

Furnace Creek 508 Race Report

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PROLOGUE

The Furnace Creek 508 experience for me starts with the question of "Why"? It's the question I've been most frequently asked about the race and the least understood. How does one get the notion that a 500-mile bike ride through the California desert in 48 hours or less is a good idea?

My introduction to the race was 5 years ago when my brother, Erik completed the course as a solo contestant. I was on his crew during the race and it left an indelible mark on me. I knew my brother was one tough nut but to see him pounding out the course hour by hour made my observations real. I think we're all wowed by elite performances at events like the Olympics but the longest, toughest event is what, a marathon of around 2 hours? To witness Erik still cranking his way up monster climbs at mile 450 and looking as strong as he did at mile 45 was the pinnacle of elite to me and something I'll always be extremely proud of him for.

Every year since Erik's solo finish, I've participated in the event as a rider or crew member, the race is that addicting. 200 solo riders and teams show up in California at Magic Mountain and skip the theme park to plod along the dry, hot, lonely and cruel desert all the way to the entrance of Joshua Tree National Park. The race draws out a unique breed of human being. They come from all over the globe and from all walks of life to participate in the 508. Many of the individuals have been racing bikes all of their lives, but what truly strikes me, are the stories of people tackling this race on top of their own battles with cancer, epilepsy, diabetes and more. The courage that lines up at the start of the race is something to behold and you can't help yourself but to want to be a part of it.

"Are you ready?" is the next question I'm commonly asked. And it always makes me chuckle as I have no clue as to how to answer that one. I've ridden in dozens of centuries or 100 mile rides by now and a couple of 200 mile rides. But neither of those distances can compare with the head-game of being out on the bike for nearly two days and two nights in a row.

I've done my research and there is no secret recipe for getting this race done. I think if there were a tried-and-true formula (i.e. a $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of miles and a pinch of suffering and voilá you've got the 508) then it would take all the challenge out of the event. I've learned the hard way that whatever shortcomings I may have physically and mentally, either the training or the event will draw them out. The preparation and the event itself are very personal and what may work for one person will never be the standard for what works for the rest of the crowd.

Just like the 500 miles ahead, training requires that you jump in with both feet. The actual bike portion of the preparation was the only part I found somewhat straightforward. The 508 climbs the equivalent of Mt. Everest over the length of the course so you might want to hone those climbing skills. You're also out there alone and not tucked in on a paceline during the race so a pair of aerobars and some practice in the drops will come in handy.

The variety and quantity of training that didn't involve pushing pedals caught me by surprise however. "Are you ready?" isn't answered just by miles on the bike, but by all the other small but significant factors that add up too. An event this epic forced me to live what I'll call a "508 lifestyle," where I passed up many an opportunity to throw back beers with friends and instead branch out and explore new ways of living that helped me better prepare for the race. Some lifestyle changes were brand new and others were tweaks to things I've done in the past. They include:

- Yoga. Great multi-tasking of stretching, strengthening, breathing and focus. A regular routine of halfmoons and down-dogs improved my time on the bike, seriously.
- Physical therapy. Training this hard and this long surfaced new aches and pains. Best not to train through them, dealt with the source instead.
- Sports massage. Guess I'm a bit of a prude because it took me a long while to step up and give it a try. Glad I did as it was well worth the time and the money.

- Changes to food intake. Still love my ice cream, bacon and beer but found they didn't make the best pre or post-race fuels. Made it a point to cook at home more often. Raised a garden this year and introduced more organics and local food into the diet.
- Stretching, stretching, stretching. 30 minutes everyday. No kidding – no stretching equates to no biking for me.
- Regular trips to the gym. It was key for me to balance out the muscle groups in the legs and hips or pay dearly later.

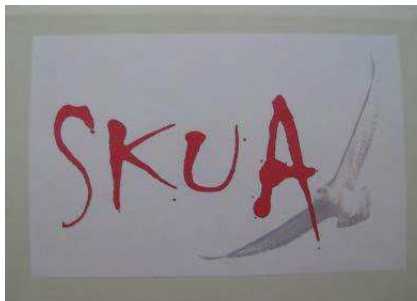
Between the training miles, hamstring stretches, pigeon postures, cooking pasta, trips to PT, 40 hour work weeks, maintaining the casa and time with the Mrs., there wasn't any spare time left this past year. Any 10 minutes left unscheduled went to 508 planning, bike tuning or more stretching. Multi-tasking became essential: it may sound goofy but little tricks like doing my lunge stretches while brushing my teeth at 6 in the AM became part of my regular routine and added up over time.

But enough with all the plotting and the training – let's get on with the details about the ride!

PRE-RACE

Two days before the race our team was found making the final preparations for the trip. We picked up the rental van in Salt Lake and loaded it up with two bikes, food and water to feed a small army, spare parts and tools to support all of Team Radio Shack, sunglasses, suntan lotion, chapstick (all in triplicate!) and the kitchen sink. Next we drove down to Las Vegas to catch up with the Borracho Burro team (our buddy Ed is also racing in the 508 solo) and to pimp out the crew vans. We spend Thursday evening before the race pasting logos on each of the vans and organizing the loot inside over pizza and a couple of beers.

The 508 rules require each racer to pick a totem or animal name instead of a number and post it in huge letters on all four sides of the crew vehicle. It's common to select an animal that starts with the first letter of your last name and I settled on "SKUA" after catching an episode of National Geographic on arctic sea birds (or Skua). My favorite scene from the show was when one particular Skua was chasing off a caribou – what kind of crazy bird is going to take on a 500lb animal with antlers? Sounds 508-crazy, I think that'll be my totem!



The crazy-bird Totem

As we're wrapping up van preparations, I pull the crew aside for a few minutes to walk them through some basics with the bike (taking lights and computers on and off, which electronics go where, what batteries each take and how to replace them). I guess it was a bit too basic as they all rolled their eyes at the cheesy demonstration. Their look said everything – "Um yeah, you've got an engineer, a teacher/chef and a navy veteran on your crew. We know bikes are *tricky* and all but we just might be able to figure out how to push the little button that makes the light go from blinky-blinky to a steady on. *Okay??*" Point taken, I guess I won't have to worry about the crew!

Friday we split first thing in the AM and caravan down to Santa Clarita with B-Burro and his crew. I should mention that in our van we have my wife Kris, my cousin Chris and my dad Dennis. Ed's crew includes my brother Erik, our buddy Ryan and another friend Mike. Besides a freak thunderstorm that washed all of the bikes hanging from the car, the drive down to the 508 start at Santa Clarita was uneventful and we made it in around 1pm – prime time to check in for the race.

I mentioned previously that I've been down to the race a number of times, but so had most of our crew members. The veteran support was awesome and both of our teams sailed right through racer check-in and the bike/vehicle inspections. I felt a little sorry for teams that were in the parking lot still adding reflective tape to their rider's bikes – we've been in that position before and it's a drag. I was stoked that our crews had dialed in both bikes and vans the night before in Vegas so that we could enjoy the rest of the afternoon as we chilled out.



Mugshot from Racer check-in



The A-team. Dad on the left, me, the Mrs. and Crew Chief Chris

The teams grabbed some lunch after racer check-in and then Kris and I headed back to the hotel room for a quick nap. I've been jittery the last couple of nights leading up to the 508 and behind on my sleep. The nap is short but sweet and I wake up with enough time to take a quick shower before the crew drops my Dad and me off at the pre-race meeting.

At the pre-race meeting the race Director, Chris Kostman, pumps up the crowd with a video from last year's epic race. Riders in the video, including myself, are all smiles during day one leading into Death Valley with the ripping tailwind at their backs. And then there are video shots from day two. The screen flickers images of sand, gravel, bikes and bodies being blown sideways across the road. Yep, I remember those winds vividly. I still haven't shaken the experience of holding on to the handlebars for dear life and not being able to let go to nab a bit of food or water for the fear of getting blown directly into the ditch. Fortunately there is nothing in the weather forecast suggesting the insane 30-40+ gusts we saw last year. It's going to be hot (90+) but the winds we're told should be more manageable.

The race Director walks us through the rules, some last minute updates and a few hints for the adventure that begins bright and early tomorrow morning. "Do whatever it takes to finish" are his parting words of advice. "I'm surprised every year by the number of people who throw in the towel with plenty of time to regroup and bring the ride home. Strange and unexpected things are bound to happen out there. Remember you have an entire 48 hours to get this ride done. Keep working your way to Twentynine Palms so I can award the 508 finisher's jersey



Two good-looking crews and two nervous riders!

and medal to each and everyone of you". The anticipation in the air of the pre-race meeting hall couldn't be any thicker. I'm assuming most of the riders feel like I do - it's time to get this show on the road!

Our two crews regroup at the El Torito Mexican restaurant after the meeting for a pre-race dinner of enchiladas and a margarita. Then it is back to the hotel for the final-final preparations before the ride. I lay out all the gear I'll be wearing in the morning on the spare bed in the room. It strikes me as very Don

Quixote to polish up the battle gear and neatly spread it out in the remaining hours before doing battle with windmills (or are they dragons?). How the hell are we going to succeed in tackling this gnarly beast?

