



HOKA HEY

IT'S A GOOD DAY TO RIDE

By Alex DeMarban

Alex Sweeney wanted to quit. Competing with hundreds of Harley Davidson riders on a long-distance sprint from Florida to Alaska, he was exhausted. It was just Day Two.

In it for the adventure – not to win – he'd let scores of bikers blow past after the June 20 start in Key West. Groups of them smoked by three or four at a time. Organizers billed the event a challenge, not a race, and said speeding tickets would disqualify racers. But with the promise of a \$500,000 prize, plenty of people took their chances.

Sweeney, a stickler for safety and the only rider he saw wearing day-glo gear, knew from the beginning that it would be a tough ride. Back in Key West, during pre-race ceremonies, organizer Jim "Red Cloud" Durham set an ominous tone for the contest he'd created to raise money for his reservation. He warned the long course was designed to break bodies and souls, according to Sweeney.

The 8,400-mile route, roughly traversing the southern U.S. before heading north at Arizona, would be revealed on maps provided at each checkpoint. It would cross more than a dozen states and scores of mountain ranges, forests and national parks.

Durham named the race Hoka Hey, a dramatic Lakota warrior phrase he said meant, "It's a good day to die." But the race's marketing materials softened the term to say, "It's a good day to ride." Alex chose the latter.

Controversy dogged the event. Talking with reporters, riders called maps wrong, communication poor, and the \$1,000 entry fee a rip-off. Many of the race's 700-plus competitors dropped out early on.

Sweeney had no complaints. "It was worth every penny of it," he said. "I think some people thought there were going to be teams of people babysitting everybody along the way. That was not my understanding. I knew from the day I started I was on my own."

A Friend for a Guide

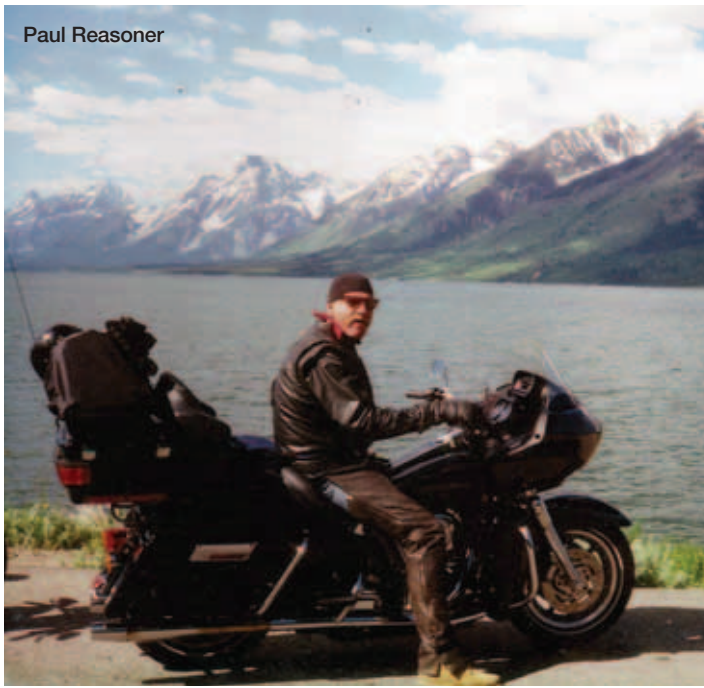
Though he's a churchgoing man who dotes after three young daughters, Sweeney isn't hard to picture in a cutthroat road race, even among "hardcore bikers with tattooed faces," as he called a few of the racers. He's broadly built at 59 with trim white hair, and he's no stranger to demanding schedules and rugged conditions. He's had plenty of experience with both in a career with Crowley that's spanned 30 years and taken him across the globe.

Currently vice president of operations for Crowley in Alaska, he

started as a mate working on a tug in the Alaska Arctic. He moved up quickly to captain and into the office in Alaska. His roles have included vice president of operations for Crowley's marine services in the U.S. and international operations.

He's worked in Russia, China and the Western Hemisphere from Tierra Del Fuego to Prudhoe Bay at the top of Alaska, among other places. Wherever Crowley's had work, he's been there. But in all his years, he'd never traveled across the U.S. on a motorcycle, a dream he's had since his teenage days in the late 1960s, when he met a Vietnam veteran riding horseback from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The stranger spent a night at Sweeney's uncle's farm in Michigan, and spun tales of his trip over dinner with the family. Sweeney was hooked – only he wanted to experience it on two wheels.





A good friend he met through Crowley years later fueled the idea. Sweeney hired Paul Reasoner to captain a Crowley tug during the cleanup of the Exxon Valdez spill in 1989.

