

A PIRANHA IN THE DESERT?

2002 Furnace Creek 508

Written By,
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“Just do what they do....”

This became our motto before and during the race, as we were placing lights and other accessories atop our van while glazing over at Bald Eagle’s van one space over in the parking lot of the Hilton Garden Inn.

This was without a doubt going to be the biggest challenge of one very short cycling career. We (the crew and I), to say we were rookies was an understatement as none of us had ever done anything remotely close to this, in fact only one member of the crew of five had any cycling experience. Sure, I had ridden a few doubles in the past two years,

mainly [CTC](#) and [Planet Ultra](#) Double Centuries (approx. 12) but 508 miles is more than 2.5 times farther than I had ever ridden before.... I started to have serious doubts.

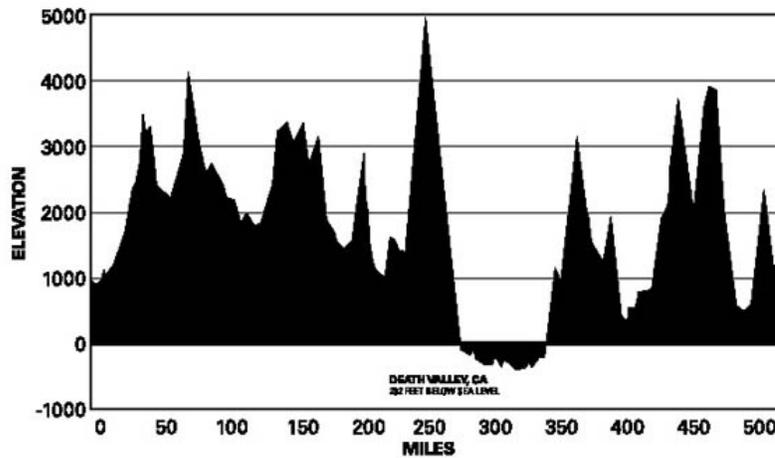


Tom making last minute preparations...

The [Furnace Creek 508](#) is considered one of the toughest, if not the toughest 500 mile bike race in the world, with ten mountain passes accounting for approximately 35,000 feet of climbing, potential for intense heat and headwinds and very remote territory that can challenge the psyche of even the most experienced ultramarathon cyclist.

The field of solo riders entered in this years race was full of some super talent, including but not limited to; Steve Beaver Born, Seana Hoopoe Hogan, Mark Panther Patten, Reed Flamingo Finfrock, Andrew Octopus Otto, Jeff Bubba Shrimp Stephens..., to name a few of the veterans ([RAAM](#) – Race Across American veterans as well). There were also some outstanding

rookies in the field, including Bill Bald Eagle Ellis and Graham Python Polluck who regularly tear up the California double century rides, usually finishing first or close to it. All this to say, I was already seeing myself bringing up the rear, “that’s okay”, I thought, I’m here to finish... that is the goal.



That evening after the pre-race banquet meeting, the crew met back at the hotel where we went over some last minute logistics, I was so nervous. We had decided earlier to have two vehicles, an additional vehicle to give crew members a break and to act as a backup if necessary. It really worked out

well. The crew was made up of some of my very closest friends, my lovely wife Lisa, my boss Mike Straka, a fellow engineer/co-worker Scott Andrews, and two of my best friends and roommates from college, Jon Webb and Tom Overstreet. This group of friends would prove to be the reason that I would eventually cross the finish line; I would not have made it had it not been for the crew. Additionally, my parents had intended on meeting us at the finish line at 29 Palms, where I had secretly planned on giving my mother her birthday present, added incentive to getting there, more on this later...

The next morning came so quickly, I was almost relieved. The 350-400 mile training weeks leading up to the big day were starting to get old as I felt as ready as I would ever get at this point. I was able to read over the last minute race tips that former 508 veteran and [Big Dog](#) stud [Nick Gerlich](#) was able to give me. I must say that both Nick and Steve Born both gave me unbelievable assistance over the past few months providing me with many insider tips and strategies that would prove to be invaluable and ultimately lead me beyond the dreaded DNF (did not finish). I was also able to talk to Catherina Bumble Bee Berge after the Knoxville Double Century and she was able to give some great crew info as well.

