



“How **Fast** Do You Ride?”

(And Other Stuff Reporters Want to Know)

By Chris Cimino

Here's a quick test.

Only one of the following statements is true. Which one?

1. Ken Hatton rides 140 mph when competing in the Iron Butt Rally.
2. Rick Morrison and Gary Eagan are sponsored by the Ducati Factory Race Team.
3. I dropped my manufacturer-lent Kawasaki three times in the mud while attempting to get to the Bristlecone bonus.

Stumped? It's number 3. It sucked, too, as the bike is damn heavy and not easy to lift in the mud. My wife still chides me about it since she had recommended 30 minutes earlier to abandon the bonus.

Get it wrong? Don't worry. You probably read the other "facts" in an article.

As long as there has been an Iron Butt Rally, there have been reporters rifling around the parking lot trying to scoop the skinny, some invited, some not. News coverage of the Iron Butt is a necessary evil. Necessary because the Iron Butt is, after all, a highly competitive event with winners, losers and drama to spare. Who can forget the image of Peter Hooegeven's battered Blackbird as he finished in 1997, leg bleeding, motorcycle bleeding, being followed by the very tow truck to which he refused to surrender and DNF, only to finish 2nd, again? Or, what about poor Keith Hanchar, arriving in Chesterfield by tow truck (a theme?), devastated, searching for his CBR1000 that Alex Schmitt had borrowed, just so he could avoid a DNF when his own ST1100 cried *No mas?*

The IBR is the stuff of legend. The best of the human spirit. The latest and greatest in technology and motorcycle development, pitted against the elements, preparation and, often, the anachronism of vintage equipment and classic strategy. From a purely voyeuristic point of view, it is hypnotic. Anyone who has hit the Refresh button a hundred times each day of the IBR to read the latest rally report knows it is an engrossing story to read and, therefore, be told. From an economic standpoint, coverage of the event serves to promote the Iron Butt mystique as an ongoing business venture, strengthening the brand and ensuring future events, products and services. Unfortunately, this need for coverage often flies in the face of the news reporter's need for relevance.

Odds are, if you compete in the IBR, you can expect to be asked questions by a reporter. A recent, completely unscientific poll of IBDONE members suggested half of all finishers have been interviewed at one time or another. The attention can be flattering. But, if unprepared, the questions can catch you off guard and your answers can be twisted out of context, leaving you frustrated to see "your" words in print with an entirely different, even misleading voice. And, retractions (when printed) offer little satisfaction. You can't un-ring a bell and you were the giant gong. For this reason, Press Awareness has been the

subject of a pre-rally session at every IBR since 1999.

However, knowing how to respond to these questions shouldn't be limited to just those competing in an IBR – everyone who participates in a long distance challenge or rally should be press savvy.

A common approach practiced by at least half of IBDONE members is to simply avoid being interviewed, politely declining. If you chose to answer questions, short, thoughtful responses are best. Understanding the reporter's motivation can be a good defense to being prepared with answers. Like every other rally prep, it is boils down to risk awareness, acceptance and management.

Third party reporters generally fall into four categories: Professional Feature, Professional Lifestyle, Program Host/Columnist and Amateur (blogger). For purposes of this article, I have excluded the first person narrative told by the rider in his or her own words, such as through a website, series of articles or book.

The Professional Feature reporter has already pitched the idea for the article to an editor, either during production meetings if on staff, or through the query process if free lance or a stringer. While the reporter has likely surmised an angle or slant for the story, he or she will often resist steering the article in a predetermined direction. Good editors will encourage the writer to let the story unfold without forcing it. Feature reporters often immerse themselves in the subject matter or study principal characters, intent on conveying the experience or representing a unique point of view to the audience. They tend to ask open questions, instigating discussion. They will welcome your questions as to their interest and motivation, but will deftly redirect the discussion back to their queries. They may take notes for reference or to record a quote. They may even contact you later to follow up on a thought or confirm material before submitting their product. They also tend to survive professionally by reputation. Magazines do not pay enough for feature writers to risk alienating editors or readers by misrepresenting facts for entertainment purposes. Miscues always find a way into the light, usually through a barrage of reader letters, causing embarrassment and loss of credibility. The reporter may lose his welcome to pitch subsequent ideas for articles. While not just a loss in income, it can mean surrendering the keys to the coveted press garage. No more free toys. Ouch!