The two men got to know each other through work and later, through their love of motorcycles. Reasoner, tall, red-headed and full of life, once hurtled by bike virtually nonstop from Jacksonville to Los Angeles in 36 hours, Sweeney said. The two often talked about making a cross-country trip together, and Reasoner always rang up his friend before he hit the road. But Sweeney was always too busy.

Then the unexpected happened. At age 50, Reasoner was killed in a carjacking in Port Arthur, Texas, in late 2006.

Sweeney never forgot their dream. To honor him during the race, he taped a picture of Reasoner to the windshield.

"I took him along on the ride with me," Sweeney said. "Right behind the compass."

A Lifetime Opportunity

Sweeney's long-distance experience by motorcycle was limited to treks with his wife, Adrienne, an assistant port captain for Crowley when they met in 1993. After they were married and living in Valdez – where Alex was vice president of operations for Alyeska, and Adrienne was chief mate for the Alaska Marine Highway – they enjoyed taking cruises on motorcycles between Valdez and Homer. They often traveled across mountainous Southcentral Alaska, making the 14-hour journey to Homer and returning home to Valdez via Whittier and the Marine Highway ferry, *M/V Tustumena*.

But then they started having children, and had second thoughts about their risky hobby. They had three girls – today, Eleanor is seven, Lillian is six and Lexie Pearl is five – and the penalty for getting hurt seemed too steep. They sold their bikes and agreed not to ride again until their youngest turned 18.

Then Adrienne heard about the Hoka Hey Challenge, when Durham came to Homer to introduce his plans to the city council. The Sweeneys own the 32-room Driftwood Inn and RV park in Homer. Adrienne runs it in the summer, and Alex comes to Homer to help on weekends when he's not working in Anchorage. The race seemed tailor-made for Alex, she said.

His cross-country riding dream started in Florida and ended in Alaska. And the fact that he could finish the race at home, in Homer, seemed like an extra bonus. Adrienne suggested he sign up and not to worry about the dangers; after all, he avoids taking risks on the road and he functions well in adverse conditions.

"I told him, 'It's your dream to do this. Once in a while in our lives we have to follow that dream and say, 'I did it,' because if you don't then you might regret it,'" she said.

Worried about the risks, he hemmed and hawed but finally agreed, knowing he could ride safely. Things fell into place. Seeing a business opportunity, the couple marketed the hotel to racers and their families. And she decided to keep a daily journal of his race on the hotel's website.

Sweeney got a screaming deal on a bike, too. During a trip to Crowley's headquarters in Jacksonville, he learned of an Orlando shop selling a 2009 Electraglide for \$17,000. The store promised to hold it until he could drive there the next day, but didn't. Yet they ultimately honored their commitment, knocking \$7,000 off a spanking new 2010 Road Glide Custom.

Motivation from Alaska

For the race, Sweeney packed light, taking Carhartt overalls, a big road atlas and plenty of underwear. He made sure to bring high-visibility vests. While others sported black leather and removed their helmets, he glowed orange and green – and wore a gleaming-white helmet to boot. Racers leapfrogging him said they recognized him in the dark, even from a distance. For bathing, he brought a box of man-size wet wipes. "I wore one set of clothes and changed my underwear every night," he said.

The Harley performed well, but it was top-heavy, and by the end of Day 2 he was whipped. He'd covered 950 miles in the saddle. At one point that day, he'd wasted five hours in Georgia lost in the 100-degree-plus heat, searching for unmarked roads. When he rolled into a gas station that night, he was tired and weak and felt devastated.

"I was really struggling and said, 'God, I need some help. Paul, where are you? You're a better rider than I am. I need some help on this ride or I'm not going to make it.' This was where I was at mentally. I was just done."

He pulled out his cell phone and called his wife in Alaska. "I just should park this bike and come home," he told her. He was riding with two guys then, all of them lost, and one of whom wanted to keep on.

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– Alex Sweeney

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– Adrienne Sweeney

“You just gotta stop for the night. Just promise me you’ll stop and get some sleep,” she told him. “You can’t just throw your hands up now; go get some sleep and you’ll feel better in the morning.”

Her support made all the difference. The group found a campsite that night, with help from a police escort. The next morning he shot down some coffee, mounted his Road Glide and kept at it for another 11 days.

Rigors of the Road

Sweeney said he stuck to the rules: no speeding and no hotels, for starters. He usually slept where his bike came to rest, spreading out in grass along the roadside or curling up on the sidewalk under gas station awnings. He showered once, at a campground bathroom in Wyoming. Minus soap and towels, he dried off with a dirty undershirt.

Alex at Key West landmark “Mile 0” before the start of the race.



“It physically beat me and it stretched me mentally. But I loved it, I just absolutely loved it.”

