

THE BLACK WATER 100



HARE SCRAMBLES, WEST VIRGINIA STYLE

*"Such a place, all dangerous places being obscured under a cloak of moss." From **The Fairfax Line**, by Thomas Lewis, 1746.*

By Rick Sieman, Paul Clipper, & Tom Webb
Photos by Arlene Sieman & Janice Jones.

In 1746, Thomas Lewis, a surveyor, made a long and grueling trip through the mountains of the Virginias to map them out for his employers. Lewis, a highly educated man with terrible spelling habits, kept notes during his journey, which went from September 10, 1746, to February 24, 1747. The book is faithful, in that it retains the oddities of the language of the day. It makes for interesting reading if you're considering racing the Blackwater 100 Hare Scrambles, held in the swamps and mountains surrounding the town of Davis, West Virginia.

This year, the entire editorial staff of *Dirt Bike* loaded up and headed east to participate in this most grueling of all events. Last year, we had our butts well and truly whipped. We weren't ready, mentally or spiritually.

This year, we were ready!

Sort of.

Sieman and Clipper tried to scare Webb senseless with horror stories during the trip. Krause, after hearing a few of the tales, immediately volunteered to be a photographer. In spite of name-calling, chiding and numerous innovative threats, he refused to even consider riding a bike. They don't call him Mr. Know-It-All for nothing.

For those unfamiliar with the term "hare scrambles," a bit of explanation is in order. Basically, it's a 100-mile race consisting of a number of loops. In this case, it's five 22.6-mile loops, run through the town of Davis and into the surrounding countryside.

The "countryside" varies from deep woods to bottomless bogs, liberally laced with rivers and streams. One other thing adds a degree of difficulty to the race: It rains an average of 340 days per year in Davis. That means your chances of having a dry event are not too wonderful. The *DB* staff refers to the place as "Wet Virginia," at times.

After seeing the photos of the mud and hearing the lurid war stories about the race, you might wonder just why we trek back there each year. Well, much of the reason is because of the challenge, but a big part of it is the way the folks are. You simply cannot find a more friendly group of people. They come from Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, Maryland and just about every place else imaginable. Dave Henry and Suzy Mingo made the trek up from Florida, one young fellow from Alberta, Canada, traveled 3000 miles and Jim Yehl (from Jones Goggles) flew in from Colorado. Black-



The Blackwater 100 starts right in the middle of the town of Davis, West Virginia. Eventual winner Mark Hyde (Husky) drew number five and a front-row position. When the rope was raised, Mark never looked back.



In complete contrast to the smooth ride put in by Hyde, we see DB editor Tom Webb stuck up to his cupcakes in a prime Blackwater goop hole.

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water is rapidly becoming *the* prestige event on the East Coast.

The man behind all this controlled chaos is none other than Dave Coombs, a retired moonshiner and ex-con from Morgantown, Wet Virginia. Each year, Dave spends endless days in the swamps and woods, trying to lay out a course that will amuse, delight and confound the racers. While he's doing all of this riding, his lovely wife Rita is doing all of the *real* work: getting riders signed up, assigning numbers and answering endless questions.

The staff of *Dirt Bike* has learned not to trust Coombs. He'll look you straight in the eye with the sincerity of a large beagle and tell you the most outrageous lies imaginable. His course layouts would terrify a weasel and even the local black bears shy away from the ribbons hanging on the bushes. It's rumored that Coombs is this way because of his abnormally high intake of Jalepeno peppers. While in California, Dave acquired a taste for these fiery green items and hardly a day goes by that he doesn't have a few dozen of them. One look at those thin, squinty lips will confirm this rumor.

Anyway, the *DB* crew arrived in Davis, ready as possible to do battle with the elements. Clipper had an immaculate 1983 KTM 125, Sieman was on a 250 Maico MXer with a wide-ratio gearbox, and Webb was mounted on a 490 Maico. No, Sieman did not ride the famed and feared 760 Maico again this year.

Our special thanks go out to KTM and Maico for supplying the bikes. Selvaraj Narayana and Gary Hurto of Maico East prepped the red bikes and Rod Bush guided Clipper through the mysteries of setting up the KTM. However, the best-laid plans of men and mice, as they say, oft times do go awry.

