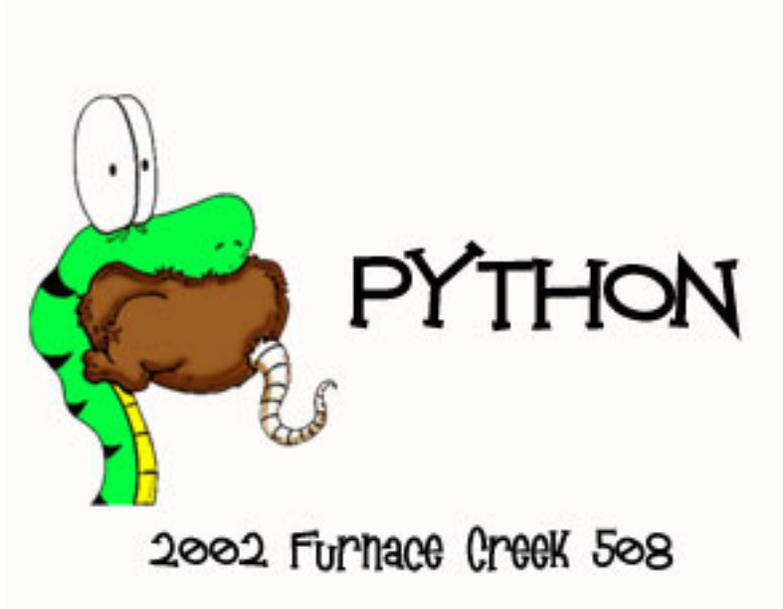


To the edge and back again Python's 2002 Furnace Creek 508 Slitherfest



Saturday May the 11th 2002 is a date etched in my mind. "Why Python ?" I hear you ask. Well that was the day that the planets aligned and I got the sign that told me it was time for me to attempt the Furnace Creek 508. I managed to finish with the lead group at the Central Coast Double Century that day, and I was feeling pretty good after just having ridden 209 miles with 13,000 feet of climbing in a little under 11 hours. I bumped into Debbie "Dolphin" Caplan after the ride and she asked me when I'd finished. "uhh ...5:08 ... I think" I replied. "That's a sign !" she said, "you should do the 508". Looking back that one little comment was what it took to tip the balance. That off-hand remark planted a little seed in my mind. "I'll think about it" was all I could say in reply at the time (OK maybe I wasn't feeling quite as fresh as I made out, but hey, this IS supposed to be a tall tail).

I've only really started doing longer rides since I moved to California from my native Scotland a little over five years ago. I started riding double centuries two years ago and on some of those rides I'd bump into individuals who kept talking in hushed tones about a race in the desert known simply as "the 508". The more I heard, the more I became intrigued. What on earth would make someone want to ride five hundred and eight miles in the desert ? could I possibly do it ? Well having been given "the sign" at Central Coast I had been given the excuse I needed to find out the answers to these and many other questions that lay unanswered in my mind.

On the drive back home the following day with my friend Ken "Kangaroo Rat" Holloway that little seed had germinated and managed to turn into a fully-grown tree overnight. Ken is a solo veteran of the 508 and he has also crewed it several times before. I was always asking him questions about the event, eager to hear the tall stories and experiences he could relay. I asked Ken if he'd consider leading a crew for me if I entered and thankfully he agreed and thus began my attempt at a solo entry in the Furnace Creek 508.

First on my agenda was the selection of a suitable "totem". Riders don't get numbers in the 508, they must choose an animal as their identity. I thought long and hard about this aspect of the race, looking at several books for inspiration. In my searchings I came across a cartoon of a

python eating a rat. That was it ! The cartoon showed a rat, but it wasn't just any old rodent, to me it was definitely a Kangaroo Rat – Ken's 508 totem. To me this was perfect - the image represented the rookie Python devouring the veteran Kangaroo Rat. What more motivation could I need ? Thankfully Ken saw the funny side of things and thus the Python was born...