The Professional Lifestyle reporter is assigned the story by an editor, usually with a predetermined, desired slant. The reporter's task is to get images and quotes that support the desired storyline, and roll everything into a neat package an audience will want to read or watch. The practice is less Journalistic Integrity, as Bob Higdson so eloquently defined, and more Journalistic Efficiency. Lifestyle reporters are utility bit players, moving seamlessly from the plight of animal shelters with too little space, to the 97 year-old woman receiving her high school diploma, with equal enthusiasm, praying all the while the dogs attack or the new graduate strokes out on camera. They rarely take time to understand the subject matter being reported beyond getting their own name right with the station identification. They tend to ask leading questions, steering the discussion. They may also phrase questions to elicit answers that support the desired slant. "How fast do you ride?" "Don't you get tired?" "Isn't that dangerous?" are common questions from the Lifestyle reporter, all intended to support the premise of a



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high-speed race with catatonic riders strafing small towns. If your answers are not exactly as desired, they may repeat your answer, paraphrased for effect.

Bob Mutchler, easily the Association’s most experienced interviewee, recalls how reporters can try to direct the answer. “Do reporters try to steer me towards certain answers? Constantly. I have learned to think about what I am going to say before answering and then be as succinct as possible while giving the answer I want them to hear. I have also learned early on that the more an interviewee says, the easier it is to “cut and paste” out of context.”

Lifestyle reporters will be vague about their motivation, answering in double-talk or lofty aspiration. Your bogus bonus meter should be pinging by now. Trust your gut and politely disengage, leaving the reporter nothing to twist. Avoid the temptation to correct, educate or bludgeon.

Program Hosts and Columnists are a unique hybrid of stylish, engaging personalities and reporters. They often have a defined voice and audience to entertain. You are the bit player in *their* recurring show, filling allotted time. Most are benign and not confrontational. Some are even thoughtful. They may discuss the intended questions ahead of time, giving you an opportunity to consider your answers and relax. But, if you are unfamiliar with the show or the host’s “voice,” you may want to consider avoiding the interview altogether. These guys attack for a living; not a place for amateurs.

Reporters almost always report to an editor who reviews the submitted material (much like Bill Shaw will review this column) looking foremost for appropriateness. Does the piece complement other articles in the issue or edition? Often magazines issues or recurring programs will have a theme orchestrated by the editor. Is the piece entertaining? Does it resemble what the reporter and editor initially discussed? To a much lesser extent, is it accurate? Contrary to perceived opinion, publications rarely check facts unless there is a clear risk of retaliatory liability. Editors will often, well, edit submissions by cutting extraneous passages that don’t support the intended or desired storyline. Occasionally, they may even add language to clarify or emphasize. Also, most adhere to the Liberty Valance Principle of Journalism, that is “when the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

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Unfortunately, even the most thoughtful reporter and conscientious rider can be bushwhacked in post-production by an aggressive editor who feels the story or quote needs more oomph or pizzazz to carry the point. Since you almost never get to see the final version of the article before production, knowing the reporter’s motivation and intended audience can help you assess this risk. Trust your instincts. If in doubt, politely disengage or decline. Enlist help from other riders, if needed.

Based on my earlier unscientific study, most interviewed riders confirmed being asked most often about speed. While the wording may vary, the central theme of the answers was consistent about riding the same during the event as on any other ride. Some riders chose to redirect the question by answering about the need for speed when stopped, even measuring the time to fuel, eat and pee. Monster Sportster rider, Brett Donahue, has even mentioned sleep bonuses. “If they hear that we get points for sleeping or resting, and how that works,” says Donahue, “it REALLY seems to deflect and deflate the, sleep deprived speed demon mentality.” All are excellent tactics, leaving the reporter little to twist and having the side benefit of being true and, thus, easier to remember.

Second to the dreaded speed question was the oft asked “Isn’t this dangerous?” Again, Mutchler’s experience is equally profound. “Never talk about speed, risk or danger. The reporter

is hoping you will massage your own ego by talking about these things. Rather, say how easy this sort of riding is for you because you have trained for it and are comfortable with the activity.” Kids, don’t try this at home.

The fourth category of “reporters” is the Blogger. Amateurs with too much time on their hands and without the benefit of editorial discretion or review, reporting for “truth” or, more likely, the sound of their own voices. Sadly, one of the many byproducts of the Internet, aside from the resources to locate every girl you didn’t get to sleep with in college, is its universal megaphone.

Bloggers don’t worry much about journalistic integrity as they don’t have sponsors, advertisers, editors or (many) readers to satisfy. Just a keyboard and the sound of one hand typing. Bloggers usually start the interview with a shared experience, trying to impress their credibility upon you so you will want to talk to them, your kindred brother. Phrases such as “When I was riding...blah blah blah” or “I have found that...blah blah blah, don’t you agree?” Avoid bloggers. Decline the interview. Politeness is optional.

In summary, it pays to be aware of the risks of being interviewed. Assess the risks beforehand and consider how you will respond when asked, even if the response is to politely decline. If you do choose to be interviewed, practice TBS (Think Before Send). Determine which category best describes the reporter so you can better understand his or her motivation. Listen to the question asked, repeating it if necessary. Consider how your answer will appear in print or on camera. How easily can your answer be misconstrued or taken out of context? When in doubt, back out. Or, enlist others to help. 🍌