The race itself is broken up into 8 discrete stages and we'll work on taking them down one by one. There is a time station at the end of each leg staffed by the wonderful volunteers who support this race each year through the countless hours of heat, wind, dark and sometimes rain. First up is the leg from Santa Clarita CA out to California City in the Mojave Desert.

WE'RE OFF!!

Santa Clarita to California City. 84 miles, +3500 ft of climbing

"You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the same thing which you think you cannot do."

-Eleanor Roosevelt, first lady

Two years of training and preparing lead up to this: standing around in a Hilton Inn parking lot with the chit-chat of our fellow travelers in the air all waiting anxiously to do what we do – ride a bike! Both crews are pumping Ed and I full of encouragement along with a few pats on the back, hugs and kisses (Mrs. only please!). After the national anthem the crews are told to depart and wait for us up ahead at mile 24.



Trying not to look nervous!



Ed "B-Burro" and I are ready to roll

I hang towards the back of the pack at the starting line-up and end up chatting with Dennis "Triceratops" just before we take off. I am stunned to hear his 508 story from last year where at age 60 he completed 474 miles of the course under the heinous conditions that crushed me by mile 300. It simply doesn't register with me that anyone could possibly throw in the towel with so few miles to the finish or that his crew would let him. My own lesson on perseverance was still to come.

"Don't think about the 508 miles ahead of you," Chris Kostman echoes out of a microphone in the final minutes before we roll out. Yeah right, like any of us have been thinking about anything else for the past year. The plan my crew and I had from the beginning was to finish. Yes, getting done by midnight on Sunday so we can get some sleep would be great but finishing was the target. There's a strange dichotomy, or yin and yang thing going on as you mentally work through the problem of a race like this. On the one hand the distance sounds insane – how can you *really* prepare for the sleep deprivation, fatigue, soreness and loss of focus involved with two endless days of pedaling? On the other hand, you only have to average 11mph or 9-hour century rides to get this monster done. On my worst day(s) on the bike I've never gone that slow, even when everything has gone wrong and I'm stopping to hurl by the side of the road. As I'm standing over my bike in the final moments before the ride I try to stay focused on the latter – I can do 11mph, no sweat.

Essentially my plan was to keep the riding mellow and calm on day one leading into the halfway mark of the race at Furnace Creek in Death Valley and then see what I had left in the tank for day two. I'd focus on keeping my heart rate in low zone two (140bpm-ish) or below and watch out for heart rates peaking into the 160s on climbs.

Just keep it cool for day one, I thought. We'll deal with Day 2 when the sun comes up again and it is probably best not to think about it now.

Finally, we're off! Part of my "keep it mellow" plan was to ride towards the back of pack during the 5-mile group ride at the beginning. And when I say "towards" the back what I mean is the very back – I roll out with the very last three riders out of the parking lot. This is fine with me as I'm not ashamed to be heading out with guys nearly twice my age. As the race Director pointed out at the pre-race meeting, "the race can be lost in the first 50 miles, but is rarely won in that distance". I've got the Plan and I'm sticking with it.



The starting line-up at the 7am solo start.



And then there's me at the back (yellow shorts)

It feels great to be back on the bike. The temperatures are pleasant and the air at sea level fills me up with energy I'm not used to at 4,500 ft back home. In past years the race organizer suggests that the lead riders keep the pace down to a mellow 18mph or slower but I don't remember him saying anything like that this year. The rest of the solo group must be feeling the rush at sea level too because the group is whipping up the pace within the first couple of miles. I notice that the heart rate on my cyclocomputer has crapped out, so I slow down and spend even more time at the back of the pack fiddling with it. As we approach the last climb before we turn left for San Francisquito Canyon I meet up with our buddy Mark "Borzoi" who is giving the ride a run for its money at 60 years of age. He's an accomplished cyclist who put away both the LOTOJA and Desperado Dual 200 mile races this year and it is inspiring to see him attempting a ride this grand.



Mark "Borzoi" and I at the back talking some trash

Once we enter the canyon I ratchet my riding up a notch. I feel good, the bike is working flawless, and the 508 miles won't get put away by themselves. On the flatter sections I drop into the aerobars and pick up a little speed. I keep things loose on the climbs and mix it up with a little standing up and seated high cadence spinning. We've been told to avoid grouping up after mile 5 and it is difficult to do with so many riders wanting to go their own pace and not push off too hard in this first leg of the race. There is a constant stream of leap-frogging as some riders pass on a descending section and then get passed on an incline. I work on keeping things light

including my attitude and chat up the fellow riders as we converge. I recall throwing out random comments like:

- Dude, someone told me this course was flat. The evil bastard lied!
- Are we there yet?
- Twentynine Palms is just around the corner, right?
- Yay, we get to see our crews again soon!

This last comment drew a deadpan response of, "Um I don't think so, they're still about an hour out". I'm hoping I didn't offend any of my fellow riders with my smartass comments. It was great to have the company and camaraderie of the solo racers around me and I was working hard to keep a fun attitude!

About 10 miles in, my rear tire felt soft when I stood up out of the saddle and I stopped a couple of times to pinch the rear tire (my highly calibrated pressure gauge). I was planning on asking the crew to top it off when I bumped into them again at mile 24 but the neutral support of Bicycle John's hooked me up. The tire was 10lbs low and the two guys from their shop had me rolling again in a heartbeat. I was passed by a handful of people during the stop and I started picking them up again as we continued up the canyon.

Further up the road I hear a roar and a silver blur passes 12 inches from my elbow. Ugh, another SUV running late and pissed off at bike traffic. I don't even bother looking at my HR monitor, the pounding in my chest and shortness of breath tell me my pulse has gone through the roof. I'll never understand the need by motorists to play chicken with me and my bike but I resolve to not let the incident spoil my day of riding... correction, two days of riding!

Coasting into the 24-mile mark of the ride is a sight to behold. We've been weaving through this beautiful CA canyon for a little under two hours, out for what feels like just another spin through the neighborhood. And then you see almost 100 vans, plastered in logos and lined up at the end of canyon with all of the crews out ringing bells and cheering the riders on. It's another one of those inspiring moments that tugs at the heartstrings and reminds you that this is not your everyday race.



My bro Erik and cousin Chris decking out the speakers on the rental van – highly recommended!

As planned the Crew is ready with smiles, Perpetuem fuel and water towards the end of the crew van line-up. I swap my two bottles and keep trucking up the hill. We're almost at the top and from here the course takes a long fast descent into the desert and then it is dead flat leading into the next climb: the Windmills.

I've been keeping my heart rate (HR) in check and under 160 for the climbs, though I'm surprised this is difficult to do. I've been tapering off my training for the past three weeks or more and I'm taken aback by how the HR rockets up under what feels like little effort. This is a good sign that I'm plenty rested up for the adventure ahead.

The descent into the desert is awesome – no effort and the cool air whipping by feels good

after 20 miles of climbing. I rapidly gain on a pair of riders and wonder what is going on, until I pick up on their feet spinning out of control. Fixies. The man and woman I just passed are riding fixed gear bikes with a single gear that won't allow them to coast for the next 480 miles. I make a mental note to share with the crew: don't ever, ever let me consider anything that silly, ever. As if this race wasn't hard enough to begin with.

At mile 35 the course enters the desert and is flat and fast. I'm making the most of my aerobars and am occasionally seeing speeds in and around 20mph. The day is starting to heat up and I notice that after three hours on the bike that I haven't needed to hit the bathroom (i.e. random desert shrub) since I've started. I continue to pound more water and more electrolyte pills.

During this section we continue to leapfrog riders and crews. The crews don't appear to be picking sides and cheer on everyone that comes by with equal zeal. I make friends with the crew of Andean Condor when I throw them a "rock loose" hand sign as I go by on the bike. Jeff from their crew seems stoked to be receiving a response from any of the riders (besides a nod) and proceeds to crank up the punk rock from their van's internal stereo as

I pass by. He also gives me a swift smack on the backside as I pedal by. I remember hoping that none of the race officials were around so that we wouldn't have to contest whether he was accelerating my forward motion. I notice the heat even more as we ascend the Windmill climb just before the city of Mojave. This is another one of the exclamation points along the 508 course. From the distance you can see a windmill farm approaching and as you get closer you can finally pick up on how massive the structures are. It perks up my attitude tremendously having this break in scenery and ticking off another major milestone along the route. This year is unique though as the winds are mild and barely turning more than 3 of the 100 windmills on the hill. It's an eerie sound out there when all the windmills are cranking in unison, you can here the internal motors spinning at low RPMs and

it leaves a metallic whir in the air.



Windmills at a standstill this year

The crew is also operating like a well-oiled machine. They're dialing in their system and making hand-offs to me at the occasional stop sign or hill about every 30 minutes. I want for nothing and they have everything lined up and ready to go before I ask. It takes me a few stops to register that each has their own particular supply in-hand when I roll by: Kris will have ice water for drinking, Dad has the fuel and Chris hands me another water bottle to splash myself with. I'm all business when I stop to see the crew and throw out demands like, "chapstick," "chamois cream,"

"fresh pair of legs," "electric motor." No amount of pleases or thank yous could begin to measure my gratitude for them taking "vacation" and giving up four days of their time to travel to CA, watch me ride a bike and treat me like a princess in granting my every request. It's extremely selfish to do this race and I strongly believe that the Crews are the unsung heroes of the 508.



