

Wendy Crockett

Biggest challenge for the first woman to win the 11,000-mile Iron Butt Rally will be trying to top that.

> By **Alisa Clickenger**

The infamous Iron Butt Rally (IBR) conjures images of anti-social people, short on sanity, humming along highways and skimping on sleep, to ride the required 11,000 miles in 11 days. Held every other year since 1984, the IBR is indeed a test of endurance, strategy and stamina.

In 2019, Wendy Crockett became the first woman to win the Iron Butt Rally. She speaks of it with such raw and infectious passion that it makes one wonder whether completing the IBR might be much more than quickly racking up miles. A motorcycle mechanic, mother and avid motorcyclist, Crockett began riding in her youth.

"I don't come from a motorcycling family," she said. "But for some reason, I was always fascinated with motorcycles and got one as soon as I moved out of my parents' house."

Soon after, she discovered long-distance motorcycle riding and started traveling North America, routinely averaging over 50,000 miles per year. Upon learned about the Iron Butt Rally, Crockett knew she'd found her calling.

"This is my Zen and my release," she said. "My connection with that which is both greater than myself and deep within myself. You can't put those moments into your GPS. Rally riding is not for everyone, but it's right for me. Any excuse to be out there, leaning, twisting, seeing, smelling, feeling, focusing, absorbing. Any opportunity to be so overwhelmed by the majesty of it all that I have no choice but to hone in and thoroughly experience the precise



Wendy Crockett rode 13,000 miles in 11 days during the 2019 Iron Butt Rally aboard her trusty Yamaha FJR touring bike, the first woman to finish first.

splendor of this solitary moment. This is why I rally."

IT'S NOT THE BIKE, IT'S THE RIDER

During this year's IBR (her fifth), Crockett rode 13,000 miles in 11 days on her Yamaha FJR, modified for long distances. She has added several comfort modifications to the bike, such as bar risers, highway pegs and a backrest, but loves her custom Russell Day-Long seat. Suspension modifications support the extra weight of a fully loaded rally bike, including auxiliary lighting and an auxiliary fuel tank.

"All of these modifications are great for personal comfort, but none of them are a necessity," Crockett said. "Every rally includes nearly-stock bikes, vintage bikes, small displacement bikes, dual-sports, even scooters. You name it, someone has probably ridden something like it in the Iron Butt Rally. It's been said, 'It's not the bike, it's the rider.' That is absolutely true."

As a long-distance rider, I inquired whether riding in a rally adds to or takes

away from the experience. Does competition add another flavor to it?

"Endurance competitions are like an epic road trip adventure with which someone else has surprised you," Crockett said. "Most people spend countless hours researching, plotting and preparing for standard long-distance motorcycle travel. When you set out to ride a rally, you will embark on a day or weekend or a few weeks of riding, with very little information beyond where you will begin and end."

"That might not sound like a ton of fun on its surface, but think about it like this: Do you have favorite spots? Local gems that require local knowledge or venturing off the beaten path? What if you had a team of people assembling such places, across a state, country or continent? The best riding roads, fantastic restaurants, picture-book towns, bizarre museums, obscure historical sites, you name it. Places you are unlikely to stumble upon in a typical ride, let alone string together in one amazing adventure."

ADAM FONDREN

THE FIRST FEMALE WINNER

For Crockett, rally riding is about the experience, but she also loves the challenge: preparing, strategizing and executing that plan flawlessly adds to the thrill. She admitted to not expecting to win, and that becoming the first woman to win the IBR felt surreal. She also said the long-distance motorcycling community is extremely welcoming and supportive of all riders.

"I wasn't sure that my route this year was going to get me a top 10 finish, although I felt good that I'd given it my all," Crockett said. "Within the endurance riding community, there isn't a separate category for women riders; your finishing position is your finishing position. I've never experienced anything different or negative as a woman rider. The community support after my win has been mind-blowing.

"Outside of that community, I have been surprised and pleased at the impact my win has had. As a female, I might seem a bit more approachable to a wider group of people who are interested in the ride. Overall, it has been great. Anything we can do to generate excitement and draw new people into the powersports community, maybe even into endurance riding, is a big win."