* * *

UNCHAINED MELODY

By Rick Sieman

• Andy Poole, the Metzeler pusher, looked ready. He'd lost about 30 pounds since the last Blackwater and had abandoned his four-strokes in favor of a new Maico 490. He'd never gone more than one lap before, but this year there was a certain determination in those beady little eyes. Bets were accordingly placed against him, but a bit more cautiously than before. Last year, he had to eat a five-gallon can of military surplus crackers because he only made one lap. This year?

* * *

Dirty Harry (of Dirty Harry's Bikes, Verona, Pennsylvania) sighed and said, "Look, if you want to do good at



Yet another *DB* editor extracting himself from the mud. S. Hunky retrieves his Maico from a fate too sickening to discuss in a family magazine.

Blackwater, you have to treat it like a fast trail ride, not a race. If you try to race it and make a mistake, you'll spend a lot of time getting your bike out of a sink hole. Think real hard and study everything in front of you before you proceed." Harry makes four laps just about every year and is a model of consistency.

* * *

Jim Yehl, owner of Jones Goggles, looked in dismay at the bike Dave Coombs supplied him for the event. It was an outrageously ratty 450 Maico that was jettied for 5000 feet below sea level. "Well," he mused, "at least it has a new spark plug in it." At this, Dave Coombs bolted around the van, rapidly removed the fresh Champion and cross-threaded in a vintage B8E7, then left mumbling something about needing a spare plug for laying out the last section. Yehl looked at the dark sky, closed his eyes and gulped.

* * *

Velvet Jones, a rider out of Dirty Harry's shop, pushed his bike to the starting lineup, all dressed in white and looking like a million bucks. I asked Harry why anyone would ride this event in new gear, let alone white gear. He scratched his chin. "Well, Velvet has a lot of enthusiasm, probably more than any rider out of my shop, but he sure crashes a lot. You can count on three or four crashes every few miles. I think he wears the white so he can spot the blood real easy. Then he knows he isn't dead. Or something like that."

* * *

After the race, Velvet Jones was walking around, waving his one good arm and talking enthusiastically, holding a drink in the hand strapped in the sling. His shoulder and arm looked as if they'd been chewed on by a large dog. His white riding pants and jersey were the color of the first big bog. Dirty Harry had just come in from his fourth and final lap, tired but satisfied. Andy Poole was still

out on the course, on *his* fourth lap. Harry mentioned that he'd seen Andy trying to kickstart his bike in waist-deep mud. Andy's girlfriend got out a set of rosaries and lit the first of several candles.

* * *

My 250 Maico was the perfect bike for this run. It had smooth power and could be lugged through the snotty woods in second and third gear. In the deep bogs, second gear and full throttle did the job. I never even fell on the first lap, but I will admit I rode more cautiously than a granny lady. Like Dirty Harry said, "Treat it like a fast trail ride if you want to finish." The Maico glided through the woods, churned through the mud and ignored the water. I knew, I just *knew*, I was going to make four laps.

* * *

At the riders' meeting, Coombs got up with the microphone and cleared his throat. "Alright. Here's the deal. Now listen up, you riders. When you come to the last water crossing, you'll only have a few miles left before you get into town. This stream is not too deep—maybe two feet—but on the exit side, there's this bank that's about 14 feet high and almost vertical. We've got some people there to help you out of the stream if you get into trouble. Here's the catch, though. If you don't give it a decent try at getting up the wall, they'll let you sit in that river until you're old enough to retire. Do I make myself clear? Oh yes . . . that *will* be a spectator point, right off of Highway 93. So put on a show for the folks, okay?"

* * *

By letting other riders dive into the bogs before me, I was able to find out where the good lines were. At one particularly gruesome bog, I clutched in and stopped the bike, looking for a decent line, or for some fool to wander on into it. There were a dozen riders stuck up to the gas tanks. Behind me, another rider pulled up and halted, studying the situation. I motioned for him to go right ahead and he shook his head "no." A third rider joined our little group, then another. None of us was willing to go first. A ring-ding sound came through the woods and a rider on an old DT Yamaha, dressed in Levis, charged right into the bog and promptly sank up to the gas cap. Not there. Finally, we all headed way off to the right side and took a chance through the tall weeds. Two of us made it. Two joined the guy on the DT.