Dad getting a chance to practice hand-offs

The route creeps up to the edge of the city of Mojave but darts around it to avoid traffic. As we approach the town, the last turn is blocked by a passing train. I take advantage of the blocked road to take a pit stop, lube up with even more chamois cream, and top off fuel and water. A group of about 6 riders have piled up at the railroad crossing and I roll out with them on to the highway when the guards are raised.

Booyah - we're nearing the first official time station! The crew has sped ahead of me to help check-in at the stop and to get ready for the short intermission I'll take there. It's getting downright hot and the wind doesn't seem to help as it is either in my face or pushing from the side. That all said, I'm feeling pretty good and reasonably fresh like we've planned. We're rolling into Cali City around noon which is a good time for me. Spirits are high and we bump into B-Burro's crew. The combined crews support me as I take another pit stop, lather up in suntan lotion and top of the fuel and water before I'm off

again. They load me up with extras of everything because they'll be stopping to grab lunch in town and I won't see them again for over an hour.

DESERT SOLITAIRE.

California City to Trona. 71 miles, +2500 ft of climbing

"Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go."

-T. S. Eliot

The Crew-less hour goes by quietly and uneventfully. I keep trucking along until they catch up with me and it is great to see the decorated van pass and hear the cowbells ringing. It's an episode that I'll experience countless times during the ride and will never get tired of.

Mile marker 90 of the course route is continued flats not long before we work our way to the climb up to Randsburg. There are a number of railroad crossings that scar the pavement and the crew does a great job of standing by just in case I get a pinch flat. Fortunately this year a couple of the worst crossings have been patched up and won't swallow bike wheels whole as they have in years past.

As we march towards the Randsburg climb the temperature continues to ascend as well. I'm doing my best to continue taking in lots of water and electrolytes. I'm stopping frequently to hydrate the desert foliage so I think we're doing okay with fluids. My fuel though is getting cooked in the heat. I've taken along insulated bottles and the crew is loading them with ice and Perpetuem. The two-hour fuel bottles are warming up fast and the stuff inside (that already tastes slightly better than watered down pancake batter) is taking a dive in the flavor department. I continue to take my medicine but it is a warm, watered down version of what I'm used to on my training rides. I need the fuel so I pinch my nose and keep chugging away.

One of my favorite components of long-distance cycling is the crazy endorphin buzz I get after being outside for hours cranking away on the bike. Even the Mojave Desert, which might not draw many looks by passersby in a car, is getting my attention. The mountain ranges and desert landscape are pretty in their own unique way and I make it a point to scan the environs and soak it all in. It feels good to be outside and even better to be on the bike. I smile inwardly and pedal on.



I assure you the view is even prettier after a few hours on the bike!

We reach the base of the climb up to Randsburg and it is scorching hot by now. The Crew has surrendered to hosing me down with an entire water bottle every 15 minutes as it becomes essential in beating the heat. I leave the arm sleeves on in an effort to shield me from the baking sun. Chris invents the "biker shower" which involves wiping the excess water into the dry sleeves and jersey. Don't forget a splash down the helmet vent and one in each armpit to help even more. Back on the bike, every drinking water bottle the Crew hands me is jam packed with ice and it helps for the 10 minutes or so before it melts away.

"Now don't you just have the most beautiful legs." The racer Butterfly is giving me grief in her southern accent as I go by her ever so slowly up the climb. It's not

the heat that's making my cheeks rosy but the embarrassment and lack of words for a smart reply. We'll see her on and off throughout the race and it impresses me to no end how she always had a smile on her face and a positive attitude towards the task at hand. I'm stuck in serious-mode and it's tough to get much out of me beyond my curt, military comments like "ugh, it's hot".



The glorious bike shower!



The first of many desert rollers dotted with 508 riders

We reach the top of the climb and into the town of Randsburg. It is a blip of a ghost town and just as soon as we arrive, we're gone and on our way to Johannesburg. The route continues on through the desert and takes you up and down over a few, large rolling hills. The game of leapfrog continues as I get passed or occasionally pass another rider and their crew. I notice a disproportional number of Canadian based jerseys around me and little did I know that I would see them a good many more times before we'd reach the end.

By this time I'm pretty stoked that my cycling fitness is holding up; cadence and HR are good, speeds are steady and while I'm not setting any land speed records the riding feels solid. The one thing that does begin to nag at me



Throwing signs to the race official vehicle – rock on!

though is my gut. I'm nauseated and having a heck of a time keeping my appetite up in this heat. I experienced something very similar during last year's 508 attempt and which I've dubbed the "bubbling cauldron of nastiness" or BCN. What can I say, there are all sorts of games you'll play in your head passing the time out here and finding acronyms for your gut malady is just one small example! Anyways, around hour 24 last year, the stomach just became a vial of churning discomfort and all earlier sense of taste was distorted. Nothing tasted good or right, my body didn't seem hungry for fuel of any kind, and I had a constant stomachache that didn't seem to be aided by my knees slapping my belly as I continued forward on the bike. This year I brought extra saltine crackers and soups to help combat the BCN disease but I wasn't expecting it this early in the game. I

remember the Plan (get to the finish) and I slacken my pace to see if that settles the stomach. I also start taking on solid foods and ask my crew to bust out the cheesy cheddar and peanut butter cracker packs.

After the big desert rollers one of the official race vehicles passes and it's the race organizer taking shots of all the riders. I'm still camped out in the aerobars and making the most of the speed I can get out of the nearly horizontal pavement. I'm feeling pretty good and throw another hand sign that gets captured on camera. It's about 150 miles into the adventure and the legs feel strong so I pedal onward towards Trona.

To people approaching by car, Trona may not seem like much – just another mining and mineral processing town in the middle of *nowhere*. But to the 508 racer, Trona is huge! Every mile is a step closer to reaching another big milestone along this 500 mile trek in the desert. Even the environment improves as the sun begins to tuck behind the mountainside and shadows give the slightest reprieve from day’s relentless heat.

In the 20 miles before town I get picked up by the leading team racers. They left Santa Clarita two hours behind the soloists and include 2x or 4x teams. Last year I was able to fend them off until just after Trona but it wasn’t in the cards for this year’s ride. I’m sticking to the Plan and not getting too excited about the race around me. I continue to keep the HR low to ease the stress on my gut and spin the legs over and over and over again.

After winding through the valley floor I eventually roll into Trona. It’s 5pm and I’m about an hour behind last year’s time but that’s okay. I’ve been sticking to the Plan and the winds have not been as generous during the first two legs as they were in ’09. Kris is waiting for me at the time stop to make sure I’m checked in. She flags me on as the crew is waiting another mile up the road by the only gas station in town. The rest of the crew is poised to support another quick break and I head their way.

THE CRUX

Trona to Furnace Creek. 97 miles, +5000 ft of climbing

“Determine that the thing can and shall be done, and then we shall find the way.”

-Abraham Lincoln

I stop a mile up the road from the Trona time station and meet up with my Dad and Chris. The B-Burro crew is also in the parking lot, which catches me off guard. Ed is a much stronger rider than I am and from the get-go I wasn’t expecting to see him or his crew again until the finish. Even though he is not hours ahead of me as I had hoped, it is awesome to see the familiar faces from his van hop out to chat us up for a few.

We take a short break and I sit in the open sliding door of the crew van. It feels great to get off the bike, rest my feet, and to get out of the blasted sun for a while. My bathroom breaks have required short hikes into the California desert and on each trip I bring some of it back with me in the soles of my cycling shoes. The crew hooks me up with a clean pair of socks and they feel fantastic on my tired feet. Food is still a dicey subject and Chris tears off a quarter of a turkey sandwich for me to nibble on. The real, solid food is just what the body needed and breaks up the monotony of liquid fuels and crackers I’ve had over the past 10 hours. After being off the bike for 15 minutes, the crew cracks the whip and sends me on my way again. They’ll fill up with gas, grab a few more supplies (including Trona Tacos!) and then chase me down again.



Ahhh, Panamint valley from the top of Trona Bump

The Crew’s stop is brief and within 30 minutes they’ve picked me up on the flat desert roads outside of Trona. The sun has tucked behind the Argus mountain range just west of us and it is about time to put the bike lights on. The race rules dictate that by 6pm each of the riders must have front and rear lights on their bikes and that the crew vehicle must be following immediately behind me with flashing rear amber lights and an orange caution triangle pasted to the back. Until 7am tomorrow we will travel as a pair with the crew a mere 20 feet or less from my back wheel. With a few minutes to spare before 6pm the team takes

another pit stop and slaps on my lights in record time. I guess the Crew was right – my bike basics coaching back in Vegas was overkill and completely unnecessary!

Near mile 160, the road heads up again over what is called the Trona Bump. It's a mellow climb of 1000 ft over about 10 miles. I continue steadily up the route and at the top reach one of my favorite views along the entire course. At the peak of the bump, both rider and crew have a brief panoramic view of the entire Panamint Valley with mountain ranges buttressing it on both sides. A thin streak across the desert landscape marks the road that I'll follow for the next 30 miles. I've only seen the view a handful of times and it always draws an audible ahhh, especially while on the bike.

