

## **Race Report: Furnace Creek 508**

### **To California City**

We gathered at 7:00AM beside the lobby of the Hilton Garden Inn, in Valencia, right across the street from 6 Flags, Magic Mountain. This area is considered North Western Los Angeles. I stood there amidst the racers, most of whom I have never met. Chris Kostman, the director of the race, was there to offer some last minute suggestions and support before we all took off. I am not sure, exactly as to what was swishing through my mind as I stood there, but when Chris played the National Anthem, emotion replaced thought, and right then, there was no place else where I wanted to be.

The anthem lasted only moments, and before I knew it, we were off and riding. For the first 4 miles, we all rode together, as a group, and while we rode, our support vans, passed us in a procession as we made our way East. San Francisquito Road was filled with some very beautiful scenery, but during the race, I was unable to see any of it due to the dense fog shrouding the peaks of the hills leaving North-Western Los Angeles. Within the first 23 miles, we climbed, roughly, 2500 feet. However, a wonderful place was picked just a mile and a half up the road where everyone's support vans were parked and waiting. I stopped to pick up two bottles and take off my arm warmers. The initial plan was to stop for less than five minutes, no matter what, during the instances when I needed to stop. This stop was flawless, and I was able to start riding in less than two minutes. For the next 20 miles, I found myself riding on some exceptionally flat stretches of straight roads. The sun came out toward the end of the first climb, and I was basking in the light during this stretch. We were now playing "leap frog."

Before mountain section two, I refilled one bottle, took my knee warmers off, and I asked my mechanic to raise my seat by three millimeters. We had a discussion about it over the walkie-talkie, but the members were lost when I tried to explain the significance of the three millimeters. I did not have time to explain then, and I probably would not be able to make anyone understand now, (unless

the person I am convincing already understands.) However, that change worked perfectly, and it made a difference in climb section number two. (Climbing section two lasted for 14 miles.) On the other side, we passed huge windmills as we descended into Mojave, California, and started on some flats which did wonders for my average speed. I managed to replace two bottles on the way up the second climb section, so that I did not have to slow down during the flat land hauling to be fed. This was a good thing since I would be traveling, at speed for some time, since the next significant hill was 25 miles away. This section took me through California City, where I ran across the first time station. I rolled in, shouted "RED TAIL HAWK" received the nod, and off I went.

### **To Trona**

In the mean-time, my crew stopped at a Subway in Mojave to pick up food. Once my crew caught up with me, there were several times when they tried to give me water. Unfortunately, each time I was close enough, I had to decline because I was moving too fast for a hand off. Due to the rules of the day, the hand-offs had to be done from the side of the road, with a crew member running with a bottle. The fastest I could go with this working, was about 25 MPH. I was moving at a speed that was close to 35 MPH for several miles. Fortunately, they were able to make it work once we reached a more rolling section. Once I was fed and watered, we moved across that rolling section which seemed to last forever. Finally, that 12 mile stretch took us to the next climb section. This one was a tad more difficult, than the previous climbs, because it made me feel like I was going nowhere. In fact, I had to look back several times to see if I was making any progress whatsoever. Once I made it to the top, in Randsburg, I asked my crew to stop briefly while I changed shorts. (I had wanted to change every 100 miles or so and at this point, I was passed due.)

There was still some climbing to be done over the next 10 miles, we had some long rolling hills, and it was in this area that I spotted the second Golden Eagle I have ever seen. He/she was less than 25 yards from where I was riding. What an amazing bird! His/her belly was a yellowish beige color, with a dark brown outline of the whole body, and some more yellowish beige on the other

side of the outline. If I didn't know better, I would have said somebody was being creative with a paint brush! At the top of the final roller, I started a descent that took me to speeds in the low to mid 50 MPH range, but since I was more interested in finishing, I never tried to push for a max speed. (70MPH could have been easily attained on this particular hill) Consequently, I only hit 54.8 MPH, which I was able to hold for several miles. The rest of the way to Trona was mostly flat with another nice descent tossed in. After Checking in with the time station, I went directly across the street to the bathroom of the gas station. One of the problems people encounter while riding a bicycle, through the desert, is a lack of bathrooms! The locals of Trona, who I met while driving the course, before the race, told me that the competitors will be riding through Trona between 3:00PM and 4:00PM. My check in was at 3:45, so I was on schedule, but I was not going to push to make this happen faster.

### **Furnace Creek**

After Trona, there was a several mile climb which took us to one of the last stretches we would ride before climbing Townes Pass. What really stood out in this climb was the fact that my legs started to lock while working toward the summit. What I mean by "lock" is that my legs were beginning to cramp so severely that they would not be able to move without unbearable pain. When this process started, I forced myself to drink two full bottles of Cytomax, and I also asked my crew to begin making the mix double strength. In the mean time, I eased back on the effort, as much as possible, for about 10-15 minutes. This enabled the electrolytes to get into the muscles and arrest the cramping. (Or at least that was the plan.) It took some extra time to reach the summit of this particular hill because of my efforts in stopping the cramping. Once at the top, however, I descended into a valley and was able to ride quickly as I made my way to Panamint Valley.