Ken has an amazing network of riding friends and I quickly homed in on Michael "Hummingbird" Hollenbaugh as my second crew member - I had offered to crew for Mike on his 2001 solo 508 ride when I found out he was having potential crewing problems. But in the end my services weren't required as his original crew managed to sort out their scheduling difficulties. With two crewmembers accounted for I had the task of finding a final person to help me. I decided that I'd like to ask a close friend, Richard Provan, from my biking days back in Scotland to be the third crewmember. I wanted to make sure that my 508 attempt would be relayed back to my biking buddies in the UK, where tales of the 508 could seed further minds and help the 508 forest to thrive and continue to grow. Richard jumped at the chance, especially given the weather in Scotland in October would be a little less warm than the deserts of California...

With my crew established and containing two solo 508 veterans no less, I felt that my chances of completing the ride were significantly improved. The combined experience of the Hummingbird and Kangaroo Rat would help to see me through both my training and the ride itself. I received immeasurable help from them; from tips on equipment selection, to training techniques, nutrition, and a hundred other subjects I wouldn't even have thought of. One thing that amazes me about cycling is that no matter how much you think you know about the subject, there's still more to be learned, and the longer the ride the more you learn.

Physically training for the 508 is something I wasn't too scientific about - I figured that my riding schedule for the year would be reasonably appropriate given the type of riding I preferred. I covered around ten thousand miles in the ten months leading up to the 508, including 8 double centuries, a complete Brevet series (200,300,400 and 600K) and an Audax-style 1000K Brevet for good measure, as well as a few climbing events such as the Death Ride and Klimb to Kaiser. My main concern with the race was always the heat and road conditions. I had ridden Death Valley Double Century twice prior to the 508 and I know what the road surfaces in that part of Southern California can do to your body. 40 miles on desert roads can feel like 200 anywhere else. Being from a cooler Northern European climate I was also concerned about the effect that heat would have on me. As preparation for this I did several long rides in high temperatures to help get acclimatized to the heat. This included a 180 mile ride on a 106-degree day with 40 pounds of gear in panniers and 10,000 feet of climbing – but that's a tall tail for another time...

I'll skip over the logistical aspects of the race as others have covered this in much greater detail and depth than I ever could. But one thing I will mention is that having either some experienced crewmembers or having helped to crew the 508 before hand is an immense advantage when it comes to understanding what equipment you will need for the race. My equipment list was based on Kangaroo Rat's from 2001 which in turn was based on a previous rider's list. Take the time to learn from those who have gone before - it will be the best investment you ever make in your race attempt. Read all of the articles on the 508 web site then read them again and commit them to memory. My mistakes in this year's race (I'll get to those later) were all preventable had I heeded the advice I was given.

Now let's fast forward a bit - OK, so I've entered the 508, picked my totem and crew, stuck to my training regimen and the event is fast approaching. Two days before the race my crew and myself loaded all of the equipment into my van (a standard Dodge Caravan - a bit on the tight side, but perfectly adequate) and managed to find a place for everything including 20 gallons of water, two ice chests and a spare second bike. Hummingbird was unexpectedly held up with work at the last moment so the remaining 3 of us - Ken, Richard, and myself - headed off from Folsom and down I-5 for Valencia early on the Friday morning. We reached the start hotel in the early afternoon, checked in, and began the last of the preparations for the race. The required lights, warning signs and totem banners were put on the van before heading to the pre-race meeting. This was my first

chance to actually meet most of my fellow competitors and see whom I was up against. It turned out to be quite an emotional experience, as Chris Kostman dedicated the 2002 Furnace Creek 508 to Perry "Swan" Smith and Jonathan "Abalone" Arnow, two 508 veterans who have both experienced great personal set-backs with their health, and shown incredible courage in overcoming adversity. They are an example to us all, and I left the pre-race meeting feeling both humbled and inspired by the whole experience.



The pre-race meeting in Valencia – a chance to meet the competition

On the way back to the hotel we gassed up the van and topped up our supply of ice in preparation for the start the following morning. With all of the practicalities out of the way I retired to my room and tried to relax before the big event. Unusually for me I managed to get a reasonable night's sleep - perhaps the drive down had tired me out. Whatever the reason, I was dead to the world by around 10pm and didn't stir until the following morning. It was during this time that Mike arrived having driven down from the Bay Area on his own.

