

## HAZEL'S MONSTER

by Bob Higdon, copyright Iron Butt Association 1993, Chicago, Illinois

It is an improbable bike for the Iron Butt Rally, the black BMW K75RT. Arrayed near it are the Wing and Venture starcruisers, which threaten by their awesome presence to grind ""The World's Toughest Motorcycle Competition"" to bits. When one of them lifts off the pad on the first leg of the event, people glance nervously at the Beemer, hoping that it won't be flattened by jet wash.

But even more improbable than the K75 is the rider. She is Ardys Kellerman, 5.33 feet in length and 61.45 years in age, a woman who has a grandchild nearly older than one of her competitors in the rally. She ignores the remarkable fact that she is the second oldest rider in this crushing endurance competition, and the only woman. Ardys is used to being the only babe. What bothers her is that she is not the oldest entrant, period. But she plans to be one day, figuring that Garve Nelson, at 69, can't keep up this insane riding forever. And Ardys has youth and treachery on her side.

For someone who didn't even sit on a motorcycle until she was nearly 53 years old, Ardys has taken some giant steps. Her preliminary hops on a couple of small-bore Hondas invariably led to laughter at gas stations. It hurt. Stupid, stereotypical jokes frequently do.

""But on my first big ride, all the way to Florida, a friend realized that I was depressed. He introduced me to her."" The tone is almost reverential. ""I met Hazel Kolb.""

The American Motorcyclist Association has named their highest award after Hazel Kolb. It is the medal of honor for motorcyclists.

""Hazel convinced me that it was their problem. I was seeing the country. They weren't seeing anything."" They sure didn't see what Ardys was about to do.

In 1986 she bought an R80RT and joined the BMW Motorcycle Owners of America, an organization that prides itself on harboring long-distance gunslingers. They have a contest, running from mid-April to mid-October, to award the Heavy Hitters. In consecutive years Ardys finished first, second, and third in the women's category. She ran in a blur from Jacksonville, FL to San Diego, becoming only the second distaff member of the Iron Butt Association's prestigious 50cc club (coast-to-coast in under 50 hours).

""At Hazel's last year at the Americade,"" Ardys says wistfully, ""she introduced me as the monster she'd created.""

In 1990, her fourth year in the contest, Ardys rode 50,089 miles in six months, beat the second place woman by two light-years, and lost to the top male rider by under 1,500 miles. No woman, before or since, has come within 10,000 miles of that performance.

""Once I get going,"" she says quietly, ""I don't stop.""

At the rider's meeting in the middle of Texas on the eve of the start, Mike Kneebone, the Iron Butt's rallymaster, said that the first checkpoint was in Los Angeles. The in-your-face bonus was to get there by way of Louisiana. Don't do it, Mike told them.

Ardys did it, averaging nearly 60 mph for 35 straight hours.

As Norman Mailer recently wrote in Esquire, "The very best move is often near the very worst." At the first checkpoint in Los Angeles she was in second place. But the cost in fatigue had been high. "I don't have a very good record for listening to people," Ardys admitted.

A missed turn the next morning turned into a time-barred arrival in Spokane, the loss of 4,000 points, and condemnation to "also ran" status for the '93 Butt. She still finished, averaging 940 miles a day every day for eleven consecutive days. In the process she beat the men who had finished first, second, and third in the '91 Iron Butt. Admittedly, Garve Nelson, her AARP rival, had cleaned her clock this year, only because of the missed checkpoint.

"But I averaged 200 miles a day more than he did," she smiles confidently.

One robin does not a spring make, nor one missed checkpoint a failure. A life is measured by the sum of its accomplishments and the audacity of its brilliant, near-miss failures. In such an equation Ardys Kellerman's efforts begin to form a division sign that the rest of us can only admire.

Once I get going . . .

"I suppose there's an Iron Butt '95 in your future?" the casual observer asks.

"Oh, yes!" Ardys says with a smile. "This was my first one. Now I know what to expect." We can only wonder what her competitors might expect from Hazel's monster.