The light was starting to lessen as we approached 6:00PM, but I was able to make it about half way across Panamint Valley before I had to stop and put my lighting equipment on. Once we started again, I was able to regain my speed and finished the first 200 miles in a personal record time of 11 hours and 10

minutes of total time. (this included stops) According to my computer, my average riding speed, (without the stops) was 19.2 MPH. According to my altimeter, I had climbed 11,500 feet worth of hills in that section. To say that I was ecstatic would be an understatement. So much so that I did not mind the fact that there was a head wind as I started climbing Townes Pass. The light was becoming dimmer with each passing mile, and we were all plunged into total darkness in a very short period of time. There were many who were on the pass before I arrived, and I could clearly see the lights going up the pass. Some of them seemed to be directly over my head causing me to think: "Wow, I am climbing up there?" Well, I had to stop thinking about that, and concentrated on my own climb. During this section, I had seen Magpie at the bottom, and we wished each other well on the climb, and I passed Dolphin and Parrot while climbing. I may have passed some others, but I remember Parrot and Dolphin, because we passed each other several times on the way up. One time in particular, was when I crashed due to a malfunction in my shifter. Apparently, things loosen when one is riding fast over rough roads, and my derailleur was not immune to this problem. When I was shifting into my biggest cog in the rear, the chain over shot, and was caught between the cassette and the wheel spokes. When this happened, I stopped, and before I could unclip, I went over. However, I did manage to keep my body between the working parts and the road, so no damage was done to the bike! Parrot had his own problems, He was riding a bike in a class called "fixed gear" this means that every moment the rear wheel is spinning, the pedals are turning, so there is never an instance when one can coast, nor is there an instance when one can switch gears to make a climb like Townes Pass easier. Whenever I passed Parrot, specifically his support van, I had a chance to look inside and take note of the "hearts" game being played on someone's laptop. That is the Microsoft version that comes with windows. From what I could tell, each time I passed, Ben was winning! I digress, back to the climb...

It took an hour and 40 minutes to achieve the summit of Townes pass, a total of 10 miles of 8-13% grade. While not a race ending mistake, I would

definitely not make the mistake of stopping at the top of the pass again when next I race in the desert, because of the extremely cold temperature; I am not sure how cold, but if I had to guess, I would suggest it was in the 40's somewhere. It was here that I changed into long tights, arm warmers, and began having things stuffed into my jersey to protect me from the cold. However, I was also cramping, shivering, and still sweating. One of the results of the shivering was the cramping of muscles that I never knew existed. After much too long, I was back on the bike, and flying down the hill into Death Valley.

From the top of Townes Pass, I had to navigate the twists and turns of the first five miles in the dark. My speed, while fast, was not nearly as fast as some of the descents experienced earlier in the day, under the sun. I was still shivering during this descent, and my muscles were tight during this plummet. However, the temperature started rising rapidly the lower my altitude became. In fact, many of the layers stuffed into my jersey had to be taken out once we got to Stove Pipe Wells about 25 minutes into the descent, but even as I was regretting my decision to change into long tights at the top of the pass, I kept them on for the ride across the floor of the valley.

Approximately four miles past the closed gas station which marks Stove Pipe Wells, a relentless 40 MPH headwind with 50+ MPH gusts manifested itself. The rest of the way between Stove Pipe Wells and Furnace Creek, all of the racers were hit with this wind. My legs were sweating, in the tights, but I was glad to have been wearing them, because of a five mile section where we were getting a half head wind/half cross wind, (still 40 MPH) and there was more sand, in my eyes and in my lungs, than exists on the whole shoreline in Atlantic City NJ! It felt exactly like riding through a sand blaster! Riding was extremely difficult through Death Valley, and eating/drinking, while riding, was downright impossible. This created a need to stop frequently so I could take drinks and eat. Once in Furnace Creek, my support crew was totally wiped, (not that I was much better) so the 4 of us took a nap for an hour.

### **Shoshone**

Once back on the bike, I headed out to the road... (For some reason, Furnace Creek, where we were, was sheltered from the wind...) Once I turned onto the road, I was hit full force by the wind that I was experiencing before. This won't really mean much to most people, so let me describe this a bit more... The bottom of Death Valley consists of a number of low, long, rolling hills. This means that they are steady up and down, with very little, if any, flat lands in between. With the wind, I was forced to crank on the down-hills, and crank MUCH HARDER on the up-hills. The gusts would destroy any momentum as it ground me to a halt, blew me into the next lane, or threatened to blow me over completely. It was this way for more than 77 miles, and my average speed across the valley was around eight MPH, or less.