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Because it wasn't raining on raceday, there were fewer actual hazards than last year's event. But, the race was much more grueling and pounding. Coombs put in more deep woods than he'd ever put in before. Even though the woods weren't as tight as, say, the Fireball 100, I spent a great deal of time smacking into saplings



Water crossings were no big problem this year . . . as long as you were water-proofed. YZs had the most grief. KTMs and Maicos ignored the wet stuff.

and saps (the larger saplings). Strange thing about those woods: If you play it safe and try to go too slow, your tires build up with mud and become twice their normal size. You have to shift up and get *some* speed to keep the tires clean. I was very glad that my bike was shod with fresh Metzlers, front and rear.

* * *

One bog looked genuinely dangerous. I clutched in and studied both sides, hoping for a rider to make a try and give me a clue. Aha! A Lojak, one of the woods-riding whizzes from Pennsylvania. The saddles of their bikes wear a white "Lojak" inscription. This particular Lojak—Ed, I believe—darted quickly to the right, went up about 20 yards then nailed it straight for the bog. For a while he looked great, then he sank the front end of his Husky up to the triple clamps and bailed off. I went another 100 yards to the right, found a decent line and snaked across. A quarter mile later, I looked back and saw a figure bent over the bike, trying to extract it. A small shiver ran up my spine.

* * *

The first time the chain tossed, I didn't think anything of it. The second time got me worried. I still had a half-dozen miles to complete the second loop and get back to the pits for an adjustment. Three more tossed chains and I was starting to worry, so I backed off a bit and tried to take it gentle on the links.

After getting through the last water crossing (by tossing the bike away with a flourish and crawling up the bank like a muskrat), I felt better—only a few miles to go.

The engine revs climbed and I knew without looking that the chain had broken or jumped once again. There it was on the ground, stretched out in a straight line like a bizarre snake. I moved the Maico to the side of the trail, retrieved the chain, noted that the master link was ruined and rummaged through the tank bag for a new master link. In that bag, I had two DID 520 links and two Regina Extra links. When I tried to insert the DID item into

the chain and it wouldn't fit, a flash of panic hit me. Frantically, I bit open with my teeth another small plastic bag and fished out the Regina master link. Same story. In desperation, I tried the other two links, knowing full well what the story was as I went through the futile motions.

For some reason, my bike came equipped with a Jwis chain, one of my all-time least favorites. Apparently, some of the Maico enduro bikes had come with this inferior chain on it and I'd been unlucky enough to get saddled with a section of it. The Jwis, even though it's listed as a 520, has undersized pins and will not accept a normal 520 master link. In desperation, I flagged down some riders who were obviously limping in and begged for spare master links. After a half-dozen different links, I realized it was hopeless.

I removed my helmet and sat down on it, suddenly tired and weary. The sky was still mostly sunny, with patches of clouds drifting by. "Well, lookee here. Remember me?" A voice broke through my thoughts. I looked up at the mud-encrusted face and tried to place who and where. The bike was a white IT. "It's me. Bill. The guy who gave you some gas when you ran out in the swamps last year. Then I had to take off."

I couldn't believe it! The same guy from last year. "Didn't you used to have a blue 175?"

"Yup. Still got it, but I sure like my new bike. Whatsa problem?"

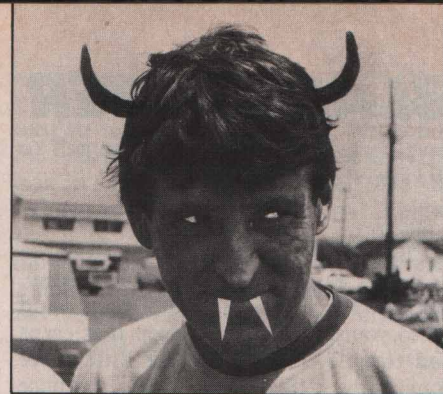
We shook hands like long lost relatives and dug into his tool bag. Same story. That damnable Jwis chain wouldn't take anything. Bill looked up. "Guess I won't leave you stuck this year. I just got over a broken wrist and can't take much more pain. Got a tow rope?"

I *did* have one, tucked into the remotest corner of my tank bag. Forty minutes later I completed lap two, chain draping over the handlebars, at the end of a very muddy tow rope. Thanks, Bill.