The view of the Panamint valley and ticking off another milestone along the 508 route has stoked the fire within. Ahead of me there's a ripping 7% grade leading down into the valley below. I'm not typically known as a good descender but I let this one fly. I tuck down low and throw my weight into each of the twisting turns to scream down the hill. Later I would find out that I caught the crew by surprise and that they were having a heck of a time hanging on right behind me in these minutes just before dark. The Crew swears that gear was getting tossed about as if on a ship in a violent storm. If you are one of our family or friends who received a 508 race shirt, well, this is the section where it was dyed red with Gatorade!

For the next 25 miles I plug my way across the Panamint valley. It is another flat section that gives me a chance to recoup and collect myself. The sun has disappeared entirely from view and I make the early evening adjustments including switching to glasses with clear lenses. The desert is beautiful at this hour with varying reddish hues being drawn out of the landscape by the dwindling light and contrasts with the darkening green foliage.

This particular leg from Trona to Furnace Creek is my favorite section of the race, but also the most intimidating. The long 25 miles through the Panamint valley gives the gears in my head plenty of time to churn about the crux of the entire 508 course just up ahead – Townes Pass.

Townes Pass is a beast. Over the distance of 13 miles the road heads straight up for 3800 feet of climbing. From past experience, 10 miles of it feels like 10% grades or better and it rarely lets up. To put it in perspective, this is about as tough as climbs ever get on a bike and compares only with the epics like Little Cottonwood Canyon back in Salt Lake or Alpe D'Huez in the Tour. The only saving grace is that climb starts low and tops out at 5000ft, which helps those of us who live and train up at altitude.



Trucking across the Panamint Valley with Townes Pass on my mind

This climb has been on my mind plenty throughout the training year. But I've not been worried about going up, I've been nervous about going down it again. During last year's solo attempt at the 508 I wiped out when I rode my brakes too long heading down, smoked my front carbon rimmed wheel and scuffed myself up when I hit the pavement. I think the crew and I would agree it was far and away the low point of last year's race and the beginning of the end for my incomplete ride. I've been getting a hard time from my crew all season long that I needed to include regular and rapid descents into my training or bring a parachute this year!

Now at mile 200, I'm worried about going both up and down this peak. So far I've been focused on what tweaks and adjustments I can make to

keep moving forward. The pace I'm holding is steady but slower than I'm used to. I've had to hold back and ride in HR zone 1 (130bpm-ish) for the past few hours to keep my gurgling stomach at bay. How am I going to get up the climb? There's no easy way up the hill and I'm feeling timid about what the higher intensity riding is going to do to my already stressed out gut.

We eventually reach the right turn on to highway 190 and the gateway to the Townes Pass climb. We bump into a number of other riders and crews who have all collected at the base of the climb to catch their breath and ready their nerves for the route ahead. The view from the last of the valley floor up the climb is absolutely spectacular! It is deep into the night now (10pm?), completely dark and you can see the train of blinking amber lights attached to crew vehicles dotting the path all the way to the top. We haven't seen many of these riders for hours since the daylight leapfrogging but now we're reminded of all the other companions out here also trekking to Twentynine Palms.

It's go time – we've stripped the bike of the saddle bag and taken on a lightweight water bottle instead of the pair of heavier insulated bottles I've been carrying all day. Ounces of difference in weight but I'll take every advantage I can get. I make my way into the start of the real climbing and any fears I've been holding onto begin to fade. This is exactly what I've been training for over the past two years and everything begins to click into place. I alternate frequently between higher cadence seated climbing (70ish rpm) and standing up out of the saddle. Within the first mile we approach another rider and their crew vehicle – I feel strong so I drop the hammer and shout out a “nice work, you're looking good” to the fellow rider as I make my way ahead.



Townes Pass – every year it seems to grow steeper!

I reach the Elevation 3000ft road sign and my knees begin to ache, but I don't care. I've passed another rider and a 2x team and the adrenaline has taken over. I've practiced a ton this season in the hills and I'm elated that all the hard work is paying off. We pass the 4000ft road sign and another 2x team. Near the top my thoughts briefly lean towards swapping my compact crankset with a triple and then the incline finally lets up. Hallelujah – we've reached the summit! Another small pack of riders has congregated at the peak and we join the group.

The crew and I take a quick break and prepare for the descent. We've been planning for and have discussed at the length the next 15 miles all season long. Last year the 5000ft descent crushed my chances of finishing and none of us care to repeat the experience. The Crew readies my ride with a halogen light and me with a windbreaker that will also serve as my parachute! As a pair we roll away from the curb and on to the descent.

Within the first minute of spinning down from the top of Townes Pass, I've reached breakneck speed, or so it feels like to me. I sit as upright as I can and let my body and jacket catch some of the wind to slow me down the hill. I'm tired now and the cooler air is biting at me. The first few miles let you know that there is no easy way down. The pavement twists and turns left to right and as soon as it straightens out it heaves up and down to leave you with just a trace of light ahead to mark the way. There could be a chasm ahead where the road should be but I won't see anything for a few seconds until the van's headlights catch up with me. I pass the 4000ft altitude marker and the road is perfectly straight now. All I can hear are the buzzing of my bike's freewheel and the wind rushing by my ears. Frequently and violently these sounds are broken with the screech of my brakes. 3000ft comes and goes and I can feel the transition to warmer air as if there were physical layers tagged by the altitude road sign. 2000ft and I am more than halfway to the bottom. The descent won't stop until I reach the floor of Death Valley and the near sea level altitude I started at this morning. Bummer, all that climbing leads me back to the altitude I started at. The fluorescent mile markers continue to flash by as I roll on. My hands get stiff and tired from frequently working the brakes but I'm grateful that the steepest descending is behind me and it looks like I'll make it to the bottom while keeping both tires in contact with the pavement. 1000ft and I get hit with another wall of air that is downright warm now. I'm feeling nappy now and blink my eyes. Were they closed for an instant or for 10 seconds? I can't be sure so I vow to keep the eyes wide open until it's time to crash in the van.

I let out a huge sigh of relief as I glide to the floor of Death Valley – the crux is behind us and we’ve made it through unscathed! The legs are stiff from all the coasting but I get them kick started again after a few revolutions. I’m excited to check off another milestone and look ahead to what’s next. In another 25 miles we’ll reach the third time station at Furnace Creek. Furnace Creek is merely a Chevron gas station and a small campground inside the Park, or at least that is all I can remember from visiting it previously in the midnight hours. Every light ahead of me appears to be town as I pedal onward in the flat to rolling sections after Towne’s pass. And as I approach each lit section ahead I learn Furnace Creek is just around the next bend. Just a little bit further, I’ve heard that one before. The 25 miles seems to take forever but by 1:35AM the Crew and I have finally arrived at the halfway point of the race.

SIDEWINDERS, AND SCORPIONS, AND TARANTULAS – OH MY!!!
Furnace Creek to Shoshone. 73 miles and +3500 ft of climbing

"Ultras are just eating and drinking contests, with a little exercise and scenery thrown in."

-Sunny Blende, ace ultra nutritionist

250 miles complete in less than 19 hours, so far so good. I feel pretty tattered and worn out making it to Furnace Creek but in much better shape than the bandaged, strung out version of me that crept into this same time station a year ago today.

Sleep was a big unknown leading into this race. I had no intentions of doing any obscure twilight rides or practicing sleep deprivation during my year of training. The Plan discussed between me and the Crew on the drive down to the race was to shoot for a 3-4am naptime and stay down for no more than one hour. I must have looked pretty wobbly coming into Furnace Creek, as there were no objections when I suggested a sleep break now. Past experience had taught us that parking the van right at the time station is a bad idea; too much traffic in and out where headlights and slamming doors interrupt any chances of shut eye. We move forward a mere 500 yards into the parking lot of the KOA-style campground right next door. The crew launches into action and clears a spot near the sliding door of the crew vehicle and lays out a sleeping pad for me to crash on. I settle down while the Crew Chief and my Dad doze off in the van seats and Kris spreads out on a nearby picnic bench.

It’s too hot. Is this Death Valley or something? It’s 2am and I stir after 15 minutes of marginal sleep. The temperature is 85 degrees outside and hotter in the back of the van without the A/C running. I sit up and the exhaustion and nausea convince me to rest my head on the floor again. Sleep is simply not going to happen so I get up. The crew hears me moving around and helps me get a new jersey and pair of bibs ready for a fresh start to Part 2 of the race.

"Ultras are just eating and drinking contests..." The quote leading into this section of the race report was printed on 11x17 inch paper and taped to the rear quarter panel of the van as inspiration and a bit of humor for me during the ride. The comedy is lost on me now and I beg Chris to tear the sign off. I sit in the open doorway on the passenger side of the van, hunched over with my head in my hands and feeling absolutely wrecked. The gurgling cauldron of a gut has not settled down even after mixing up my liquid Perpetuem diet with Ensure, V8 and cracker packs. Kris kneels next to me and asks me why I’m not on the bike. I explain and she responds with, "Have you puked yet? Maybe that’ll make you feel better." I stumble over to the picnic tables and hit the reset button back by my tonsils a few times.