Finally, after the sun had been up for 2 hours, I made it to the bottom of Jubilee Pass. My crew needed another nap after the long slow crawl across the valley, so I took the opportunity to stretch, relax, and take another nap, for a while. Magpie, who I became friendly with before the race, caught up with me. We passed each other frequently while going up Jubilee, but the downhill between Jubilee and Salisbury put him out front. Our support vans were in close proximity to each other, and Magpie's mom offered me a sandwich as I approached. "Food? Me refuse FOOD??" We ate and chatted briefly before resuming the long climb up Salisbury Pass. This was one that seemed to go forever. Salisbury pass is a straight grade. So much so, that I don't believe I have ever seen a hill that was so uniformed in its steepness. It was only about 5% grade, but it was never-ending. Loon drove passed Magpie and I we were climbing; he wished us well and congratulated us for going as far as we did. We also passed Marlin who was having problems due to the fact that he could not keep anything in his stomach. The people who do this race are simply amazing! The strength of will required to finish is incredible, and I find myself feeling very proud to be sharing the same roads. The time ticked past quickly, as we moved slowly. Aside from the two I mentioned, we saw nobody else as we crawled up the mountain passes, and even though the wind left us as we climbed, progress was still slow.

Once on the other side, we experienced a 12 mile net descent toward Shoshone. Once I got to the bottom, I made the right turn south, (to stay on 178/127,) and was hit by the same wind that was brutalizing me in Death Valley. I rode the remaining mile to the Time Station, and Felix, who descended faster than I did, had elected to call it quits. My crew, who was also there ahead of me, (we were playing leap frog) were waiting for a decision from me, and I thought about it, briefly. The thought of riding the next 180 some odd miles with that wind was just not my idea of fun, so I elected to be done as well. If I was able to drink and eat while riding, and still keep the bike under control, in that wind, I would have finished, but the fact that I had to stop every single time I needed to drink/eat, I would have DNF'd due to the time limit. Magpie's mom and dad are wonderful people, and I am thrilled to have met Magpie and his parents!

#### **Four Things to do differently**

The first thing that needs to be done, before a racer can expect to finish the 508, is to start creating a schedule for food/water/Enduralite consumption. This schedule needs to be followed, to the letter, no questions, and no ignoring of pleas from the crew to eat; the racer must listen to his crew and eat when they tell him/her to eat. Consequently, the crew needs to be aware that they must perform this function. To a person, every finisher was on a schedule for calorie intake. Secondly, since we are on the subject of food, the correct food needs to be in the cooler for the racer, before the race. There are no questions about this, it is necessary. Due to issues beyond our control, we were unable to shop until it was too late to achieve this goal, and this made for a more difficult race. The difficulty beyond our control was actually my fault, and will be corrected the next time this race is done.

The third thing I would do differently is to never stop, at the top of Townes Pass. This cost time and energy that we could ill afford to spend. It is much better to stop in Stove Pipe Wells if one needs to stop on this journey.

The fourth thing is to be mentally prepared for anything. I was prepared for a long race, and I was prepared for the dry conditions of the desert, but I was not prepared for the horrendous wind, despite the warnings that there might be

strong winds on the floor of Death Valley. This goes toward the long ride issue. Once I completed the first double century in 11 hours and 10 minutes, I thought, stupidly, that I could keep that kind of pace (time-wise,) or at least make up some time on the low rolling hills across the valley floor. I was wrong, and the extremely slow average speed across the valley floor illustrated my error. This really hit me hard, psychologically. It was not the being wrong, and it was not issue of slow progress. Rather, it was the compilation of watching the sun-rise knowing that I was still on the valley floor and the knowledge that I needed to be further along than where I actually happened to be.

On the Furnace Creek 508, there was no physical pain that was unendurable, there was no problem, whether it was cramping or feeling hungry, that could not be solved, somehow. In the future, I will finish this race. I have learned many lessons on my excursion through the desert; lessons that I will take with me and apply to future achievements in cycling. I would like to thank Chris Kostman of Adventure Corps for hosting this event, Charlie (the Lizard) Liskey for helping me get there, and I would especially like to thank my crew, lead by Scott Davidson, without whom I could not have been there, Rebecca Vasconcelles, who enabled me to stay on the bike, and Bob Stout, who made sure everything was working the way it was supposed to be working! On a Training note, I do not believe I could have had a better influence than that of two men who assisted in my training. Ryan Graff, who worked tirelessly on creating training schedules for me this season, and to Danny Chew, who offered guidance and direction. Thank you all very much!!

Words can not do justice, in describing my first experience with the 508. The next time that I race through the furnace, No wind, however great, will stand in the way of me achieving my goal! A very quick mention to the racers I have met, and consider friends. Dolphin, whose strength will take her anywhere, Parrot, you fixed gear guys are amazing, Lemur, you just plain ROCK! Magpie, I'll be in touch! Scarlett Fairy Cup who proved that she can do anything; you and your husband are wonderful people, Thanks for everything!