

Planning That Poker Run

Following is a set of suggestions and insights provided by Elaine via e-mail to a GWWRA member who asked her for information about setting up a poker run. It contains a great deal of valuable information. (JRD)

Well, you have got a lot of decisions to make! That's the pleasure of being volunteered, hmmm? *grin* Please take the following as just the fruits of my experience -- not "black-letter law." *g*

One thing that will be important is to determine as well as you can roughly how many bikes will be at your event(s). If it's been done in the past at the same time of year, or in the same location, or by the same group and has been come to be an established event, you will have some history to look at. If you are having to plan a series of Poker Runs over some period of time, you'll want to consider some new ways to bring folks in and get them involved.

Part of the general plan for any poker run is deciding on the scope of your target 'market.' If you are trying to raise money for a charity, as well as cover the costs of producing your event, you need to get as many people as possible there, of course. If it's just a 'fun' thing, what's going to happen to the money? Will it go into the chapter treasury? Will the chapter bear the costs? (I regret to say that the poker run organizer -- you -- may find yourself spending a little here and there and so on, to get all the things that you decide would be 'nice.' Balloons at the checkpoints, a deck of cards with male strippers on them -- oops! *blush* Well, anyway, been there, done that, my husband knows. *g*)

Is the poker run you're planning part of a rally? Is it just for your chapter, like a weekend day-ride? Will it be over in one day, or will people be camping and covering part of the distance the second day? Is it just for your GWRRA chapter and a few others? Will outsiders be welcome? Do you figure you'll be selling things to your guests, as well as offering them a chance to register and go on your ride? Will you have a 50/50, or serve food at the start/stop point? (Don't forget to buy two-part tickets if you have a 50/50 or prizes to give away.)

Do you have enough people to man the checkpoints on the way, or will they be unmanned? If you play games, or have people draw cards, or get involved with anything you think a practical joker (!) might want to sabotage at some remote checkpoint, you'll need to have someone man the checkpoint, usually for hours -- most of a long boring day, they'll tell you!, and their comfort and safety become an issue, as well. At our Lone Star Ladies checkpoints for our State Rally each year, the riders are secretly awarded extra points by the people at the checkpoint if they have the proper safety gear on: full length pants, long-sleeved shirt, boots, helmet and gloves. The riders don't know about this until the run is through -- all they know is some people get a red sticker and some people get a green one. (Stickers put on the headlights are sometimes used to show a rider has been through a checkpoint -- depends on the kind of run.)

You can plan checkpoints with all kinds of purposes in mind, but you generally want to give the riders some pleasant way to compete that just about everyone can do successfully:

Stopping to get a date from a historical marker (or one of the girls), going into a museum and answering questions correctly, looking for billboards or signs along the way that spell out a message, stopping to hunt for something that you've hidden, playing 'games' at the stop (Ring Toss, Straw in a Bottle, Balloon Toss, whatever, either On-Bike or Off-) ... there are lots of ways to send a group out on the road and make it entertaining for them.

I think it's better if whatever happens at the manned stops requires that the riders check in and DO something with the people there. The breaks from conversation with the riders who are coming through on the route are invaluable to ease the plight of the volunteers stuck at the checkpoints.. and sometimes the stops where the co-rider FINALLY gets to go to the bathroom *grin* and the rider gets his coffee break make up much of the fun for both competitors and 'officials', as you may hear a new joke, or get a tech tip. You should figure that a group of riders will spend a good 10-15 minutes chatting at each stop with their friends.

I have planned a good many different kinds of poker runs, including one that incorporated a scavenger hunt. One of the favorites was an inner-city ride (through as much open land as we could find on the west side of Houston), where the riders had to locate businesses with the words "Ace, King, Queen, Jack, and 10" in the names of the stores. They had to bring back the addresses (corner of x and y) and got a card for each correct one. There were extras along the route.

As you can imagine, it takes a rather long time for the poker run to be laid out if you want the riders to look for something specific on the road. Similarly, you don't want to make a rider do ANYTHING unusually dangerous in order to compete -- such as have to look at, memorize and/or write down the street number in an address. (Harken to the voice of experience on that one -- thankfully some of my friends overruled me on that silly idea, so no one was hurt looking for addresses on busy city streets.)