We leave the gravel parking lot and the last of my liquid diet as we hit the pavement again. I begin to perk up as the legs churn in their familiar rotation and my stomach settles down. In awhile I ask for saltine crackers and the Crew obliges me with a handful from the open window of the van.

I can’t believe how hot it is!! It is nearing 3am and I continue to request water bottles to drench myself with. How is this possible? The rolling floor of Death Valley feels like an oven – heat radiates at me from all directions. I shiver for a few seconds after a self-fulfilled bike shower, and then I’m back to comfortable. The van’s thermometer registers in the 80’s through the better part of the night.

The bike ride becomes surreal and downright weird in my head during these early morning hours. I chuckle to myself that I'm not far off from the 24 hour mark and have many, many more hours to go before I'll hang up the bike. The universe around me shrinks to a 30-yard diameter or the distance that the van's headlights extend out into the blackness. Occasionally a desert critter will enter my sphere. I point out the tarantulas, sidewinders and scorpions as I go by. I make a mental note of how the world has changed – on any other day we'd all stop, bust out a camera phone and take a snapshot of these rare desert travelers. But tonight I'm just thankful to keep a safe distance. I have no intention of stopping and have just enough spare energy to point a finger. I'll also dodge these funny puffball desert mice from time to time. They literally look like fuzzy little golf balls streaking back and forth on the pavement. In dodging one particularly brave mouse I veer two feet off of my course to avoid flattening the little guy. Later the Crew Chief will reprimand me for my stunt and suggest staying the course next time unless the obstacle has fangs and/or venom!

Out of the darkness erupts AC/DC, then Eminem and the Beastie Boys. The Crew has turned the external speakers on full blast and Chris is singing karaoke to a few key choruses out of the megaphone. We may be at the literal low point of the ride (280 feet below sea level) but my spirits rise. The tunes of my riding playlist pair up with the 90rpm my legs are wheeling at. It feels fantastic to let the thoughts in my head go and just bike with the tuneage. I feel my speed increase and am thankful the Crew Chief worked so hard to make the external speaker system a reality. I was indifferent but now I'm a true believer. I'm guessing my Dad would disagree right about the time my 508 playlist shifts to Tool, Tupac and NIN. A little further up the road, I wave my hand like I'm slapping the pavement in an attempt to signal the Crew to turn down the volume. I see a parked van ahead, another crew getting their rest for the night. We get close and I'm stoked to see that it is our buddy Mark "Borzoi" who must have gotten ahead of us during our stop at Furnace Creek.

On paper the floor of Death Valley looks like a straight line but tonight I learn first hand that the slope alternates slightly up then slightly down for the 60+ miles through the Park. As we slightly incline for the umpteenth time the crest takes us to Mormon point. This is the exact spot, nearly 300 miles into the race, that I raised the white flag last year. In 2009 we didn't reach this point until well after sun up and the math showed I had zero chance of hitting the 48-hour finish mark. I'm encouraged that this year we pass the point in darkness and we keep marching on. Every inch beyond this road marker is now the furthest I've travelled by bicycle.

The bubbling cauldron of nastiness has begun to subside. My stomach continues to ache but the nausea has left me alone. The Crew continues to push a steady diet of Saltines, Cliff blocks and fruit roll-ups. When the saltines run out then we switch to the Crew's personal stash of cracked pepper Triscuits. As one fear abates any other wrinkles in the Plan send me into a panic. How much can the course throw at me and will I have the stuff to hold on? Now my attention moves to the wind. Since Mormon point, we've picked up a small but steady headwind slowing down my progress. I pick up the intensity but am not moving any faster than the hour earlier. I laugh again at the mind games the 508 will play with you. I begin to think how ironic it is that the exact point I surrendered at last year due to the nastiest of gusts would be the same spot that I would pick up these fresh headwinds a year later. It's as if they've been waiting 365 days for my return.



Dawn of Day 2 on the floor of Death Valley

Slowly but surely the valley expands with the rising sun beyond the mountain range. I don't know the exact time but in my head I'm behind schedule. I was hoping to be on to the climbs out of the Park by now but we still have a good 20 or more miles to go before we reach the Jubilee/Salsberry climb. About an hour later I hear another rider and his crew approaching from behind, with cowbells. Can it be? Ed rolls right along side me and suggests I step on the gas pedal. Seeing a familiar face lifts my spirits and we swap stories. The B-Burro crew went down for 2 hours which led to them falling behind us. Both of us riders are suffering from the gut

rot but do what we can to survive. Ed suggests we've got at least 12 more hours of riding before we see Twentynine palms. Thankfully my brain can't process the arithmetic – 12 hours is the best I've ever done 200 miles in and there is no way I'll repeat that after the 300 miles we've already put into our legs. Ed is looking fresh and riding strong and within a couple of minutes he pushes forward up the road. The B-Burro crew passes our train and I'm elated to hear the encouragement of my little brother Erik and training partner Ryan.

Like "Back in Black" over the loudspeakers earlier, being passed for the first time in hours and seeing the B-Burros lights a fire under my butt. I pick up the cadence and do what I can to keep their team in sight. Before long we reach the exit to Death Valley; the sister climbs of Salsberry and Jubilee will take us upward for 3300 ft over the next 16 miles and out of the Park. Ed and Co. stop by the side of the road within the first mile of the climbing to attend to something and I slowly chug by them. I'm back on home turf in the hills and settle into my climbing rhythm. I unzip all of my jersey to take in the cooler air as I alternate between sitting and standing my way up the hill. In awhile the B-Burro crew van zooms up to me – they're hooting and hollering that I'm destroying the climb and gapping their rider by 15 minutes. My response is no more than a grunt and a nod. I'm focused on the task at hand and am solely concerned with what it takes to keep plugging away. This ride has been a monumental effort to this point with a long way still to go. All of the finishers receive the same medal and jersey and I could really

care less what time I may get done relative to anyone else – finishing is all that matters.



Climbing out of Death Valley National Park—looks and feels steeper on the bike!

The climbing out of the valley is long and sustained but not nearly as steep as the route in via Townes Pass. I continue to chip away at the hill climb. The soles of my feet begin to hurt from the constant pressure of forcing my feet around and around. There isn't much I can do about it but jot it down in my mental notebook, I have to get up this hill and applying any less power will send me backwards.

Finally I reach the top and join a couple of riders collecting themselves before the descent into Shoshone. I stop just long enough to zip up my jersey and we're off again down the 12-mile descent into town. The coasting is a welcome relief after another major hill climb. I relieve the soreness in my feet by unclipping from the pedals and giving each leg a healthy Elvis shake to get some blood flowing back down to my toes. The climb shielded me from the steady headwind

but now it is back in my face and I find myself pedaling through the flatter sections to keep my speed above 18mph. The descent goes by quickly and just before 10am we arrive at Shoshone and Time Station #4.

THE MELTDOWN.

Shoshone to Baker. 56 miles and ~1000ft of climbing

"I have failed over and over again in my life. And that's precisely why I succeed."

-Michael Jordan

Shoshone is another desert oasis that consists of one gas station, one post office and a café across the street. We celebrate making it this far after acknowledging that this destination seemed so impossible last year. While the crew prepared the bike and van for our next leg, I take advantage of the stop and use a real rest room for the first time in over 24 hours. Before we roll out the B-Burro and Andean Condor crews catch up with us to share some love. We avoid getting too cozy in town with our friends and hit the road again.

Its hour 30 in this crazy adventure and just about the time I'm hitting the pavement to start my 5th leg, the winner Chesapeake Bay Retriever is cutting tape at the finish line. This dude is 50 years old and demolishes the competition, *all* of it, on a classic steel bike. When I say classic I mean 1985 technology: downtube shifters, steel lugged frame and 32 spoke wheels. And when I say he wailed on the competition I mean everyone else out there including me on fancy carbon frames with deep dish wheels and aerobars, in addition to the 2x and 4x teams who started 2 hours behind the solo racers. Look up badass in the Webster's dictionary and you'll see a picture of this guy. Just another reminder that this sport is all about the motor and is barely concerned with the machine.

I've ridden this leg from Shoshone to Baker once before and recall it as one of the more fun sections. In 2007 I had traversed this part of the course on a 2x team and with ripping tailwinds, the 54 miles ticked away with little effort. It also helps that this is the only leg of the 508 that actually loses more elevation than it gains by a few hundred feet. My spirits are high in the early miles of this section: the toughest legs of the 508 are behind me, this next section should go by in a few hours and from here on out the time stations are at regular 50ish mile intervals. I think to myself, the hard part is over; let's bring this ride home!

2 hours later I begin to realize I spoke to soon. It is no accident that the 508 is dubbed "The Toughest 48 Hours in Sport." The 750-foot climb, if it even deserves to be called a climb, is going by painfully slow. I'm going uphill through a convection oven – the headwinds are persistent and the heat is on broil again. The nagging pain in my feet has escalated to a scream. Every time I apply force to the pedals it feels like the bike is kicking back at me through the balls of my feet. My enthusiasm wanes and I clearly notice that riders I have not seen since the initial 24 miles of the race are passing me by.