The following morning was cool and overcast; I was so nervous, that I couldn't even joke around with the crew, clearly not normal behavior for me. I was having a difficult time



dealing with the overwhelming anxiety brought on by the race itself. At that moment Tom had sensed my uneasiness and came up and put a big bear hug on me and prayed that the crew and I would be safe and have the opportunity to bring glory to the Lord, this helped to calm my nerves immensely. There were so many riders at the start, making last minute preparations, stretching, using the restroom, trying to relax. I glanced to my left and there was Steve Beaver Born. He had just done the race in reverse and was now preparing to do it again with the rest of us. A double 508!!

He is a super-stud! I introduced myself to him and he looked surprisingly fresh to me, amazing. Chris got up and made some comments (which I can't remember any of them)

and then we were off! Everyone was riding together through the first few miles up until the first climb, San Francisquito Canyon. I kept it very slow and under control as I wanted to save my energy for the second half of the race. My heart rate was pegged, mostly because of nerves. It took me over an hour to calm down... I was praying that I wouldn't flat mainly out of inconvenience, as the crew was told to drive on ahead about 25 miles or so before being allowed to offer support. The first climb was very easy and I figured that I was near the rear of the pack. I started passing many riders on this first climb, trying to maintain my desire to hammer; I backed off a bit and just rode easy.

The early headwinds were a bit annoying as I was expecting tailwinds through this section, but the conditions were not too bad as it never got all that hot, the first day anyway... for this I was very thankful! The crew and I were starting to figure out the leapfrog concept, although it took a while as I kept stopping and getting off my bike (bad idea). My wife finally said "stay on your bike! We'll hand off to you!" I was so used to doubles where you stop and refill bottles, etc... total rookie maneuver.

"Just do what they do...."

By the way, my wife was amazing as she kept the van organized and kept the food, fluids and supplements coming. Everyone in the crew was impressed, especially at her ability to hang out of a van door and wash bottles; she also stayed awake almost the entire time.

After about 60 miles, my nerves had subsided and I was finally into a comfortable groove.



At this point in the race we were trading spaces with Bubba Shrimp, Golden Bear and California Condor. The other crews were fabulous as they kept yelling out words of encouragement to us as we would pass by. My own crew was doing a fantastic job of keeping me fed, hydrated and on the bike, not to mention keeping me up to date on the Giants score.

Trona finally came and I was informed by one of my crew that another cyclist had left most of his lunch on the ground by the front tire of our van... I must admit that I wasn't feeling all that great either, but I had ridden under control thus far, so my energy level was still pretty good. The monster was looming, I could sense it... Townes Pass. How was I going to be able to climb this thing? I just kept riding and tried not to think about it too much.

After a few more hours we finally made it to the base of Townes Pass, a 5000 foot climb with gradients of 10-12%, a real ripper. By now many of the tandem relay teams had caught up to us. The crew put on some good music which really got me going, maybe a little too much as I kind of over did it on the first part of the climb. I hammered up to about 4000 feet and then paid the price for the last 1000 feet trying desperately to

recuperate. Once we got to the summit, I changed clothes in the van and tried to warm up as it was very cold at the top. I did gain some ground during this climb as I passed several riders, however, I wasted too much time in the van (i.e., off the bike) probably as much as 25 minutes... another rookie maneuver.

Descending Townes Pass was unbelievable. I was so cold during the first part of the descent, and shaking so violently that I thought I might lose control of the bike. It did get warmer and warmer the more we descended. I kept losing the van lights in the rollers, but the descent was straight and had excellent pavement. I was using some really intense lights, so the van lights were not all that necessary. Scott told me that I had pushed 60 MPH during parts... yikes. BTW: Scott did an outstanding job of following me down such a treacherous descent, something we were all a little nervous about prior to the start of the race.

For me, the best part of the race was the next section, through the desert during the night. I have to say this was one of the best experiences on a bike I had ever had. The temperature was perfect, and there was little to no wind. It was simply amazing. It was a very spiritual moment for me as I felt very close to the Lord, loving Him, worshipping Him. Gazing up at the star filled sky, a reflection of His glory, I was truly humbled by the moment.



