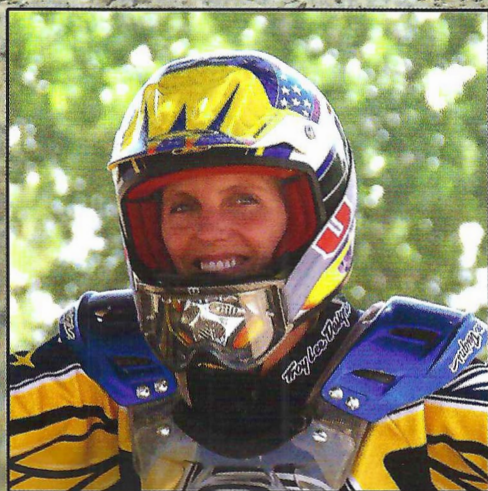


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2009 Kawasaki KLX-cellent 250S

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ADVENTURE RIDER'S CHALLENGE 2008

Story by Bill Dragoo Photos by Bill Dragoo Unless Otherwise Specified

Have you ever wondered just how high a quarter-ton BMW R1200 GS can fly? What's the turning radius of a KTM 950 Adventure? Can a KLR beat a BMW F650 through the sand?

Had you been at the 2008 NAARC, you would have seen for yourself.

Jim Hyde, owner of Rawhyde Adventures, believes that if you ride an adventure bike, you should know what you and your machine are capable of. His philosophy is "The adventure begins where the pavement ends..." He and his henchmen at the Castaic, California ranch teach folks who want to better their skills the finer points of finessing big-bore off-road motorcycles through the rough. Last May, about 70 riders gathered to pit their pistons and skills against one another over the course of this three-day event.

Jim started his training camp to help riders fill the ravine between merely operating a motorcycle and truly mastering what it takes to get the most from a heavyweight, off-road-capable two-wheeler. Jim is a graduate of the BMW Enduro School in Hechtlingen, Germany and has many miles of real-life adventure to draw from. His good nature and vast knowledge enhance the learning experience.

Naturally, once folks learn to handle these beasts, they feel compelled to compete. Thus began the Second Annual North America Adventure Riders Challenge, where recent Rawhyde graduates and pro-level desert racers went head-to-head for a chance to win a horde of prizes.

The creatively diabolical Del Christensen, Michael Hanus, son of Jim's mentor at the BMW school in Germany; and a host of volunteers helped build the Challenge course, which consists of nearly 30 "elements" simulating obstacles a rider might encounter on a world tour. Del's "real job" is building climbing walls and outdoor competition settings for people seeking challenging, non-motorized adventure. Sand, mud, log crossings, steep hill climbs, descents over rock-strewn hard-pack and off-camber turns are just some of what awaited this year's contestants, yours truly included. There was a giant teeter-totter, a tapered bridge down the length of a telephone pole and a suspension bridge to humble even the best of riders.

I had entered the contest for the express purpose of providing a rider's perspective to share with our readers. I expected some tough competition, but didn't really expect it to turn out like it did...

It is 4:00 a.m. and I can't sleep. It has finally cooled down in my tent enough for me to stop sweating. There are no wagons to circle, but this is Day Three of the Adventure Riders Challenge and I can't stop thinking about that danged suspension bridge. I had just about decided that the best way to cross would be to minimize my exposure by pouring the coals to the 950 Super Enduro and ripping down the center of the bridge before it could "wake up" and start the inevitable heaving and rolling action I dreaded. By the time I had finished my first cup of coffee I was having second thoughts. Maybe I should rethink my strategy.

Three days ago I showed up at the Castaic Ranch sans wheels, having braved the airlines from my home in Norman, Oklahoma. KTM was kind enough to loan me one of their much-heralded Super Enduro demos to ease my plight. Naturally, I needed to familiarize myself with the bike and what better way than to join a bunch of BMW HP2 riders for some fun in the woods outside the ranch boundaries? Before the contest began, we went for a little ride. After some 60 miles of fast fire-roading, swapping bikes and eating dust, we turned back towards the ranch with barely enough time to make the 12 o'clock riders' meeting.

As luck often has it, when you play too long and too hard, things go south. I had swapped the KTM for Gary Kepple's HP2. Somehow we became separated and I was working my way past several riders on a dusty road when a massive black KTM Adventure appeared like a battleship out of the fog. Keith Falerios committed the ultimate sin and low-sided in front of

my speeding Beemer. There was no way I could stop. A well timed swerve prevented total disaster, but Keith's rear tire ramped me skyward. The KTM's pannier mount ripped a 2" hole in the left valve cover (magnesium)...\$189.00 plus tax if you really want to know.

We patched the hole and showed up late, dirty and tired for the rider's meeting. What a beginning.

There were two categories of competition. Bikes ranging from the Kawasaki KLR 650 through the BMW R1200GS were grouped together as "Dual-Sports." The bikes in the "Moto" class were the brutes of the bunch. BMW was well represented with several of their mighty HP2's. I was thrown into the shark pool with them on the Super Enduro. Blaine Dehmlow surprised everyone when he showed up on his very off-road capable Ducati Monster, the "Terra Mostro." Check it out at www.terramostro.com.