The Crew steps up time and again to patch me up and keep me going. Bike showers are back on the schedule with a 15-minute rotation. Chris has even perfected the technique by hosing me down from an open van window as opposed to me dousing myself. It saves precious energy that I find is dwindling with every mile. An unintended side effect of the bike shower is the soggiess it leaves in my shoes and shorts. My feet have pruned up and the bib chamois has swelled to twice its typical size. The Crew rotates out my socks and the Chief even gives me a roadside foot massage to quiet my screaming feet (don't try to deny it now buddy!). I alternate between a pair of tennis shoes and my cycling shoes to move the foot pain around a bit. My expanding bibs feel more like a pair of Depends and I tug at them every five minutes to interrupt the stitching from cutting into my inner thigh. Assos chamois cream is my new best friend and we exhaust the third jar since the starting line.



The ultimate "Rolling Bike Shower"!

A green sign marked Ibx Pass approaches and I've reached the top. A 10-mile descent and 30 miles of flat highway will lead me into Baker. I hit the downhill section and am smacked with another surprise. The headwinds have picked up and I pedal to keep my speed above 15mph. What the hell? I was banking on another reprieve but it is not in the cards for today. I alternate legs and shake my feet out to get feeling back in them again. My favorite section of the 508 has turned to torture and the 54 miles seem endless.

At Mile 350 on the flat road to Baker I pick up a hitchhiker. He's a chatty fellow that prefers to whisper in my ear. The exchange between My Own Worst Enemy and I follows:

"You can't finish this race"

Yes I can

"Okay, but you don't want to. It's too far and you haven't trained enough."

Maybe

"Do you think buying a fancy bike and riding a couple of doubles makes you some kind of ultra-rider?"

No response

"What about that gut? Do you really want to be on the verge of puking for another 10+ hours?"

"How about the pain? Doesn't another 150 miles where every pedal stroke hurts between a torn up backside and your destroyed feet sound like FUN?"

"And all for what? A stupid jersey and a medal - HA! Or maybe you're trying to prove that you're tough. Well, to whom? Are you convinced this is really worth it?"

The exchange will heat up and rage for what feels like hours. Eventually my Enemy's logic wins and my will is broken – I continue to spin the legs around in little circles but my heart is no longer in the effort. He is right, I've gotten myself in *waaaay* over my head and the rest of this trip is going to be a full-blown sufferfest. Damn, I've come so far but my desire has completely evaporated under the heat, the wind and the fatigue. Two years of training and all I care about is finding the nearest motel for a nap with the air conditioning on full blast. The Crew van passes by and my sour attitude tells me that they look as exhausted and dejected as I feel. They must know that the end is near?

My speed is reduced to a crawl as we near Baker and the train of crew vans that have been bunched around us race ahead to reload on ice and fuel at the crossroads. B-burro's van jets by with the cowbells on again, but I can't hear them. It has taken me over 5 hours to go the 54 miles to Baker and will go down as one of my slowest rides ever. At 3pm on Day Two of the 508 adventure I arrive at Baker and prepare my one shot to tell the Crew that I'm done with this race and will never come back.

ATTACK!!

Baker to Kelso. 35 miles and 2500 ft of climbing

"It's not enough that we do our best; sometimes we have to do what is required."

-Sir Winston Churchill

Prior to the race I prepared a notebook with course beta, forecasted weather conditions, inspirational quotes and a few notes as pointers that might help the Crew. One of the notes reads in big bold letters is "**NO RIDER STOP IN BAKER!**"

I had read plenty of 508 tall tales from veterans who cautioned about letting the rider put his or her feet up at this time station. Interstate I-15 is a mere 500 yards away and the siren call leads you off the bike, into the van and on the highway heading north or south for home. The warning is lost to me after we check-in and I immediately stumble over to a shady spot next to the nearest building, a Mexican fast food joint.

I collapse against the wall and like any good break-up, I've created some space between me and the bike. The shade has taken the edge off of the heat and I strip the sun sleeves off of my arms. I hunker down in my sanctuary while the crew darts back and forth in front of me as they ready the van again. For what? To go on? I've



Arrival at Baker with Tennis shoes on

told the crew I need a break but alert escalates to alarm as I've been stationary for 15 minutes with no signs of life from this statue. One by one the crew checks in on me to see what they can do to help. A cool towel on my head is heavenly and I let it fall over my face so I don't have to look at the outside world for a while. What I really need is a fork – stick one in me because I'm done.

Riders I recognize from our game of tag over the past day and a half roll through the time station and I look away to avoid making eye contact. I'm impressed they are moving on and I simply dread putting another mile on the bike. The Crew has heard me utter "game over" and they've huddled by the van to strategize their next move. The Mrs. must have drawn the short straw because I see her walk over and then pull up a spot on the ground next to me. "What's the scoop?" she asks.

My surrender speech begins with "I'm done" and rattles on forever through the long list of reasons of why I'm a wuss and why this race is out of my league. Included are gems like "if I continue on then I'm going to hate the bike and never want to ride again" and "I'm done with this godforsaken race and promise you I will never, ever come back". The words are My Enemy's but I mean every one of them. I simply don't see how physically or mentally I'm going to be able to hold up for another 120 miles. I stopped having fun along time ago and the last 50 miles have been relentless misery. Kris' patience is infinite as she listens to my rambling without interruption.

I finish my speech with a sigh, now it is Kris' turn. "Listen" she says "I know you feel like you're getting killed out here but you're riding consistent and strong. A lot of other riders seem worse off with their surging back and forth. Okay, so you had a crappy 50 miles back there – are you really saying you *cannot* ride the bike anymore or you just don't want to? And you're not having *fun*? Uh, let me assure you that it is no disco party being locked up in the van for the last 36 hours either. Do you really think it is fair to your Crew to drag all of us out here to quit now with another 12 hours still left on the race clock?"



Baker time station volunteers capture "the Talk" on film

Kris' words are sinking in and I get the message – show the Crew blood or broken bones otherwise it's time to get back on the bike. "Can you ride to the next time station in Kelso? You've never ridden that leg of the 508 before and I think you should keep going" Kris preaches. Yeah, I know this story – just a little bit further. Just make it to the next time station. String a few of these together and before you know it we'll be in Twentynine Palms. It is crystal clear that this is the pivotal moment where my run at the 508 is abandoned forever or whether we'll continue on until the bitter end.

My enthusiasm is running on empty but fortunately my Crew has enough to spare. "It's too hot – grab me the white jersey and white bibs", I'm back to

issuing instructions to the Crew, which is a good sign. I put on a fresh set of battle gear and the new chamois is dramatically better than the soggy diaper I've been wearing. A clean pair of socks also helps my swampy, swollen feet. The crew loads me up on fuel and water and sends me on my way again. They'll reload the coolers with ice while in Baker and will catch up with me again in about a half an hour.

My self-pity has turned to anger and I pummel away at the pedals on my bike. Okay, if we're going to do this then the first thing I need to do is make up on lost ground. I saw a number of riders including B-Burro and Butterfly pass me at the time stop and I'll start with reeling them in. The route ahead takes us up 2500 ft over about 25 miles and then drops down into Kelso over the final 10 miles. The headwinds seem to have subsided a touch and the climbing feels natural again. My feet and behind are hurting but I'm amazed and thankful that the legs still have some juice left in them after all the miles required to get to this point. I drive my quads with increased

tempo and am amazed that the stout effort does not register more than 139 BPM on the HR monitor. I guess I won't have to bother checking my HR for the rest of the ride.

Within a few miles we pick up the B-Burro crew parked along the side of the road and their elation to see us is heard in the clanging of cowbells and hoots or hollers. I press on, as there are still riders to catch. After 30 minutes or so I've passed a couple of riders and the van catches up with me. We chit-chat and they're stoked to see me back in the game. I gaze up the road and the next rider is a long ways off so I ask Chris "Where's Ed, I haven't caught up with him yet?" He informs me that he was back with his crew when I saw the van a few miles earlier. I respond with a "crap, then why the f& %# am I working so hard?" and ease up the pace.

With the arrival of the van comes the return of a steady stream of triscuits out the front passenger window. I've already downed one box and am starting in on the second, this time they are garlic infused. From all the literature I've read crackers are not the ideal race fuel but it has been treating my stomach okay and I'm sticking with what works. The temperature has been dialed back by a number of thunderclouds that have skirted our path. Once in awhile I'll get a bit of a drizzle and it helps with the sweltering heat. We are awestruck when a rainbow emerges in the distance and offers a little inspiration that maybe with some more teamwork we'll get this ride done!



Rainbow after Baker – still chasing a pot of gold

There is so much in this race that you can't prepare for and my Crew has reminded me that you have to roll with the punches and stay attentive to what can and needs to be done to keep moving. The items on my list under "Damage Control" are starting to pile up. My left calf has been dicey for hours – on the side I've got a knot developing and on the back just below the knee the calf feels ripped to shreds. My dad is extremely generous and massages it out with some Ben Gay to keep my calf loose. My pulverized feet are my primary concern and we resort to new tactics to mitigate or at least alternate the pain. I ask the crew to put platform pedals on my backup bike and they leave me unsupervised for about 20 minutes to make the swap. I'll later learn that the original clipless pedals were welded on and that the crew had a

hell of a time getting them off. The change in footwear does indeed help, while the pain has far from subsided, it has at least moved to new pressure points and the occasional switch between bikes is a welcome break for the rest of my body too.