I was awoken by the hotel room alarm clock at 4:30 am and I quickly arose and began the process of readying myself. I was still feeling pretty calm at this point, but pre-race nerves would catch up with me soon enough. Once I had put on my sunscreen, and cycling gear I decided to go outside and see what everyone else was up to. When I walked out into the hotel's parking lot I could see a hive of activity before me. There were vans of all shapes and sizes, colors and configurations being loaded and worked upon. There were vans with spare bikes on the roof, SUVs with bike racks on the back, and a variety of sound systems attached to the front of vehicles, which amazed me. Now I was getting nervous - I began to wonder what I had gotten myself into. How could I compete with all of these people and their crews? I suddenly had a panic attack and began to wonder if I might have taken on too much and whether I really should have skipped those couple of days training in the last week when no one was looking. With half an hour to go before the start of the solo race I got on my bike and headed off looking for the start. Quite a few of the other solo riders milled about at the meeting point waiting for Chris Kostman to come and give us the final pre-race pep talk. I began shivering, mostly from nerves, and tried to find ways to distract myself so that I didn't get any more nervous. I talked with a few of my fellow riders - Bill "Bald Eagle" Ellis, Eric "Ostrich" Ostendorff (this year's solo winner - way to go Eric !), Andrew "Octopus" Otto, and Sam "Seal" Beal to name but a few. This helped to

calm me down a little, and before I knew it Chris was giving the final count down "...5...4...3...2...1...go!"

This was it - the training, equipment selection, and logistics had all led up to this point. We slowly exited the Hotel parking lot to cheers of encouragement from our crews and a small crowd of well-wishers who had turned up for the start. The race begins with a four and a half mile lead-out to San Francisquito Canyon and the first climb of the 508. I was closely watching my heart rate at this point and trying desperately to heed my crew's advice - "don't hammer at the start, remember you've got over 500 miles to go". With those words echoing in my ears I began the ascent which rises 2300 feet over approximately 20 miles - normally I would take this in my stride, but I wanted to make sure I took my crew's advice so I sat in behind a couple of other riders and tried to resist the urge to speed up. Of course I couldn't contain myself for long and when a group of riders shot off the front after only a few miles I began to pick up my pace. I had planned not to get my heart rate above the 150's during the race, but soon it was creeping up into the mid 160' s and on one of the steeper sections it hit 174 for a little while. "Slow down Graham, you're going too fast" the little angel on my left shoulder kept telling me, "don't listen to him - let it rip !" said the little devil on my right. As we neared the summit of this climb and turned onto Johnson Road where our crew vans could first meet us I had been listening to the little voice on my right shoulder a bit too much.

I handed off my pump and tools to my crew and headed the last mile or so to Johnson summit and prepared for the descent down the other side to the flatter terrain that lay beyond. I dropped into my aero bars at the top and soon I was doing more than 40 mph and trying to get as aerodynamic as I possibly could. Nerves still had a grip on me at this point and despite the fact that the road lay out in front of me as straight as an arrow for at least 10 miles I managed to turn right on a side road after mistaking a cyclist there as a fellow competitor. I quickly realized my mistake and skidded to a halt before turning around and heading back on course. I don't know what my crew must have made of this, but I felt pretty stupid as I tried to make up for the lost time.

The next 40 miles or so were entirely flat with a few turns and stop signs thrown in to keep us on our toes. During this period I began to relax a little, and found that I was clipping along at a nice 24 mph or so and I finally had control over my heart rate. During this section we began the process of getting a rhythm going between the crew and myself. They would park at the side of the road and I'd shout to them what I needed and then they would leapfrog on ahead and hand me my request a few miles down the road. On one of my first bottle hand-off attempts I managed to end up in the dirt at the side of the road. After that I made sure I kept well away from the road edge.

The weather is always an important aspect that plays a large part in the outcome of the 508 - this year we were blessed by the weather gods and cool weather was the order of the first day. In place of the feared heat we received winds instead. Sometimes they were head winds other times side winds, but they barely ever seemed to be of the desired tail wind type. To make things interesting I began to concentrate on passing a few of the riders in front of me - slowly, so as not to use up too much effort in doing so. By the time we reached California City (the first Time Station, at mile 82) I was feeling pretty good. I had been watching my hydration and had made sure that I was getting enough calories. Actually if anything I was getting too many calories and this would catch up with me sooner than I thought.