And, by the way, at the end, if someone has screwed up and not gotten all the questions answered, or not found everything he was supposed to find, you want to let him draw a hand anyway -- let him pay a little more into the kitty or make some kind of charitable contribution in order to be as likely as anyone else to win the whole game. The idea is to have fun, and not take the 'competition' too seriously, and not turn anyone away mad. Expect serious cheating, too. ;) Our ladies at the checkpoints usually 'sticker' the bikes, and initial something on the score card the rider carries. The terrain over which you are taking the riders on a poker run should, ideally (in my opinion, like all the rest of this) be an area with light traffic, but you want some areas along the route that have gas stations, telephones, food&water, and emergency resources. The length of the should probably be at least 50 miles, and 100 is not too long, but 150 is probably at the outside for a single day run. I try to avoid highways because they can be dull.

If you can divide up the responsibility, you may want to have one person or a team lay out the ride (we pre-ride our Lime Run three times, minimum). One of the last pre-rides should be the day before the run or the morning of it, to be sure road conditions haven't suddenly changed. Then you will want one person to be handling registration the day of the event (minimum -- again, depends on the scale of your event), and someone who knows how to score a poker hand to handle the scoring after the run, unless you use dice or something like that.

What goes on at the registration table is subject to a lot of controversy, by the way: your club will probably want an event release of liability signed there. Who is going to prepare it? Are you just going to use the AMA Release? (There's a whole seminar on dealing with the AMA for such things, BTW.) You will want to know something about risks when you sponsor such an event for the public, and insurance, depending on the size of your group (talk to your chapter officers about this). You will want to decide if you're going to sell patches, T-shirts, maps, pins or anything else at the registration point. You'll want to know who and under what conditions your volunteers are authorized to turn a rider away at registration or call for help or call the police, in advance. You'll want a box for money and change, and someone to keep an eye on it who won't let it walk away.

If you want to sell something, you've got to get it designed, produced, and priced before the event, so that is its own can of worms. Pins and patches can take a long lead time. Get someone who works with or knows the novelty world to help with this, or just skip it.

Again, depending on size of the event, you may have to think about porta-potties and traffic control. We are way too small a group to do these things, but the first year, before we realized that ours is a VERY small event, we worried about it. The big benefit runs, like the March of Dimes Bikers for Babies Run, require a YEAR's advance planning, because there are 3000+ bikes involved. Our biggest turn-out for our LSL Lime Run has been about 60 bikes, I would say, but this year I hope we can get over 100. It takes years, literally, to build up an event.

Pre-registration for events just doesn't happen here in Texas -- even for the big rallies, and even when there is money to be saved by registering early, people tend to just decide to come and show up. But you can put out flyers if you want to, with a registration section to clip and mail in, and see if it works for you. By all means, put it in your newsletter several times and put some flyers in friendly dealerships.

Unless you are doing a big benefit with lots of free publicity (as in the ones where the dealership hosts, and gets a band to come in, or a DJ from a radio station, and so on), you will probably have to go on 'a wing and a prayer' as to the number of bikes to expect -- but for a small group (fewer than 200), I suggest you don't try to sell food. Even home-made food, like cookies and cakes, make a mess and don't bring in much considering the difficulties of preparing, transporting, storing, serving, selling, clean up, etc. Then there's the health department concerns. If you're going to sell food, contract it out.

You'll want to check with your chapter officers about where to start and stop the ride. It's very common for poker runs take off from a park or a camp ground as part of some other event. In such a case here in Texas the counties are adamant that we cannot sell anything on taxpayer supported public property, so we don't start our run from a state or county park.

We 'cheat' on our registration location and use an old shopping center where there is essentially no Sunday traffic, but I don't know how long we're going to be able to do this. I was asked (this is tricky, me being a lawyer) if on behalf of our group I would call the management of the shopping center to let them know that we wanted to use their parking lot. I said no, I wouldn't do it myself, and I hoped nobody else in the club did. I see it as just a gathering spot for people to get together and decide who is going to ride with whom, and pick up the instructions. We don't sell anything, and the registration fee is a charitable

contribution to the Houston Area Women's Center. This can be a rather tricky problem, though. With just 40-60 riders going off at different times, I didn't want to make a big deal of it, but there's usually a pretty good size group at the end, and when we give out the awards. So far, no one has complained and I hope it stays that way.

