings haven't used since we swung in trees, I was sitting motionless, with a cramp the size of a grapefruit on the inside of my right thigh, taking shallow breaths and gasping "aah, aah, aah, aah." McGonaghy merely dropped the map in my lap then walked away shaking his head.

Brad was within a yard of where McGonaghy said he'd be. He had pushed his bike over a full mile in deep sugar sand, parked it against the railing of a small bridge on a one-lane blacktop and was sitting under the bridge with his bare feet in the water. He said he was about ninety-nine percent bushed and I told him to use the other percent to load up his motorcycle as I didn't intend to move my right leg until next Thursday. I wasn't kidding either; I drove us home gearing down to slow the beetle and used the hand brake only for full stops.

By the time I swung into Ken's driveway my leg felt like it had cooled down to body temperature again, and I lifted it with my hand under the knee and pushed the brake tentatively for I sure didn't want the cramp back again. The brake pedal dropped flat to the floor!!

We ran off the end of the driveway into the backyard shoving a trash barrel in front of us, added an outdoor grill on the way, then mashed both of them into a steel tool shed.

"Son of a gun, Brad," I said, "I was ninety-nine percent sure I'd checked that brake fluid before we left!"