– Alex Sweeney

Mornings usually started before 4:00 a.m., but he'd pull off the road to cat-nap in midday heat, which shot above 110 for one three-day stretch that included Oklahoma and Arizona. He followed every back road and side street on the maps, another rule, covering hundreds of miles each day and averaging more than 12 hours of riding.

Despite the complaints, he called the maps accurate, though the streets weren't always easy to find. Overall, he wasted nearly 1,000 miles searching. Some bikers complained that early support teams had removed street signs. That's possible, Sweeney said. After one search, a local told him a sign had been there the day before. Townsfolk often made things worse, sending him on wild chases. He might get three answers from three people, each wrong.

Visits from a Good Friend

But Sweeney felt watched over. One morning early in the race he tried to say the rosary while riding, as he likes to do each morning at home. One morning heard a little voice in his head say: “You ride the bike and I'll take care of the prayers.”

The next morning, a woman stopped him in a gas station to ask about his journey. “She asked, taking my hand, ‘Can I pray with you?’ For five minutes we're there. She's holding my hands and she says this long prayer.”

Afterward a rider asked him what that woman was doing, and he said, “She was taking care of my daily prayers.” Such encounters became

common. “It was always something like that to let me know that I was covered,” he said.

Starting around Day 3, he began picturing his friend Paul. Thinking of Paul helped him to beat the heat and long days. While cruising down the road, he was comforted by the idea of Paul, riding beside him, wearing a red-checkered shirt and blue jeans, and watching out for him.

After the race, Sweeney visited Paul's wife, Margaret, in Jacksonville, Fla., where she works for Crowley as managing director of marine personnel. Knowing that Sweeney had displayed her late husband's photo, she thought he'd come to share stories about other riders who recognized Paul. But instead, Sweeney cried as he talked about his friend. Margaret said he described her husband perfectly. She wasn't surprised Sweeney imagined Paul riding along.

Paul, who eventually became Crowley's director of International Operations in San Francisco, knew a lot of people but considered just a few friends. Sweeney was one of them.

Paul had made three cross-country tours – Margaret called them “iron-butt” rides – and Paul would have been there with Sweeney on this one.

“I was just thrilled that he would think of Paul on the ride, because if Paul was alive he would have been there, no doubt in my mind. He would have been laughing with Alex all the way across, saying, ‘Get off your butt, keep going, we're not done yet.’ And that he could imagine him like that during the ride, in whatever form Alex saw him, it just seems so Paul to me.”

“Hugs and Kisses” in Homer

After traveling over 9,200 miles in just 13 days, Sweeney neared the finish line in Homer on July 2. It also happened to be his 30-year anniversary with Crowley.

The girls couldn't wait to see him. They'd been following him on the Internet with help from a Spot Satellite Messenger, a portable GPS tracker he'd bought so his family could follow his progress. Each day, his kids ran to the computer, shouting, “Where's Daddy? Where's Daddy?” For the last dozen miles he was greeted by signs the girls had put up along the road.

“Hugs and kisses waiting at finish line.”



“Way to Hoka Hey.”

“Good job, Daddy.”

He signed in as the 136th rider to reach the final checkpoint.

But he thinks he finished in the top 50, based on the small number of signatures at the next-to-last checkpoint in Fairbanks.

Dozens of people apparently skipped that Alaska city to the north and took a shortcut to Homer. As for the winner, that was Will Barclay, of Highland, Fla., who finished in just eight days. Despite critics who said it wouldn’t happen, Durham paid out the prize money after confirming that Barclay did the race correctly, news accounts said.

The race wasn’t easy, but Sweeney’s glad he did it. “It physically beat me and it stretched me mentally. But I loved it, I just absolutely loved it,” he said. It’s probably the last time he’ll ever do something like that.

After returning safely home to Alaska, he’s had his bike professionally cleaned and plans to sell it. Now it’s back to plan A: No more riding until the girls grow up. But as soon as the youngest turns 18, he’ll buy another bike.

And he’ll hit the road for a long, long time. **Connections**

Quick Facts

- The 2010 Hoka Hey Motorcycle Challenge was a 8,400-mile motorcycle event that began in Key West, Florida, on June 20, and ended in Homer, Alaska, on the Fourth of July weekend.
- Alex Sweeney, vice president of operations, has responsibility for managing most vessel and terminal operations throughout Alaska, and recently assumed responsibility for Crowley’s North Slope operations.
- Sweeney was presented with the Thomas Crowley Trophy in 1996, Crowley’s highest honor.

(Left to Right) 1. Alex wore day-glo gear while riding for extra safety. 2. The distance Alex rode from Key West to Homer. 3. The Sweeney family 4. Eleanor, Lillian and Lexie Pearl Sweeney welcome Alex home.

Alex Sweeney at home in Alaska