This machine will turn your head around for sure. When he rode up, I realized this would be a no-holds-barred street-fight. I looked around and saw machines outfitted with every possible trick component, and tough riders who looked as if they had seen more than a few miles of hard traveling. Some of the bikes had enough scars to win a Frankenstein look-alike contest and their riders would place a close second. I felt right at home.

Day One began with a tight course through the hay bales. Our mission was to ride through the maze without touching the bales or touching our feet to the ground. In the event of a tie, the rider with the slowest time would win. I managed to bend the



Blaine Dehmlow and the Terramostro in action. Photo by David Thurber



HP2 makes bonus. Photo by Don Rotundo



ADVENTURE MOTORCYCLE



Del, paying for his sins

big enduro through the bales without a dab and pause a few precious seconds before exiting. I was lucky. Some weren't. It takes a lot of energy to hoist a 1200GS back to vertical. A lot of calories were sweated out at the hay bales and no doubt a few discs slipped as well as numerous 500 pound bikes were dropped.

Then we entered a tight, steep, downhill single-track trail that sported an off-camber right-hand turn. Again, the KTM bore me through without a hitch, but a number of rid-

ers dabbed or fell on the slick hard-pack. I kept my fingers crossed and my clutch in the friction zone.

Deep sand whoops were next with a jog over a large hump for extra credit. The theme for the day was balance and control as we wound our way through woods, around barrels, and across ditches. We were warned that the next day would be more difficult.

And so it was. Our first element provided an opportunity to jump our bikes for distance. Clear the yellow flags and get a bonus. The tiebreaker would go to the rider who jumped the farthest. This one

provided some excitement as the giant GS's took to the air. It was impressive to watch the skill with which the GS riders landed their bikes. A few went off-course after landing slightly out of control, but a number of brave pilots made the bonus.

Each element became more difficult as the day progressed. One contestant lost his balance and fell while trying to cross a rock- and debris-filled creek bed. He ended up beneath the bike with a broken arm, our first and only casualty.

This is where I made my first mistake of the event. Two days is a long time to concentrate on anything for a guy who can't remember how to work his cell phone. I got a little



Chris Martin wrestles his HP2 to the top

disoriented as I exited the element and wound up spinning out, trying to make



the tight left-hand off-camber uphill turn on short notice. Day Two ended well enough with one error to my discredit.

Day Three was the one we all dreaded. A delicate run down the telephone pole spit us out into a forest of orange poles. We were instructed to weave our way through them without touching. I dabbed at the end... no good reason.

The teeter-totter was next. This was more intimidating in theory than in reality. It was the only element where we were actually told to put a foot down "or else," but it wasn't hard to ride as long

as you rolled past the fulcrum in one motion.

A simulated dry creek crossing filled with debris followed the teeter-totter, a nice jump to air things out, then an intimidating downhill with logs strewn across the slick hard-pack. This element required a tight left-hand, off-camber turn at the bottom and then a moderately aggressive climb back to the

top. Logs, rocks, loose sand and a few pits that deepened with every rider's passage made this one a favorite spot for spectators. Some of the big GS riders really proved their skills here. Several picked up new battle scars too, as they launched their heavyweight mounts in an attempt to clear a rock or log rather than wrestle the beast over with pure muscle.



Bill Drago eases through the rough. Photo by David Thurber



And now, here I sit, staring at the bridge that would have given me nightmares had I slept. We were encouraged to use discretion on the suspension bridge. Several opted to pass after one of our esteemed guests wadded up his bike on this wild serpent of an obstacle. I had decided to take it slow and easy, keeping as close to the center as I could. It was my wish to let the giant Anaconda slumber. Wake this monster up and you were going for a ride you would not soon forget!

I take a breath and engage the clutch, easing my front wheel onto the shaky boards. Once committed, I do my best to maintain a steady speed and monitor the "ground" beneath me. With only 20 feet to go I feel the bridge start to wiggle. I add maybe five of the available 100 horsepower and rush through the uprights like a well placed extra point kick. Whew! Luck's still holding.

I am only a rock pile and a long, slippery mud hole away from finishing

the Challenge. More than a few bikes tumbled on the rocks and this is where I stall the bike for yet another error. The mud pit has provided some great photo ops as each rider displayed his own special style. I watch as one rider almost bends his bike in half at the exit, then returns to the pit head first. I gird up my silk boxers and enter this nasty slip'n slide, steady as she goes. Another "clean..." so to speak. I end the day with two more faults to add to my previous one. By now I knew I had a good chance of winning, but I was still numb to the reality.

It was an intense three days of competition, but most would agree, worth every drop of sweat and broken parts. The final tally had me on top overall with 6650 points. Who'd a' thought it? Not me, that's for sure. Pro enduro racer Chris Martin was second in the Moto Class at 6590 with Roger Eggers, last year's winner a close third and only 10 points behind Chris. Both rode HP2's.



Kevin Harder won the Dual Sport class on his R1200GS with a fantastic score on such a huge bike, 6350 points. His best friend, Keith Falerios came in second, yup, the same Keith I launched the HP2 over on the first day and Jeff Irvin turned in a superb ride for third on his red R100GS. They scored 6270 and 6250 respectively.

Next year promises to be even bigger and better so if the good Lord's willin' and the creeks don't rise, you'll see me back at the North American Adventure Rider's Challenge, rarin' to go!

