

Pikes Peak International Hill Climb 2011

Words and Photos by Alan Lapp

My story about the 89th running of the Pikes Peak International Hill Climb could be part travelog, part race report, part first-person drama and part made-for-TV movie. I'll try to convey the excitement with minimal hyperbole, hard though that might be. It is a race of superlatives: Pikes Peak has the

NOOBS GO RACING

environmental damage to waterways and endangering rare mosquito species. Okay, I'm kidding about the mosquitoes.

Result: Colorado Springs must pave the entire road by 2012 and install concrete drainage channels to route the water

Wednesday through Friday. Qualifying is the last run of the day on the lower section. Saturday is a day off; Sunday is race day. During practice, both the course and competitors are divided into three segments, run independently. Practice starts when the sun hits the mountain, which, due to its

elevation, could be as early as 4:30 am, and runs until 9:30 am. Competitors must be awake and ready at three am to get to the gate on time. Sleep deprivation is a real issue.

The story originates with my friends from back East, Ken Kyler and Phil Marr. They got bit by the sidecar bug about five years ago, so Ken bought a Honda CR500-powered Wasp motocross sidecar rig from

Dave Hennessy, who used to race it. Ken and Phil learned to ride it well enough to run in some rallies and did one RallyMoto race, the Sandblast. Their next logical step was, of course, to enter an international race, with the real threat of death, with 30,000 spectators and televised world-wide. Two years ago, I got an email requesting that I serve as crew. I gave careful and lengthy consideration while typing "you bet your ass I'll be there."

WHEN YOU THINK YOU KNOW THE MOUNTAIN, YOU DON'T.

GET COCKY AND THINK YOU KNOW WHERE ALL THE TURNS ARE, YOU'LL GO OFF.

world's highest paved road; it is the USA's second-longest continuously running race after the Indy 500; it is one of the world's most prestigious motorsports events, and is, sadly, also one of the least known.

The Pikes Peak Highway was built in 1915 by mining baron and entrepreneur Spencer Penrose. The first race, dubbed The Race To The Clouds, was held in 1916 as a tourist attraction. The mountain is leased by the city of Colorado Springs from the National Forestry Service and serves as a tourist destination. For most of its existence, the highway was paved only about halfway to the top. This changed in 1998 when the city of Colorado Springs lost a lawsuit, brought by the Sierra Club, claiming that gravel from the unpaved road was causing

to holding ponds. Ironically, the result is erosion, shifting the problem from relatively benign gravel to very damaging silt. So because the remaining three-mile dirt section is slated to be paved before the 2012 running, I felt it important to make a pilgrimage to Colorado to witness the last running of the hill climb while the dirt section could still be seen.

The event comprises three practice days,



Left: Bill Brokaw inspects the Wasp sidecar rig.

Right: Phil and Ken get their competitor badges and paperwork... it's official, they're racing.

Below: Ken and Phil (178) set their sights on Hans and Scott (99).



Photo: Keith Mainland

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I wanted to brush up on my crew skills so I made a few calls. First, I contacted Scuderia West mechanic Niles Folin. If that name sounds familiar, it's because he served as crew chief for Dakar front-runner Jonah Street. Niles was a font of useful knowledge and observations of human nature. He said that in the early stages of any event, all the exotic machines distract the crew, and they tend to wander off. Someone on the crew must know where everyone is at all times. My favorite organizational tip is to write down a to-do list on duct tape and stick it to the seat, marking off the jobs when completed. He pointed out that there are easy things to improve the mood and performance of the team, such as keeping cool drinks and food in the cooler at all times.

My next visit was with Scott Dunlavey of Berkeley Honda Yamaha. Regular readers will recall that *CityBike* interviewed Scott, who has raced Pikes Peak, in the July 2010 issue. Scott, in his usual modest manner, will tell you "Yeah, we ran pretty good there." That means he won his class a bunch of times, including three years in a row.

Scott's advice was more specific to Pikes Peak. He suggested that when practice was

finished, and 'breakfast' eaten, a nap was a good idea. He stressed the importance of preparation, saying that "Race day is easy: the race just validates the work you've done all week." Perhaps the most sobering advice:

"When you think you know the mountain, you don't. Get cocky and think you know where all the turns are, you'll go off." Life-saving wisdom. Some turns at the top look out over nothing but blue sky and have no guard rail between you and a 1000-foot drop.