I've never ridden this section of pavement before but I've heard of its reputation. Tire eater, some call it and others won't even dignify it by calling it a road. I've seen some 508ers bring bikes with suspension forks just for this leg of the journey. There is some truth in the rumors. While staring down at the asphalt I chuckle at what it reminds me of – take an elementary school desk and flip it over, you know the large patches of gum wads spread across the surface? That is exactly what we have ahead, a thousand times over this road has been patched in little, different colored patches until you cannot tell which is the true road surface. I dodge the worst of the apprentice roadsmithing by staying far to the right near the infinite white line.

My climbing is steady and smooth and I note how the profile of the terrain is nothing at all like what we have back home in SLC. Our longest distance climb along the Wasatch Ranges is Big Cottonwood that ascends 3800 feet over 16 miles and almost all of the other climbs I practice on are half that distance. The slope on this climb out of Baker is low, averaging below 5% but seems to go on forever. Just when I think I'm about to reach the top, there is another bend in the road and a fresh new summit to climb towards.

Just like the course, my emotions climb and dive with the terrain. When I think my feet are about to explode we finally reach the last of the false summits and crest the climb. The view over the backside is nothing short of

spectacular. The sun is fading and the deep shades of red and violet light up the mountain range on the horizon. My feelings have flipped from sorrow to absolute joy for being a part of this race at this precise moment to take in this view that few will ever witness.



Descent into Kelso with a spectacular sunset



View near Kelso at Sunset of Day 2

The descending is fast and I'm glad to be taking the road in the last of the daylight. I recognize the patchwork on the descent as being done by the same novice who made his debut on the road up. Slits and creases in the asphalt are identified by the darker shadows they leave in the pavement and I zig and zag my way through the gauntlet to avoid the worst of them. I've coasted for a couple of miles and discover this to be a mistake. My left calf is not on board with the "finish the 508 or die trying" attitude and kicks back violently when I restart the pedals.

The descending flies by in a fraction of the time as the climbing and is over all too soon. On the way into the town of Kelso, the Crew and I are rewarded with another gorgeous desert sunset that they captured in the picture below. What seemed impossible only a few hours ago in Baker is becoming a reality one mile at a time. Just before 7pm on Day 2, 418 miles and 36 hours into this great adventure this band of travelers rolls our way into Time Station number 6 of the 508.

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

Kelso to Amboy. 34 miles and 2000 ft of climbing

Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness

-Chinese proverb

Leg 7 of the 508 begins with (can you guess?) another climb – ahead are 2000 feet gained in a little under 14 miles. I settle back into my climbing mode for the long and straight road in front of me marked by the flashing amber lights of crew vans. My Crew is starting to worry about

my triscuit-arian diet and prods me to branch out into new food groups including fruit roll ups, granola bars and more substantial foods. I wonder too at how I've been able to survive on the 100 calorie per hour cracker diet as compared to the liquid diet of 200+ calories per hour during day one. The change is welcome not only for the variety but also for the texture – after 12 hours of boxed crackers as my primary staple they've taken on the consistency of glass shards and are only going down with large gulps of water to guide the way.

The weirdness of riding in the dark in the middle of nowhere catches up with me again and this time the experience is heightened by déjà vu and my lack of sleep. Maybe 20 minutes of napping wasn't enough last night but it seems too late to try to catch up on sleep now. Must get to the finish and then I can crash. I'm retreating inside my own head and my universe shrinks to a 10 ft diameter of visuals around me. I don't have the brainpower to contemplate the miles ahead and instead I stare intently at the white line illuminated by the van's headlights. Once in awhile an image beside the road will catch my eye forcing me to raise my head. Is that someone kneeling in the dirt? What are they doing all the way out here? Another juniper shrub taunts me and the scene will be repeated throughout the night.

More climbing in the dark. I've brought the headphones on this trip but they've stayed in the van. We've spent a lot of time during the race around other riders and I haven't felt the need for them. That's not to say I haven't had music in my head. My mental playlist will not always dial in on my favorite tunes but it normally picks something catchy that will stick with me for hours. "Eye of the Tiger", "Road to Nowhere" and "Kung Fu Fighting" have been popular requests this race. At night everything changes including the radio station and I can't help but have Billy Joel's "River of Dreams" be-bopping in my brain:

*"In the middle of the night
I go walking in my sleep
Through the desert of truth
To the river so deep
We all end in the ocean
We all start in the streams
We're all carried along
By the river of dreams
In the middle of the night"*

Over and over and over again the chorus goes. I think about asking for the iPod just to mix things up but refrain.

Up the hill I continue with my saddle dance. 6 pedal strokes out of the saddle and 6 more seated. My body isn't grooving with Billy's voice but instead doing everything it can to alternate the pain. And everything hurts now. I'm forced out of the saddle by the rawness of my undercarriage after so many miles glued to the saddle. Standing up helps my butt but adds more pressure to my already decimated feet and I have to sit down again. I slowly ease myself down to the saddle and the transition is sheer agony. I grimace and grunt with the contact as my body attempts to meld with the machine again.



A wee bit tired and losing it!

Not too much further to the top. I can see the amber lights of crew vans ahead disappearing in the distance. I don't know why it has taken me so long to figure out but suddenly the design intent of the 508 route hits me like a ton of bricks. Up, down, up, down – rinse and repeat all the way to Twentynine palms. The 60-mile flattish stretch across the floor of Death Valley seems like it was ridden a lifetime ago and is the only time I recall the route being mostly level. I've done training rides where I've strung together a few of my favorite climbs but nothing on this scale. 500 miles with this much climbing is downright insane!

"Oh you have got to be f\$&*ing kidding me. No f&*#ing way. Won't this ever end?" I'm screaming at full volume at the road ahead. I thought I had crested the climb beyond Kelso only to hang a left and find the view of the next summit. I curse the designer of the course again for good measure. I learn too late that the crew van has most of their windows down and are catching every word of my private conversation with the pavement. Chris tries to lift my spirits by reciting inspirational quotes from my notebook over his megaphone. "Remember, the pride lasts longer than the pain!" Ugh, too tired to respond. My pride has faded and my only goal is to get to the end of the race as soon as possible to end the pain.

I mentioned earlier that as part of my 508 prep I've participated in some yoga and one of the things I've picked up is Ouija breathing. It's a long, forced inhale and exhale through the nostrils that the instructors liken to Darth

Vader's respiration. Perhaps it is some ancient Jedi trick but Ouija breathing is extremely calming and focusing and pretty peaceful when you catch the hang of it. I've found it to help a ton in stressful situations on the bike, while driving to work or being camped out in an MRI machine. I try to employ my trusty yoga breathing to these tough times late in the 508 ... but to no avail. My breathing is short and out of control. The exhale comes out as a nasally snort, the kind an injured bull might emit as he paws the earth before launching at a bullfighter. My body is breaking down under the unending pressure and my mind is close behind. This feels like what some have called an out of body experience – I don't recognize this person on the bike, the loss of control, the anger and try to guide him elsewhere but he just won't go. My ride is quickly unraveling and could be attributed to any number of a million things. At the top of the list is most likely sleep deprivation. I'm stopping a lot more frequently now and the Crew captures one of my better roadside poses in the following picture.

Finally the top. Not another phony and this time the seesaw tips back downwards and stays there. The descent feels steeper than the way up as the bike and I keep accelerating. Just a mile or so down the road and B-Burro goes screaming by me. He is riding like a man possessed and his crew gives us both another healthy dose of the cowbell. The descending is another break in the temperature and the effort. I zip along and avoid the brakes at all costs, besides I can't really monitor my speed in the dark anyways. Occasionally a cattle guard crosses the road and I hit it at full speed, too tired to hit the brakes. When the road gets steeper I finally check my brakes, my hands working at them like lobster claws due to the numbness creeping into my palms and fingers.

Mile 450 approaches and at 10PM on Day Two of the 508 we roll into the final time station at Almost Amboy.

ARE WE THERE YET?

Amboy to Twentynine Palms. 58 miles and 2500 ft of climbing

"I have always struggled to achieve excellence. One thing that cycling has taught me is that if you can achieve something without a struggle it's not going to be satisfying."

-Greg Lemond

Pardon me if the next 20 minutes of the race clock are leaning towards incoherent. I do remember stumbling around a lot like a drunken sailor and not being entirely aware of what is going on around me...

I recall asking one of the guys manning the time station where I can take a pit stop. He says I'm free to use any part of the desert I prefer just as long as I stay away from THAT bush over there next to his sleeping bag. When I return to the crew van I pace around while continuing my bull breathing. Crap, I'm really messed up and absolutely dread getting back on the bike again. I sit down and then lay back through the open side door of the rental.

"Welcome to Time Station #7 – wanna get Lei'd?" Who is that and why is he popping his head in the van? Oh yeah, the guys at this time station like to liven things up with a Luau themed time stop complete with pineapple juice and Leis for all the riders. I should know this but the brain synapses aren't firing according to their regular schedule. I'm not even sure I utter a proper thank you and the generous volunteer leaves the trophy in the disarray of the van before I lay back down again.