Early on the first day near time station # 1 at California City

Following the California City time station the route is rolling for a while before it curves right and you cross some railroad tracks, which mark the beginning of the climb towards Randsburg. During this section I began to speed things up on some of the downhill parts and as a result I began to feel a little tired. When my crew announced that I'd covered the first 100 miles in just over 5 and half hours I felt reasonably pleased, but I began to wonder if perhaps I had been a little too quick given the 400 miles that still lay ahead. The climb up to Randsburg is tame enough, but one aspect of this ride that came home to bite me as it progressed was the vast distances you can see in the desert. Most of the climbs might not be particularly steep, but they go on and on for miles and in most cases you can see the summit of the climb from many miles away and progress seems exasperatingly slow. During the climb up to Randsburg several people passed me and I began to feel progressively worse. I was getting worried - we were barely 110 miles into the ride and I was beginning to feel pretty bad. I saw my crew in front of me a little further up the climb and I decided to stop once I reached them and ask for some advice on what to do. Almost as soon as I reached the van I began to feel this strange feeling in my stomach. As I stood beside my bike I suddenly gasped the seat and handlebars in my hands and began to vomit uncontrollably. Now in all of my years of riding I've never been sick whilst out riding a bike. This was a new experience for me, and not one that I can honestly say I enjoyed. I watched in vain as those precious calories I had packed away were violently ripped from my stomach and dumped unceremoniously in the dust of the desert.

The first thought that passed through my head as all this was happening was "well Graham, that's it all over for you - you're going to DNF and after only 100 miles...". I slumped down in the van and my crew swarmed around me trying to figure out what happened and what they could do for me. We decided that I was having an adverse reaction to my food, and decided that I should move away from using Ultra Fuel and begin trying Slim Fast shakes with ice instead. After a few minutes in the van I felt sufficiently better that I decided to get back on my bike. I didn't want to DNF so early, not after all the preparation and I didn't want to disappoint my crew. For the next few miles up the climb I felt very weak and I had to stop after only another 3 or 4 miles. I decided to back off the pace and go at minimum effort and see if that helped. Luckily I was pretty close to the top of the climb at this point, so it wasn't long before we had passed through Randsburg and were heading on our way. I took 2 or 3 Slim Fasts over the coming miles and slowly I began to recover.

I knew I must have been getting stronger when my crew spotted two riders ahead (Red Rooster and Beluga I think) and reported that I was gaining on them. Encouraged by this news I started to get my confidence and my stomach back, as I lined these two targets up in my sights. I managed to catch and pass both of them by the time we reached the right turn onto Highway 178 at the bottom of a long and fast descent. Now I'm not the lightest rider around, weighing in at around 180 pounds, but I found these long desert descents to my liking, as I needed almost no effort to build up quite a turn of speed whilst going down them. A little over 13 miles later I arrived in Trona at the second Time Station at mile 152. By now I was feeling fully recovered, and was beginning to look forward to the next climb affectionately known as "the Trona Bump". On this climb I passed another 2 or 3 riders and began to feel like I was back at 100% again. I enjoyed the long fast swooping drop from the top of the climb and as we rounded a left-hand bend into the valley below, and I could see small dots on the road some 3 or 4 miles ahead which I knew to be the crew vehicles of some more riders. By now I had covered around 185 miles and we were fast approaching the dreaded climb of Townes Pass. At 6 pm my crew stopped me and put lights on my bike and turned on the flashers on the van. The other crews were doing likewise for their riders.



Somewhere on Panamint Valley Road – the approach to Townes Pass

Shortly after this we turned left onto Panamint Valley Road and my crew reminded me to begin preparing for Townes Pass. I passed Blue Fox and Octopus on this section, only to be re-passed by Blue Fox within a couple of miles. One of the things I learned on this ride was that it's pretty pointless to make surges to pass other riders given the overall distance of the race. A steady pace is what is needed - I'll have to work on that, because it's something I'm not very good at right now. As we got closer to Townes Pass I began to see the flashing lights of several support vehicles ahead at various points on the climb. Chris Kostman passed by on this section and made my support vehicle tighten up the gap given that it was now completely dark. Several of us including Blue Fox, Octopus, myself, Seal and Bald Eagle were close together as we began the climb up Townes Pass. I was feeling pretty good in the opening mile or two. I dropped back beside my crew and asked them how long the climb was going to be - when Mike came back with a sobering "oh, around an hour and forty minutes" I realized that I'd better conserve my energy and simply slog this climb out. It was at this point that I began to question my gearing choice. I was running a 12-27 cassette on the back and a double chainring on the front with 39 and 53 tooth rings. There was at least 3 or 4 miles of the climb where I was down to barely a crawl and