* * *

It was 10:20 at night and Andy Poole still wasn't in. Last year he waited for me until well after dark. I figured the least I could do was wait for him. Coombs was out on the course in a four-wheel drive looking for him. It was cold, even in the cars. Poole had on only a riding jersey and you *knew* he was wet. At 10:21, a truck roared into the parking lot and a tall, muddy figure limped out. "Hey, how does a guy get a beer in this fake nightclub?"

We jumped around Andy and everyone pumped his arms off in relief. Beers magically appeared. We asked what happened. "I was halfway between checks two and three, going down a sloppy two-track road, when I hit a rock and the bike spun around on its side and slid backwards. The pipe filled up with mud and water through the muffler and about two gallons of goop was pushed into the



Here's Dave Coombs, the man behind Blackwater. Normally, the horns and fangs don't show, as he keeps them folded. But our ever-alert lens caught the real Dave Coombs. By the way, Coombs could only manage two laps and threw in the towel, despite a perfect-running bike.

airbox when the side panel was ripped open. I tried every plug I had, but it never even tried to start. Oh well, there goes my four laps."

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Loose ends. Coombs got two flats, wasted one top end and limped in for two laps. We tied and all bets were canceled.

Mark Hyde won. Kevin LaVoie might have, but water badly affected his bike. Webb also lost a chain. Clipper got a trophy in the 125 class. I used Smith Turbo goggles and never even had a hint of fogging, which I consider a miracle just slightly less astounding than the creation of the universe.

Suzy Mingo made one lap and won the Ladies' Class, earning the respect of many. KDKA TV (Pittsburgh) covered the event.

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Thomas Lewis' journal of 1746, page 46: "If any place can be said to be twice as Bad as the Swamp at Styx & yet possible for men to struggle Through, This was the place. Our horses Sometimes tumbling out of Sight."

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A man would be a fool to ride in this place. Will I try it again? No . . . Yes! •

I SHALL RETURN ...MAYBE

By Tom Webb

• This past year has been grim, to say the least. My buddies have battered me with slurs for 12 months, ever since they rode *The Blackwater 100*. I put aside their rusty comments as far-fetched heresy. Nothing can be *that* tough, no way. Rick sighed, "You're such a worm, Webb. Here, come clean my shoes. Boy, I tell ya, it's a good thing I'm from the East. That race could eat up a novice. I probably would have gone five if my bike would

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have started." I had to excuse myself to go gag—self-induced, of course.

* * *

Clipper, on the other hand, is more down to earth—somewhat trustworthy, anyway. His stories of endless bogs, mud up to your lips, water so deep that cars had trouble crossing, were a little more convincing. "Seriously, Tom, because you've led such a sheltered existence—being from the West Coast and such—you might be able to make a lap, maybe. Here, empty this ashtray. Anyway, it's not that bad for an experienced Eastern enduro rider. Course you wouldn't know anything about that. Wipe it out a little better; yeah, that's good." I silently dropped a dead moth in his coffee

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There was no way that I'd miss the next Blackwater. A call to Maico provided me with the ammunition needed for the bogs, a 490. Serious horsepower is the only answer, and tons of it.

* * *

Putting aside the four hours of horror stories, the flight back East was uneventful. Things started getting ugly once we got to Rod's house. Now Rod Bush is a pretty serious racer—ISDTs, enduros, and five five-lap finishes at the Blackwater. His stories would have some substance, hopefully at least partial fact.

"What are you, nuts? You actually flew back here to ride a death race? You spend much time in a rubber room? Cheri, don't get close to this lunatic." The picture started getting worse.

* * *

I didn't see my bike until we arrived in Davis. Gleaming red, almost new and jettied to a T. Suspension dialed, new Metzlers; I silently laughed, thinking these guys haven't seen grit, I'd show them and then scoff once the race was over.