I see the problem as follows: If you ask for and get consent from a property owner to engage in a motorcycle event on their parking lot, THEY stand to be sued if someone goes down on their property because they 'knew or should have known' about the hazards of a motorcycling event, just because it is one. If the property owner has not given consent but we all just show up and ride off (leaving a table next to someone's car for the 'return' point), I expect that the property owner is unlikely to have any responsibility for a use of the premises that he knew nothing about. Just an opinion, and mind you I am NOT giving legal advice, it's not a legal opinion, I don't know the law where you are and if I did I wouldn't opine on it, it's just 'off the top of my head'!!! *grin*

When your people get back from the poker run, you need to figure some way to reward the winners. Allow time for 'scoring' if you give out awards. You can haunt the dealerships for contingency prizes or come up with some creative ones yourself -- get your membership to ask restaurants where they dine for a gift certificate, or make good triangle bandages to put in a First Aid kit (the store-bought ones never have any), offer a paid-up course providing a training certificate (MSF, ERC, First Aid, CPR, etc.), or ask your members for pieces of chrome that are new but just lying around in someone's garage because it didn't fit. You don't have to have trophies, but if you're going to do that, do it well in advance. One of our members generously gave us her PERSONAL trophies for a run, and all we had to do was have new engraved plates made. (She had so many from her days as a motorcycle racer that were sitting in her attic, she was glad to see them be put to use.)

We have a lot of ambitions about our Lime Run, but so far, most of what we can offer has been the RIDE. If you lay out a good ride, most people are really very forgiving about whatever other glitches there may be.

1. Emails about Poker Runs
Hi -

Your message asking a number of detailed questions about poker runs, and whether you could do something like this on the lake, came at a good time. As it just so happens, our chapter just did the poker run this past weekend for our GWTA State Rally, so some of this is pretty fresh in my mind. I will just do a 'stream-of-consciousness' answer and see if I can cover most of the things you probably need to know to translate the idea into an event for people who are into boating, not biking.

Our first criteria: We didn't want to have checkpoints along the route that had to be manned this time, because all our riders in my chapter wanted to go ride, so we did something 'new' to me: we did all the registration and card-drawing at the end. This seemed to suit all the participating riders just fine, so it's an idea you might consider for your boaters. (Usually in poker runs I've seen others do, the people who are going to play pay their money up front, then get their maps or directions at the registration desk, ride, and then come back to get their hands scored against the other riders who are playing.) I liked this better, though, because you never seem to have all your riders leaving at the same time, and if they have to pay first when they get directions or maps, that means someone has to sit there all day or all morning and man the registration table and keep an eye on the cash box.

I think it's easier to make up your pages with maps and directions and rules, leave them where the players can pick them up at their convenience, and have them all pay later, at the same time. Only if I already have a trustworthy person planning to be at the registration table at all times would I charge the riders for their poker run package when they get it (and of course, you need someone to make change). Or, if it is all going to be people you know and trust to be honest, you can put a money can or box at the starting point, and trust them to put their fee inside when they take the directions, but they would have to have exact change. This doesn't eliminate the money issue, because we always allow our riders to 'buy' extra cards at the end, if they don't like their hands. So you have to handle money twice if you make them pay up front.

As for the cards - I have done them several ways and seen other runs with their own variations. The original way I learned was to have people from the host chapter at each checkpoint (four or five, maybe six counting the starting point/ending point) along the route. The checkpoint folks would have a deck of cards, and each rider would pull a card at that site, then our checkpoint person would write down what was drawn on the rider's score sheet. Then the card would be left to go back into the deck, and the rider would go on to the next checkpoint. The person at the checkpoint in some rides I've been on would even initial the rider's hand-in score sheet with the card they drew written in, or put a colored sticker on it, and the player would

turn in their sheet at the end of the run to have it scored. Be sure the NAME of the player is on the score sheet!