The transition from horizontal to vertical is slow and tedious and most likely inspired by my prodding Crew. I find myself putting my helmet and gloves back on and wondering what the hell for? I remember asking Kris how much further to the end and when she replies "60 miles" I completely lose it. Math is also failing me and I thought we had a mere 40 or 50 miles to go. Even the 10 to 20 mile difference sounds like an eternity. I'm going into conniptions as I start pedaling away from the last time station. It's too far, I'm too tired, it hurts too much and I don't want to do this anymore.

A whopping hundred yards further we see another crew parked by the side of the road obviously getting a catnap in. I'm green with envy and visions of a hotel room and days of sleep reenter my head. I pull off the road just a little further but in the same gravel parking lot to stop. Both the crew and I are confused and in disbelief. The crew wonders if I've dropped something or whether I have a mechanical issue whereas I'm wondering why they're still pushing me along. Don't they see this isn't going to happen?

When I stop this time I'm ashamed to admit that I pull a full-blown temper tantrum. "I'm done" is on my lips and I chuck my helmet into the van. The crew is alarmed and they surround me. "Okay" the interrogators begin "what is keeping you from going on?" I take a deep breath and run through the mental checklist. Of the thousand maladies I can think of, lack of sleep rises to the top. "Alrighty then, you've got thirty minutes. Get your sleep and then it's back on the bike." Unrattled, the Crew quickly prepares my single bedroom suite in the back of the van and then they walk away to a nearby picnic table. I lay sprawled out for five minutes wondering if my nerves will settle down long enough for me to get some sleep.

I don't recall the side door opening nor do I remember sitting up. In the next instant, Kris is in the van with me delivering part two of her motivational lecture series. "Look, you've got 60 miles to go and a full 8 hours left on the clock. You've never biked that slow in your life and you can do this. I know things are pretty rough right now but remember everything you've sacrificed to prepare for this race. And look how far you've gone. You need to finish this or you'll regret it for the rest of your life." I'm still shaking the cobwebs out of my head but I absorb every word. She finishes with, "It's time to get back on the bike."

The logic is flawless and I have nothing to say. Slowly and with much help from the crew we collect all the pieces and put the rider back on the bike. I'm not entirely awake yet and the first few hundred yards weave back and forth across the road. A slight downhill lets me ease my way back into the familiar cycle of spinning legs and crouching in the aerobars. We make a left at the sign pointing us to Twentynine palms, one of less than ten turns we'll make over the entire route. The road ahead is flat and wraps around a large bend leading us to the final climb up Sheephole Summit.

The 15 miles of flat riding goes by quickly and before long the Crew and I settle in to the regular routine of going uphill. We've bunched up with a number of other riders, some are making a mad dash for the finish and others continue the game of leap frog up the ascent. The highway traffic is minimal at this hour of the night but when we do see a car or truck out here they're ripping by at top speed through the desert night.

The last climb. It's the only thought that is getting me through the 10 miles of climbing. My pace has slowed to a crawl again. It is uber-frustrating that my legs still feel okay to pound out the miles but that my feet are utterly ruined and are collapsing under the pressure. The Crew has reminded me to concentrate on the task at hand (what do I need to do to finish) and I frequently alternate between bikes and tennis shoes to mix up the pressure points. The stopping in general is getting more repetitive and the Crew is passing my requests through an open window of the van, including chamois cream, to keep me moving.

Another endless desert climb. The crew offers my iPod to up the motivation. The external speakers were cooked along with me back in Death Valley. I decline – the only thing that will ease the suffering is crossing the makeshift finish line (a string of toilet paper) in Twentynine palms. The climbing has become unbearable and I've had to switch it up by alternating walking and riding the bike. My Dad offers to walk with me for a while – what a saint!

Hallelujah – the top! We transition to the last descent and what a relief it is. The coast down is a tad chilly and I shiver for the first time in days. My feet get a few minutes to recover and I resort back to my shake-a-leg to get some blood flowing in them. Near the exit of the downhill, the road takes on a lower angle and sweeps in a wide arc directing us to Twentynine Palms. The town is a collection of twinkling lights 20 miles in the distance. The End – we can see it now and I surge with the adrenaline. No sense in leaving anything in the tank over these final miles. I tuck into the aero position and hammer on. When the body can't take the intensity anymore I ratchet back or do my little saddle dance for a break. Surge, catch my breath then rinse and repeat. Away we go chasing the white line on the edge of the pavement.

We're getting close now, real close. I don't know what time it is but we're going to make it. The crew and I had talked about hanging in there and sticking with the race just in case we butted up against the 48 hour mark but I never imagined us really being in that position. But here we are. The 508 Race Director has mentioned that there is a steady digression of the riders as they finish. Cheery and bubbly in the 20 hour range, tired but happy in the 30 hour range and then in a "death warmed over" state beyond the 40 hour mark. Yep, that about sums up how I feel at hour 44.

Only 10 miles to go. Is my mind messing with me or is that Erik and Ryan in the B-Burro van? The pair have forgone sleep to drive out and help cheer me in these final miles. I'm extremely grateful but can't put it into words; actually I can't even look in their direction. They've got the windows down, singing praises and ringing cowbells while I have my head down, staring at the white line and spinning away. Finish, hotel and sleep – my head is void of anything else. Erik and Ryan zip ahead in the van to mark the turn onto Utah Trail road, the final turn to the finish.

In these wee hours of the morning the strangeness of still being on the bike sets in again. Is this for real? Have I truly been on the bike for 40+ hours to arrive in this funky desert town to ride through main street at 4am? This is insane, who does this kind of thing? I pass a lonely car on the road and a Del Taco. I wonder what the passenger has to think about a dude in spandex straddling his bike at this hour of the morning with a van decked out in loud logos and flashing lights in tow.

There it is – the Best Western up on the hill and the finish. All too fitting that this race should end on yet another climb even if it is only 1000 yards. I've imagined this finish a thousand times during my training but not once did it look like this. No confetti and no visions of me pumping my fist in the air, I'm hanging on for dear life and ultra-stoked to be done. Would you like to buy this fancy bike I'm riding? Well it happens to be on sale for five bucks today!

I cross the street and turn into the entrance of the hotel with the Crew on my back wheel. At 45 hours 19 minutes and 37 seconds our team crosses the finish line after completing the 509.6 miles of the Furnace Creek race. Erik and Ryan are already waiting for us at the finish and Ryan nabs this awesome picture of me rolling across the finish.



Ryan's panoramic picture of the finish

Erik grabs my bike so that I can pull up a spot at the curb. Whew – over, done, finished, caput. The Crew and friends gather around for congratulations. "How was it?" I'm back to one-word answers, "hard" I reply. "How are you feeling?" Tired. I'm partly lit up by the electric buzz of people around me and the feat that has been accomplished while the other half is utterly drained and has no intentions of getting up off of this curb, ever.

Then the Race Director calls us over for the awards ceremony and pictures and I have to move. I ask the Crew to hold the finisher's medal with me as the final pictures are taken – this has truly been a team effort and they deserve a piece of the spoils too!



Having trouble keeping my eyes open at the finish line!

POST RACE

The finisher's jersey and medal were fantastic to receive and look great hanging up on the trophy wall in my house. However, the one thing I'll never forget about this event is the encouragement, love and support I received from all of my family and friends before, during and after the ride. It was a real wake-up call that I'm not nearly as tough as I think I am and it was tremendously heartwarming to know that when I fell to pieces that I had a large group of

folks behind me, seeing me through to the end. I sincerely appreciate all of my friends and family who trained with me, checked in on me after the race and have cheered me on despite tackling a challenge this ridiculous. Thanks to all of you for the encouragement this year, it has meant the world to me to have your support! In particular I need to recognize the following folks who were essential in completing this year's 508.



A team effort – couldn't have done it without the Crew!

The Crew – isn't 30 some pages of singing your praises enough? 😊

Seriously, the race category may be called "solo" but it is far from the truth. There is no doubt in my mind that I would have packed my bags and crawled home, tail tucked between my legs had I been left to my own devices. My determination and spirit were completely broken out on the course with many, many more miles to go and I will be forever indebted to you all for supplying the encouragement, perseverance and fortitude to see this through to the end. Thank you to the Mrs., Chris and Dad and congrats on seeing a 508 solo rider through, you all rock!!

encouragement. I wouldn't have ever stepped up to the 508 starting line without your support and can't thank you enough for showing me the way. Without you I'd probably still be on the couch with an Xbox controller in one hand and a PBR in the other. I always look forward to the years and the miles ahead together!

My bro Erik – you're still one crazy dude in my book but also an infinite source of inspiration and

My buddy and training partner Ryan – I've put a lot of lonely miles on the bike over the past two years getting ready for the 508 but the past 8 months have been far and away the most fun I've had on the bike thanks to you. And by fun you know exactly what I mean; icy training rides in February, gentle spins through 40mph cross winds, 100-mile canyon death marches and everything epic in between. We've both had an outstanding year on the bikes and the only reason I was whipped into decent shape was that you attacked every overpass on every road we crossed this year. Thanks again dude!