* * *

Carnegie Ray told me not to believe a word Coombs spoke. In short, Carnegie called him a liar, perjurer, and all-around scab. This made me a little cautious when I talked to Dave, but I still asked what the course was like this year. "Piece of cake, simple; no rain, no mud, a cruiser; you'll love it." It was then that I noticed the trickle of blood flowing down the side of his head. Inside his helmet was an assortment of crude torture devices such as needles, razor blades, rats' heads and all kinds of ugly man-eating bugs. I realized Coombs was a real sicko

* * *

Saturday night's dinner was choked down, then Bill, Kevin and I headed to the Rusty Nail—a local bar. We figured on

having a few beers, getting a little nuts, then hitting the hay. Our night was cut short when one of the locals asked me a simple question that I couldn't understand. Now this guy just didn't look normal. He was six feet nine inches, 270-plus pounds and had a ten-inch beard covering his entire face. I asked him to repeat the question and he nodded, saying, "Do you like to hook and duke?" Quickly I glanced down at his right hand which was holding four Molsons. He took a swig, wrapping his lips around all four beers, and I said, "I guess this isn't Friday's, guess we got the wrong state, see ya" Back at the motel, sleep eluded me as a recurring dream upset me slightly. It had something to do with hatchets, knives and face-ripping snakes

* * *

I was talking to three locals, all of whom were wearing massive earrings, when the riders' meeting started. Coombs talked about a few of the dangerous parts of the course . . . it took nearly two hours before he was done.

* * *

After the meeting I confronted Dave again, asking for a straight answer about the course. This time he was somewhat more to the point, saying, "You ever been bitten in the face by a bear?" At this point I shuddered, knowing I'd gotten in over my head.

* * *

About 500 bikes started Blackwater. In a series of five per row, they stacked up for what seemed like miles down main-street Davis. I drew number 33, a good bit of luck as an early number is a so-called advantage. My big 490 sat there on the stand, ready for anything, when a shriek ruptured my thoughts, and the next thing I remembered was lying on the asphalt. Berroth and LaVoie had tackled me in a clear-cut frenzy, both pumping 220 volts out of their hair. They were getting loose for the race; after a few good gut kicks they let me up, both of them looking for another victim. They spotted a small girl walking a dog across the street and formed a human wedge, heading for the unknowing prey

* * *

For nearly a quarter mile, the race was a cinch. Then we hit the first water crossing. Smartly, I rode slowly, the water flowing over my cylinder as I headed to the opposite bank. At this point my arms completely seized; there were only 21 miles left to go on the first lap. Ugly

* * *

A few miles later came the big crossing. Use your head, Webb, walk the bike across. In true enduro form the big Maico and I conquered the bleak obstacle. After some real nice, tight woods, a few muddy two-tracks and some rolling trails, I came



There's only one way to get your bike out of trouble and it burns energy like a gasoline fire.



A not-so-happy soul, in deep trouble.

to the realization that I was going real slow. Better bump up the average, Webb. Sure enough, my next encounter was the first bog.

* * *

Seeing a bog for the first time is unexplainable, sort of like tackling an oncoming truck that's doing 70-plus. I grimaced and floored it

* * *

Thick, gooey sewage, at least a foot deep, swallowed my bike. I was airborne, leaving the Maico some ten feet behind me. The impact was smooth and rather cushiony as the slop soaked up the blow. Goggles and gloves useless, I tossed them and tried to pry the Alpha from the goop.

* * *

Back on a two-track, cool. Thank God I had 50-plus horsepower to pull me from that nightmare. More tight stuff, mud, off-camber hills, and what! Another bog. This one appeared to be the size of Cleveland, maybe bigger. Riders were cemented in the slime, gasping for air. I lucked out. One of the Lojaks pulled up and easily weaved his way through the mess. I followed. He glanced over his shoulder, giving a giant smile; the Lojak/Webb team continued

* * *

I knew I'd struck pay dirt with Lojak. I don't know which one he was; I think there are about 100 of them. This guy was savvy. The rest of the loop was conquered with just a few flips, maybe 11 or so. Race through town and to the pits. Gary gassed the bike and I waited for Lojak.

* * *

Lojak's Husky and my Maico cut up



A happy soul, out on the trail.

the course, much faster than the first lap. First bog, cleared. Second bog, cleared—after one end-over-end flip. Shortly after we exited bog number two, disaster struck. Drafting Lojak like a stock car, I misread a headbob under a tree branch and hit the sucker dead on with my face. Once the lightning left my head, I realized that only part of my upper lip was still attached. The middle portion hung down to my chin, looking much like an arti-choke leaf—a bloody one at that.

* * *

My pit crew laughed at the bloody sausage that used to be my lip. It was huge, ugly and kinda hurt. Gary checked out the bike, adjusted the chain that was hanging on the ground and gassed her up. I sucked on a smoke and waited for Lojak.