Blue Fox opened up quite a large gap on me. "When is this ever going to end ?" I asked myself. During this section I passed another rider who was walking up the climb at this point. This made me feel slightly better - I had thought about getting off and walking myself, but I took on some fresh encouragement when I realized that others out there suffering just as much as I was.

As we neared the summit of Townes I began to hear the music of another rider's van closing on me and trying to psyche me out. It turned out to be Sam 'Seal' Beal - a solo finisher in this year's RAAM (now THAT's what I call crazy...). His crew, including his wife Connie, are masters of the opponent psyche-out. When a crew member lent out of their van wearing a Scream Halloween mask I knew I had to respond. I upped my pace and re-passed the Seal and managed to beat him to the top of Townes by perhaps 30 seconds. Here I stopped to change into my night gear and have some soup and coffee. But Sam, the master of these events that he is, simply dropped straight into the descent into Death Valley without even stopping and my wasted effort of re-passing him was wiped out in seconds.

After spending 20 or 30 minutes at the top of Townes Pass I began the descent into Death Valley. I had lingered in the pleasant heat of the van too long, because as soon as I got back on my bike I began to shiver uncontrollably. This made it impossible for me to get into my aero bars, as I'd surely have crashed as soon as I did so. After 3 or 4 minutes of this I finally began to acclimatize again and then the fun began. My original plan had to been to wear a bright (30 watt) light on my helmet to give me good visibility on the undulating descent towards Stovepipe Wells. As it turned out I had problems getting the mount on my helmet, so in the end I used my trusty Cateye micro halogen and got the van to follow close enough that I could pick out the route most of the time. I really enjoyed this descent (all 15 miles of it), but all too soon it was over and I stopped briefly in Stovepipe Wells to take off my jacket. I later found out that my top speed was a disappointing 52.1 miles per hour - it sure felt faster at the time though. I was now in familiar territory, the route here is undulating as it passes through Death Valley and there are no real climbs until you reach Ashford Mills and the beginning of the climb up to Jubilee Pass. I settled into a rhythm on this section and soon we arrived at Furnace Creek. I headed immediately for the rest rooms so that I could take my first pee break of the race. I must have been a little too keen because I managed to crash the bike straight into a wall next to the toilets, thankfully I didn't do any damage though.



Nearing Furnace Creek – the halfway point

A couple of minutes later I was ready to roll, and I headed on towards Bad Water. During this section I was passed by Panther at a really fast pace. This disheartened me for a few minutes, but I resigned myself to the fact that being passed would become more common as the race progressed. This was the first time I had ridden the section from Bad Water to Ashford Mills in the dark - from memory this section is around 25 miles or so, and I had expected it to pass reasonably quickly. But in my mind it seemed to drag by incredibly slowly - I kept expecting every bend to be the last one before the straight lead-out to Ashford Mills. When I finally did reach the beginning of the climb to Jubilee Pass I was relieved. Climbing at night in the desert is much more pleasant than during the day for me - you live in your own little light bubble, cut off from reality and that makes the whole experience much more bearable. On this (5 mile) climb I managed to pass Panther again and this gave me a lift. Soon I had reached Jubilee Summit and from there it was a quick descent before beginning the longer (10 mile) climb up to Salisbury Summit.

On this section I kept looking back and seeing the lights of a following rider - I assumed it was Panther and that he was gaining on me. This spurred me on, but the lights were definitely getting closer. Stupidly I upped my pace, determined to reach the summit before the other rider. I made it to the top only to find out that it was in fact Gorilla who had been closing on me. My effort on the climb had taken quite a bit out of me and so I stopped for some coffee and soup. More wasted time - Panther passed me again as I rested and I was never to see him (or Gorilla) again. I was beginning to realize what people had been telling me about staying on the bike at all costs.