CROCKETT'S IBR STRATEGY

While the ability to see unfamiliar places, meet like-minded souls, and push your own edge sounds enticing, there are certain challenges endurance riders face. Fatigue, sleep deprivation, the necessity to remain focused and navigate well are all serious factors in an 11-day, 11,000-mile ride. Even for experienced riders, this is no easy task. Crockett is an excellent rider and in great physical shape, the simple secret to her success.

"Endurance rallies are to motorcycle riding what ultramarathons are to walking around the block," Crockett said. "You don't start by running 100 miles; there is a lot of training in preparation for an event like that. You don't run at full speed all the time, or

you'll burn out fast. The same goes with endurance rallies. Fatigue management is critical to a safe and successful ride.

"It has taken years of trial-and-error to figure out what works best for me, and that's not necessarily what works best for anyone else. I don't use caffeine, sugar, or anything else to feel artificially awake. I stay strict with food intake—whole foods, low carb—making sure I'm not constantly snacking my way through. This helps my body stay on an even keel and helps me better recognize the signs of fatigue."

While the ability to spend long hours in the saddle is helpful, Crockett said strategy is even more important.

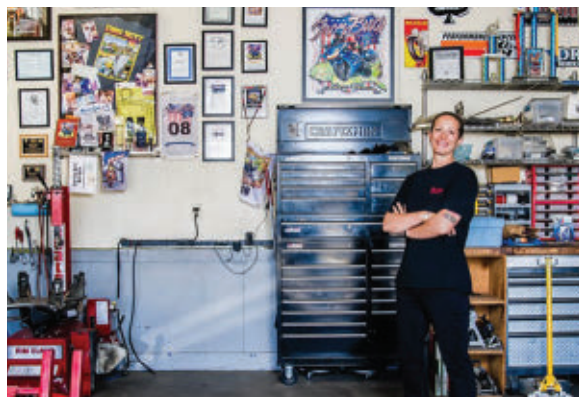
"The big skill is being able to handle the puzzle element," Crockett said. "Processing lots of waypoint information, sorting out the best possible options, keeping your personal goals, determining if you can reach those locations within their time limitations, without missing your next checkpoint window, and converting all of those waypoints and routes over to whatever routing device you are using."

NEW YEAR, NEW ADVENTURES

The 2019 IBR win was exhilarating for Crockett, but she is already busy plotting her next big adventure. In 2020, she plans to explore Central and South America on two wheels, with rides on other continents in mind.

"Motorcycles are my greatest passion," she said, "so my bucket list is simple: I want to experience as much of the world as possible on two wheels."

There's little doubt those new adventures will be as extraordinary as her IBR win. This incredible woman will continue to inspire countless riders around the world. Effortlessly combining skill, experience, an open mind and a kind heart, Crockett is a two-wheeled heroine to watch, a true evangelist of the sport, in the most down-to-earth package possible. **MCN**



BEING THERE

Excerpts from Crockett's IBR memoirs:

During those 11 days, the sun rose over the vast, rugged Nevada desert. The sun set on the lush beauty of the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec. The weight of a deep, moonless night, was felt in the most distant corners of the Everglades, as was the buzz of humanity, in a Washington, D.C. traffic jam, at 1 a.m. on a Friday morning.

Not certain exactly when or where, riding in the rain, in the middle of the night, the wind shifted just so, such that the only sound, the only sensation in the world, was the quiet pull of tires against wet pavement. Riding through a misty dawn, I came upon a moose in a field of tall, willowy wildflowers, in every imaginable shade of red, pink, orange, purple and white. She was simply enjoying her breakfast, and regarding me with the same fascination.

Exactly the right song played, at exactly the right minute, as though the cosmos was telling me exactly where I was meant to be at that moment in time. The breathtaking symphony of distant thunderstorms, powerful and beautiful, and nearly impossible to capture in all its majesty, simply must be experienced and absorbed. Moments where the sky is so blue, the air so calm and warm, the ride so fluid and effortless that the entire world melts away, and I'm left with calm focus that rivals the most ardent meditation.

I have formed connections with people who, outside of this pursuit, I never would have had occasion to meet. People who make my life richer, fuller, more complete. You can do any of these things, right now, should you desire. Load up, head out, and be confident to have such experiences, at your leisure.

Some places and things can be experienced at will, but the deeper enjoyment and more impactful experiences can't be scheduled. You just have to be in the saddle and allow these moments to come to you.