* * *

Once again the first part of the course proved uneventful. Lojak led; I followed. My collapse came shortly after the first bog—Lojak had a flat. I started crying; then realizing that wasn't too manly, I proceeded without my partner. Big bog two was in sad shape by the third lap. It must have been as wide as the whole state of West Virginia. I stopped, looking for a good line. What a joke! Off to the right looked all right, so I floored it. Again, I provided some good entertainment for the spectators by augering that mud like a giant screw, but no matter. Somehow I

got the bike across, my lungs feeling like someone had poured acid in them. Lojak passed me . . . flat and all.

* * *

With only two miles left on the third lap, my chain departed company from the bike. It picked quite a spot, right in the tail end of bog three. Gloves off, I found the chain 40 minutes later, buried in the soup. It was ruined; twisted in a manner that made it nearly impossible to reinstall. Nine master links and a good hour and a half later I made it back to town. I think it was Roger, on a Husky, who stopped the last time to offer assistance. A good lad; he consoled me and gave up his master link, which got me home. It only cost me \$531 and my firstborn; a small price to pay . . .

* * *

Gary was upset; the Maico ran flawlessly until its performance was marred by a bogus chain. Deep inside I was thankful the nightmare was over, but I didn't say anything.

* * *

Although I was despondent and very dejected, being back with humans raised my spirits. Anything to get out of those awful bogs. I hadn't done that bad—three laps. I could hold my head up. There was nothing to be ashamed of.

* * *

Clipper miraculously completed four

laps. And worse, he did it on a 125. His KTM performed flawlessly, as did Paul; needless to say he was all grins. "Boy did you luck out Webb, no rain this year. Last year it was tough, this was like a high-speed race, don't you think? Kinda like Baja, desert scrambles; all fourth- and fifth-gear stuff." It took seven people to pull me off of Clipper. He was lucky; I had the fork real close to his eye and was planning to do some real damage.

* * *

There's no question about going back to Blackwater; I have to. It's a matter of pride and some stupidity. Change that—complete stupidity . . . •

RUNNING ON EMPTY

By Paul Clipper

• I had one awful memory of last year's Blackwater race. Even though I only went three laps, it was pretty late in the day when I started what would be my last trip through the muddy course, and I never forgot the cold, wet, empty feeling surrounding me when I pushed into the second river crossing. It was late afternoon, cooling off—getting downright cold and windy, as a matter of fact—and the clouds were gathering for a truly serious downpour. I was soaked and shivering, and thinking about long-haired cats in front of roaring log fires, in the laps of pretty girls wearing flannel shirts; pouring out hot cups of coffee laced with brandy, and whispering softly that it was all right, it was all over now . . .

All in all, a pretty serious fantasy to be harboring as the cold river filled my boots and tried to push me downstream, and the mud dripped lazily off my arms and into the water. I felt sick, tired and cold, and I never wanted to do this again. EVER. And I swore I'd kill the first person who suggested I should.

Well, ain't this a fine turn of events! Look who went to Blackwater again! Over the past year I'd decided there was one thing that would make me turn up in Davis again. Winning a trophy—one of those beautiful, hand-carved pieces of wood—would just about make up for all the pain I went through last year, and might be worth what I would have to do this year. I didn't care what place—first or fifth—they're all the same size anyhow; and I knew what it would take. I'd have to ride the 125 class again, and I'd have to finish four laps.

Riding a 125 was no problem. I like 125s. To me, a 175 is the biggest bike anyone needs, and I don't like to race anything bigger, even if Coombs is laying out the course. The only problem was the four laps required. I'd ridden three laps last year, and just wanted to lie down and die afterwards—and I tried my best to do just that. One more lap would take more

(continued on page 70)

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mental preparation than physical, so whenever I was asked how far I expected to go, I answered "Five laps," with no hesitation, knowing full well that whoever won the 125 class would only go four.

Psyching up, that's all it is. We had ourselves pretty wired up by the time we hit town, but drawing good numbers turned us into a pack of animals. I didn't sleep very well on Saturday night, and I woke up shaking in the morning; but everything was ready, and there was no turning back.