I began the descent towards Shoshone feeling very tired - so tired in fact, that the wind rushing passed my face was enough to lull me to sleep. Several times on this descent I fell asleep for a few microseconds, only to wake up dangerously close to the edge of the road. Realizing that I could crash and seriously hurt myself I decided to stop and take a quick nap. Fifteen minutes later my crew woke me and I resumed the descent. When we reached the time station at Shosone I was beginning to feel pretty cold, but I opted not to put on any other clothes. I find that being cold and tired is preferable to being warm and tired; experiencing a little discomfort makes me feel less inclined to fall asleep. As we left Shoshone I could see the lights of other riders on the climb up to Ibex Pass. My pace began to increase again (thanks in part to a nice tail wind) and I focused on reaching the closest rider. After reaching my first target (I don't remember who it was, as I was still half asleep) I focused on the next rider. It turned out to be Octopus who was having problems with the cold. I soon crested Ibex Pass to be greeted by the most amazing view. The descent from Ibex Pass goes on forever and in the distance I could see several other riders (perhaps 6 or 7 miles ahead) as it was now beginning to get light. This was a wonderful descent and when my crew told me that there was no climbing until we reached Baker I began to feel a lot better. As we neared Baker I began to get frustrated with how slowly the miles were passing on this section. I could see Baker in the distance, but it never seemed to be getting any closer. Eventually I reached the time station there and stopped briefly whilst we decided how to proceed. My crew told me to continue whilst they refueled the van and picked up provisions.



Somewhere between Shoshone and Baker early on day two

As I left Baker I could see the first of the three final climbs that lay between myself and the finish, and what I saw wasn't pretty. It's one thing to look at an elevation profile of the 508 course, but it's another thing entirely to experience it. On paper this section is around 127 miles with 3 climbs whose average grade is less than 3%. Sounds easy ? - Think again. You've just covered over 380 miles to get here and if you thought the road surfaces before were bad then you're in for a shock. The route sheet for the 508 innocently says, "Average 2.4% grade for next 21.4 miles - some dips", but this doesn't do justice to the first of these 3 climbs. It just seems to go on FOREVER. After around 15 miles of this climb I was really beginning to get frustrated and began to question my sanity for having entered this race. I began to think of any excuse to stop and get off the bike just so that I didn't have to look at the climb, which seemed to be growing before me. Thankfully a team passed me and I gained some motivation by trying to pass one of the riders who was readying for an exchange with his teammate. By the time I reached the top of the climb I was almost a broken man. In the space of 21.4 miles I had gone from enthusiastic to frustrated and ready to quit. Looking at the coming descent on a horrendous road and then the 12 mile climb to Granite Pass I finally lost it. What the hell was I doing here ? What madman thought this whole thing up ?

I just wanted to give up there and then - I pulled over after attempting roughly a mile of the descent and told my crew that I was quitting. By this point in the race I had developed extremely painful sores on my butt and every bump on the road was agony. With around 100 miles to go I couldn't bear the thought of the pain, combined with the remaining 2 climbs and the terrible roads. To make matters worse the temperature was starting to get pretty warm and at this point I was looking for any excuse to throw in the towel. My crew tried to change my mind, but that only made me more determined to quit. After a while I got in the van and put my feet on an icebox and simply went to sleep. My crew left me sleeping for around 30 minutes before a 508 race official (Rick "Amoeba" Anderson) stopped to see what was happening. Rick came over to the van and spoke with me for a couple of minutes. I tried to tell him what was wrong, but perhaps the sleep had brought back some of my sanity, and my explanations sounded feeble as I told him why I was quitting. Eventually I agreed to continue, and grumbling I got back on my bike after applying some ointment to my butt in a vain effort to relieve the pain.

After reaching the bottom of the descent I was greeted with the prospect of another 12 mile climb before I could reach time station 6. My butt was aching and my head was screaming "Quit - you don't need this ! Give it up ! get in the nice van and take a comfy air-conditioned ride to the finish...". For the life of me I'm not sure why I continued at this point. I'd like to say that I overcame my frustrations and got back on track, but that simply wouldn't be true. Anyway, after reaching the time station my crew informed me that it was "only a mile or so to the summit and then there's a 20 mile descent". The thought of the coming descent picked me up a bit. One thing I've learned about myself over recent years as I've increased the distances I've ridden is that I get very frustrated if I miscalculate the distance to a destination. After I had covered the mile I was ready to enter the Nirvana my crew had promised me. The only problem was that they had miscalculated and it was still another 3 miles to the actual beginning of the descent. I lost it again for a couple of minutes and began cursing out loud to vent my frustrations. To make matters worse the promised descent wasn't to my liking - it didn't seem steep enough for me to build up any speed.