Armed with nothing but enthusiasm and good advice, I loaded up my beater Ninja 650R and headed east for Colorado. I arrived at our lodging in Woodland Park in late afternoon on Monday, just after Ken and Phil. Dave, his fiance Laura and his passenger Jeremiah had been there most of



The sidecar gang lines up for a practice run.

the day. After an early dinner we tried— unsuccessfully—to hit the rack early.

Tuesday is spent at the Crowne Plaza hotel in Colorado Springs where we complete our paperwork, sign waivers and put the rig through Tech Inspection. It's a surreal scene: racing vehicles of every stripe and high-dollar rally and hill-climb vehicles can be seen driving down public roads.

Wednesday at 3:30 am we are awakened by our alarms, struggle to get dressed, and stumble around gathering gear. At the mountain, we unload the bikes, attend the riders' meeting, and fuel up the bikes for

practice. It turns out that the hot-rodded Yamaha XS650 motor is thirsty: it will drain the 1.5-gallon tank in three six-mile runs. Ken and Phil are feeling good, but don't run all the practice sessions. They are jubilant at the end of qualifying, they pass Hans Schultz' GSX-R600-powered, shop-built rig. Ken says repeatedly that "Something clicked when I passed Hans. My whole world is different now." I can relate 100 percent: when I roadraced, I coined the phrase "I pass, therefore I am."

Thursday finds us on the middle section. While we don't time sessions, I can tell that Ken feels they should be going faster. Phil is feeling bad, not his usual enthusiastic self. They skip many practice runs. On Friday, Phil is sick and can't get out of bed. Ken and I go to the top and basically hang out. The thin, 14,000-foot-high air is a problem: when I try to do anything more than walk slowly, I get a pins-and-needles sensation in my scalp. After practice, I do minor service tasks on the bike, and we dine on amazingly good elk hamburgers brought by one of Dave's many relatives who have come to support the racing effort.

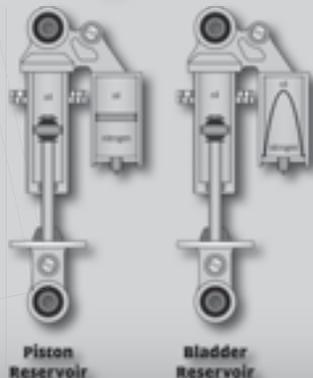
Saturday is a day off, and Sunday morning arrives too early, yet we awake without the aid of an alarm. A three-mile line of spectator vehicles is waiting to get in at 4 am. After the rigs are unloaded, I head uphill to find a place to watch in the dirt section. On race day, all the competitors will climb the hill, and wait at the top until all the classes have run, then return to the pits in a parade down the mountain. Racing starts at 9:00 am, and is red-flagged almost immediately because of an incident. Throughout the day, the number of red flags and length of delays is astonishing.

Finally, around 4:00 pm, the bikes start running. Like the cars, they start with the slowest classes: exhibition, then sidecars. They pass me in the order they finish: Wood/Rizzo on a F2 1000-cc rig, then Hennessy/Owsly on a stock-framed TL1000-powered rig, Shultz/Stull on a stock-framed 600-cc rig, followed by Kyler/Marr on the XS650 Wasp rig. Congratulations to John Wood and Chris Rizzo not only for winning but for setting a new record of 13:09:04 in the sidecar class.

What a week! It was quite the experience—the warmth of Dave and Laura's hospitality, the proximity to all the lusty mechanical artistry, the addictive jolt of competitive spirit, the drug-like effects of both altitude and sleep deprivation, the sense of belonging as crew, the deeply-felt emotional release when the heroes of the day descended the mountain. I want more. ☺

Evil Illustration Genius

Art Direction, Graphic Design & Illustration



I'm Alan Lapp, a 25-year veteran designer & illustrator.

I'm a wickedly talented technical, scientific, patent, and medical illustrator. I'm a giant gearhead, and I love understanding how stuff works, a huge bonus for my clients.

I contributed 140 illustrations to *Race Tech's Motorcycle Suspension Bible*, which I'd describe as very informative and available from me with a personal inscription.

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