I have also done them where the riders did not pull cards until the end, and I prefer this. Instead, at each checkpoint they might do one of these things in order to 'win' a chance to pull a card to start with:

1. Look for the answer to a question (this was the way we did the one last weekend), usually on a theme. This time our theme was "bells" and I found several places where there were interesting things to see as well as a bell, so that when they had to stop and get off the bike to look for the bell, it was worth it. Then I asked them for information about the bells themselves (one had a wasp nest inside, one had a dedication plaque under it inside a church, etc.). The questions were on a separate answer sheet with a blank to fill in with the answer and a space for them to put their name at the top. The directions were on a different sheet, laid out so they can fold them to put into their map pockets on the motorcycle tank, if they use one. For each correct answer, they were 'entitled' to pay \$1 and pull a card.

2. Look for something I have "planted" that they have to bring back to the starting point. I have done this in the past using pebbles, beans, or other very small items, and cheap ones at that if the chapter has to buy them. For example, you could have the rider bring back a ribbon pulled from a jar full of cut ribbons (left in a Dairy Queen, for example, near the cash register), a post card, a pencil with a certain logo on it, a type of flower or leaf... whatever you can think of that's distinctive and easy to carry. I have sometimes told the riders exactly where to look for the object they had to pick up or identify, but more often, I just get them in the vicinity and make them search to find it. For example, when we used beans, we used four or five different kinds of beans: lima, pinto, black, navy and red. I hid the bags full of beans near the parking area for each stop, for example behind a gravestone in a cemetery, or up in a tree at a rest stop. The riders had to find the bag and take one bean out, then replace the bag. Then they had to bring back one bean of each kind and turn them in at the starting point in order to pull a card: one bean, one card.

3. Pick up a certain kind of natural item (like a pebble) from an area, and make sure there are no other options in that area: for example, make sure the stones at each checkpoint are all rose quartz, or shale, or granite, or whatever is prevalent in your area and easily identifiable. It could also be to name the animals or plants on certain signs, especially if there is a roadside park or other Parks & Wildlife Center in the area with a nice display. [I have been told that some chapters have the riders pick up pebbles with the idea that

the player who that matches a target WEIGHT for their stash will be the winner (but no one is told what the target is, and the people at the checkpoints (if you use them) do not know, either. Then at the ending point, the pebbles are weighed in a scale for each rider, and the one that matches the target weight closest wins. This seems like a real hide-the-ball game, and maybe not as fun because it's kind of mindless. I don't know, maybe folks would enjoy the suspense.]

4. We have also done one where each leg of the ride was timed, according to how long it would take on average to ride it SAFELY. This means you could be penalized for being too fast OR too slow, to discourage the idea that it is a race. We had our chapter members ride the legs individually several times and record all their times for each leg, then came up with an average time that was the best-estimated 'safe time' for that leg. If you matched it within a reasonable range, you got to draw a card. There were six legs so you usually could draw at least five cards if you came pretty close on your time, or draw six and discard the worst one. (And our riders did come in very close to our times.)

5. We have had a poker run where the card you draw at the checkpoint is determined by something else: you might have to play a ring-toss, and the score for your card was painted on a board where you toss the ring so you didn't actually 'draw' it. Or you might have to play some kind of mildly funny skill game, or even do a 'slow ride' with your bike, which is very hard for a motorcyclist to do. The slower you go, the better card you 'draw.' In your case, maybe you would use knot-tying or knot identification, or skill in showing some kind of navigational knowledge or vocabulary. Lots of options here.

6. I have also done one where your cards were never "drawn," but had to be observed in the names of stores, buildings, roads, etc. For example, "King's Lodge Road," the Dairy Queen, Jack in the Box, I-10, etc. You could build your hand from these if you were observant, because of course those places were on the route but not marked on the maps. Then you could take the best hand you have 'discovered.' You were told in each leg you would find one Queen, two Jacks, etc., so you would have an idea what to look for, but not where they might be.

Note that a poker run is just an excuse for a ride, so we never want to discourage anyone from playing, and we are VERY lax on the judging. If the riders make a good-faith effort to ride the ride, it doesn't matter too much if the answers are really correct or not (if they are looking for answers); and if they don't get all five beans, or lose one on the way back, we let them pull their cards anyway. There is usually a lot of joking at the end point, and the idea is to keep having fun with the event. Some people 'cheat' and gang up, submitting one answer sheet for several riders who all went together. This is o.k., too, as long as they pay separately so that there is a

nice pot for the winner. I personally would rather discourage people from just paying \$5 and drawing their cards without riding at all, but some groups think this is o.k. too.