As I descended towards Amboy the temperature seemed to rise to an unbearable level. It was probably a misperception, brought about in part by the fact that I had neglected to reapply sunscreen during the race and was now feeling the effects of sunburn on my face (Note to self - apply sunscreen more often next time). I got my crew to begin spraying me with cold water and this provided temporary relief for a couple of minutes at a time. This wasn't a very practical solution given I still had over 50 miles to go to the finish, so I decided to pull over and my crew soaked wash cloths in ice water and I wore one under my helmet and one around my neck. This was much better ! It had the added benefit of keeping the direct sun off my already burned face. Painfully slowly I managed to reach Amboy and then crossed the tracks where I caught a glimpse of the final climb up to Sheep hole. It was supposed to be a 10 mile climb, but to me it looked more like 50. Several times I pulled over and exchanged dry cloths for new cold, wet ones and then continued. During one of these stops Bill "Bald Eagle" Ellis, a fellow rookie and friend, passed me. Bill seemed to be on a mission and he flew passed our van as I sat there. This gave me some of the motivation I needed to continue and I got back on my bike. On this last climb I began desperately to try and think of ways to take my mind off the tediousness of the climb. I began to think about cool swimming pools and lying on the beach with a drink, anything that would help me forget about this grinding, never-ending climb. Eventually I reached the summit and began the last major descent of the race.

By now my butt was giving me major problems. I found that I couldn't sit down for more than 30 seconds or the pain became unbearable and that if I tried to apply power my butt hurt too much. My speed had dropped to 14 miles an hour by this point and I was pretty frustrated with this. I still had the energy to go faster, but the excruciating pain was preventing me from being able to use the power I had left. To make matters worse my forearms were too painful for me to use my aero bars properly and so I was sitting upright with my hands on top of them. After several miles I had to stop and my crew suggested that I wear a second pair of shorts inside out on top of the ones I was already wearing. In desperation I agreed and this took a little edge off the pain, but by no means solved the problem. And so it continued - I'd pedal standing for 30 seconds, and then sitting for 30 seconds, doing around 14 miles an hour. But at least it was progress.

Finally the distance to the finish began to drop to sensible levels. Soon I had 15 miles to go, then 10, and finally I was inside the last 5 miles. Under the streetlights I could see that my speed had dropped to 11 miles an hour and the standing was beginning to take it's toll on my calf muscles. When I turned right onto 29 Palms Highway with less than 4 miles to go I finally realized I was going to finish. I mustered all the effort I had left when I saw the Best Western sign that signified the finish line hotel, and I managed a token sprint across the line. I had done it ! I had managed to cover the course in 36 hours 41 minutes and 14 seconds.

This was my first Furnace Creek 508 and looking back I realize that I made quite a lot of mistakes - thankfully not enough to end my ride, but I'm left asking the question "what would I do differently next time ?" First, I'd take better care of my butt. My crew had told me to use Bag Balm to prevent

problems and had I listened to them I could probably have finished in a lot less pain and with a higher speed over the final 100 miles. Second, I'll need to work on my mental approach to those last 3 climbs - they're not steep, just insanely long and frustrating. Third, I need to regulate my pace and not ride like I'm a bungee cord. And finally, I need to spend more time on the bike and less off it looking for excuses not to ride – I wasted nearly 4 hours that way.

I'd like to save my last comments for my crew. What can I say ? These guys were great ! They looked after me through everything - knowing when to encourage me, and when to leave me alone. Without their support I wouldn't have been able to finish the race. If you are considering the 508 think carefully about your crew - they're just as important as your bike choice and can mean the difference between a DNF and finishing.



Smiles all around at the finish in 29 Palms

(Left to right) Mike "Hummingbird" Hollenbaugh, Graham "Python" Pollock, Richard Provan, and Ken "Kangaroo Rat" Holloway



Ride statistics – where did those wasted 4 hours go ?