* * *

The big surprise was the course. What happened to all the rain we'd been hearing about? Compared to last June, the bogs were dry and dusty, the sun was shining over the strip mines, and the rivers were running at half last year's level. It looked like a cakewalk, but the things I had forgotten about were the rocks and naturally bumpy ground. Gut-pounding terrain. It was a longer yet easier course than last year's, but harder on bike and body in the long run. Flat tires and dented rims were common, and a fair share of broken bones was reported.

Easier or not, I went so slow on the first lap that a number of riders must have thought I was riding backwards on the course. I planned to take it easy the first time or two around, and save all my energy for the last two laps, but I wound up driving so slow that I was falling over any time I lost my balance for a second. Every muscle in my body cramped up in the first five miles, and stayed cramped until midway past the second lap. I never got stuck for more than a few seconds, but I did do my share of crashing. I'd just dummy up in a turn and fall down, or get sideways in the woods and smack a tree—the kind of stuff that doesn't take a whole lot of talent.

Toward the end of the second lap, I figured out what I was doing wrong. I wasn't upshifting. Seriously. Looking back, I was so cautious on the first lap, I doubt if I got any higher than third gear throughout the whole 22 miles. On the third lap I started grabbing gears, and the bike started working better. Going faster, the tires didn't pack up with mud as readily, and the suspension responded better to the bumps. I finally got into the right groove, and when the fourth lap came up I was ready. I started it with a whoop and a wheely, didn't crash more than once the entire lap, and probably turned in my fastest lap time of the day. And I had a whole lot of fun in the process.

Every time I passed a familiar obstacle on the fourth lap, I'd just check it off the list in my brain: "Hooray! I don't have to do that again!" or "That's one less checkpoint; two more to go!" Good lines started appearing where there used to be impassable mud, and before I had a

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Sometimes you get so tired of the mud that you just HAVE to get out of it, even for a little while.

chance to get cold and tired, I was back on the asphalt looking down the hill at a checkered flag. I'd done four laps in a short enough time to nail down fourth-place 125, which meant a trophy to take home and the satisfaction of knowing that the whole week wasn't wasted. I was pumped! I spent the rest of the daylight hours dancing around the streets and joking with friends: "Who's tired? I got some brass to take home from this miserable race, and I wanna party!"

* * *

As it sometimes happens, the trophy presentation was delayed until after 9:30 p.m. I'd been so busy being happy that I hadn't eaten and every restaurant in town was closed by ten. We limped back to the motel to shower and gather our wits together, finally hitting the road at 11. For all the work we'd done that day, the only thing left facing us was a seven-and-a-half-hour drive back to Cleveland. But we'd done okay. Mark Hyde won the overall on a Husky, but the KTM boys gave him their share of grief. Kevin LaVoie came in second—first Open A—on his 495; Rod and Bill were third and fourth, and first and second 250 A. And yes, there's a hungry magazine geek from California in the back of the truck who got lucky and scored a fourth 125 . . .

Just as a greasy Lake Erie dawn started turning our long, sleepless nightmare to daylight, we pulled up at Rod's house and stumbled onto aching, ready for two short hours of sleep before we had to leave for the airport. Soon, we'd have to catch another cattle-car run to the West Coast, to the even fouler air of Los Angeles.

Bruises, cuts, and a near-crippling lack of sleep assured us that we wouldn't forget what we did for the past week; but we'll remember Blackwater for more lasting impressions than mere injuries. Seeing old friends again—Dave and Rita and Carrie, my tire-changing buddy Carnegie Ray, all the folks from KTM, even Ed Hertfelder's dog-kissing friend Bill Spindler dropped by to say hi, along with dozens of people whose names I didn't catch but whose faces are more than familiar. I'll especially remember the hospitality of the native West Virginians, who must be among the friendliest people on the face of the earth. Good friends, good racing, and plenty of laughs—and yes, a few good bruises. It was a long, tiring, crazy week; one that I'll remember fondly for many years to come. □



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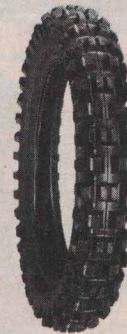
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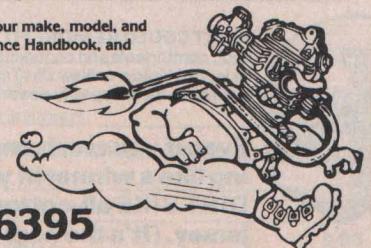


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