We also encourage people to spend an extra dollar or two and buy another card if the hand they pull looks bad. We tell them they pay \$5 for the first hand, then they run, I also put a bonus question on the list just for fun, for those who wanted to get off their bikes and walk around the town square in one of the towns I routed them through. If they got the bonus question right, they were entitled to throw back one bad card and pick another one for free.

We try to put time limits on our poker runs (for example, "First-Out at 9 a.m., Last-Out at 11 a.m. First-In at... (how ever long you think it takes to ride it safely); Last-In at X p.m. You want to set your absolute last-in time early enough that you have time to do the scoring before your closing ceremonies begin. On our last one, I just told people to keep their answer sheets with them until 5 p.m., and that we would be back at the registration table between 5 and 6 p.m. to collect the entry fee and score the cards. That gave them all day to ride it without a concern whether they rode in the morning or afternoon.

For a motorcyclist, I would also say, do NOT make your poker run longer than 100 miles. People have ridden a long way to get to some of these rallies and don't mind riding another couple of hours, with maybe a lunch break, but they do mind long, long runs. Be sure to route your poker run through some areas where the riders can get gas, help in an emergency (at least part of the time), and give them a chance to make potty stops or stops for ice cream. For a boater, you would want to set a comparable, fun and comfortable distance to sail.

For prizes, you can have trophies made up, but we always divide the pot as well. At least the winners get some money for playing if nothing else: 50% to the best hand, 25% to another hand (more on this in a second), and 25% to the chapter or the organization. The 25% second-place award doesn't have to go to the second-best hand: in our last one, the best hand won 50% of the pot, and the WORST hand won the other 25%. This gives people more of a chance to win if they start to draw a lousy hand, and it makes them feel better, and makes the poker playing just for fun. You may want to designate the other 25% to go to a charity or a fund for retired seamen, or something like that. May help draw participants if you don't need the money to run your event.

Also, be sure to have someone at the starting/ending point who actually plays poker. <grin> I don't, so I don't know what beats what kind of a hand, and I always have to have a poker player with me.

For what it's worth: We had one bad sport at this last poker run, the first time it has ever happened. He did the ride, got the answers, came up to pull his cards (he was one of the first two or three to return), and then said, when he saw that he had pulled a lousy hand, "Well, I'm not paying \$5 for this - I can't win!" He simply refused to pay up. We thought that was pretty crappy, but all Jim said was, "Why don't you step aside then so the next guy can get his cards." >From then on, Jim asked them (nicely) to pay their \$5 BEFORE they were allowed to pull their cards, and the rest of the riders thought nothing of it. A word to the wise... <grin>.

Do give the rider BOTH a map and written out directions, with each turn described as to approximate distance. After typing a detailed set of rules and instructions for a run, I found out, to my embarrassment one time, that several - SEVERAL - of the riders who came were illiterate, or almost. They could follow a map with the route highlighted, and they would usually get the rest of the instructions from their fellow riders who could read, but they couldn't read complicated directions.

Have fun planning your poker run! As you can tell, it takes a fair amount of planning and preparation to get one that fits your needs. We usually end up pre-riding ours about three times: once to scout, once to set it in basic form, and one last time just before the event to be sure the roads haven't deteriorated, or some other safety factor or time-limiting factor has not sprung up (like a major detour from storm damage). I usually do the paperwork and set up the rules and pick the theme, but my chapter members do a lot of riding with me to help with other aspects - asking permission from store owners for a bunch of bikers to come in and look around, asking if we can leave our jar of ribbons inside and selling the fact that it may mean more customers, etc.

This is about all I can think of to tell you beyond what was in the article and I may have repeated some of that, too. I know some of this may not translate to boating, but probably most of it will have some parallel. I used to boat up on Lake Travis in another lifetime <grin>, but I had my 'sad day' when the boat was sold, bought a bike, and never looked back.