Before long, the double summit climbs of Jubilee/Salisbury were upon us. I struggled a bit up these as they seemed to go on forever. We passed our other vehicle parked on the side of the road, Mike and Scott were snoozing inside and Jon yelled over the PA at them, it was hilarious. Once we finally crested Salisbury, we decided to take a short break (about 20 minutes) ... again, in retrospect, I should have just kept moving as this

was more lost time... yet another rookie maneuver.

The ride to Baker was quite boring, but we were trading spaces with Bald Eagle which was making things a little interesting as Bald Eagle and I are friends and both members of the Santa Rosa Cycling Club, so we and our crews were able to encourage each other. We were blessed, however, with a very nice tailwind throughout this part of the race. I would see Bald Eagle from time to time up until Amboy, which would prove to be the last time I would see him as he completely put the hammer down. Bald Eagle went on to beat me by almost an hour... unbelievable, what an incredible effort!

If there was a favorite part of the ride (i.e., riding through Furnace Creek at night), there was also a least favorite part of the race. For me this had to be Kelbaker Road. What a

hideous, demoralizing climb... This is a very gradual climb that goes on forever and ever, approx. 20 miles. It was also warming up a bit and I was having a terrible time breathing as the dry desert air was finally catching up with me, I had completely lost my voice.



Overheating after Kelbaker Road

As I neared the summit, a familiar car passed me, honked and arms were waving out of the sunroof. It was my Mom and Dad! They were planning on being at the finish line in 29 Palms, but had decided to try and see us in action on the way there. This was an incredible boost to my energy level, which was at an all time low. It was my Mom's birthday a few days before and within the handle bars of my bike I was carrying her birthday present. It was necklace of an encapsulated mustard seed, a symbol of faith as illustrated in the Bible by Jesus in His

proclamation that if we had the faith of a mustard seed we could essentially move mountains

[\(Matthew 17:20\)](#) or ride over them, lots of them, Ha!! We would soon find out that this level of faith would be required to get us safely through this test. As a child I had spent many Sundays, leaning up against my mom's shoulder looking at and playing with her mustard seed necklace that she had years later misplaced. My parents raised me to revere the Lord and to honor Him in all that I do and this was just one of those moments.

The final climb of the day was Sheephole, a very tough climb that gets steep at the top as you can practically see the whole climb as you approach it. I was tired but I was starting



to sense the finish which was giving me a new sense of vitality. The crew (Lisa, Jon and Tom) would follow me to the finish. Lisa, Jon and Tom took turns talking to me over the PA, inspiring me... it was awesome, they literally talked me up it. As I neared the steep section, I asked them to crank up the tunes, I then got out

of the saddle and hammered to the top, I was full of goose bumps at I crested the summit,

the rest of the crew and my parents were there to meet us! I had such an overwhelming sense of love for these people at this moment, it was joy inexpressible. I could not have gotten to this point without any of them and all of us knew it, it was a true team effort.

The last leg was brutal. I was starting to hallucinate, I couldn't talk and was struggling to breathe. The road into 29 Palms was very dangerous as there was little or no shoulder and



lots of traffic. It seemed to go on forever, I was wondering if I would make it. I must have stopped 4 or 5 times during this 10 mile stretch, I don't remember, I just know that it took a long time. As we came into town, I almost got plowed over by a guy in a pickup truck that had made a very illegal pass of the support vehicle as we were turning left. A few more short climbs in town and finally we got to the end and I could see the finish line! It was so exciting

to finally cross the finish line, everyone was there celebrating the finality of it all. We had finished 12th in a time of 36:58, good enough for RAAM qualification! I couldn't believe it as I have only been cycling for 2.5 years and now I've been afforded the opportunity to do the unthinkable.... RAAM. Well, it is fun to think about, I will have to see if my wonderful crew is up for it. 2004 maybe? We will see... [Luke 1:37](#) , [Philippians 4:13](#).

Anyway, I was able to give my mom her present. We all hugged and cried a little, it was all such an incredible experience; I can hardly wait for next year as we will go for it again. This time without so many rest stops!



Again, without Lisa, Tom, Scott, Jon and Mike (and Mom and Dad), finishing would not have been possible. Thank you and your families for affording me the experience of a life time.

Special thanks to Grama Nita and Aunt Gina for looking after our beautiful children Heidi and Hank while we were gone... I'm sure the 508 was a piece of cake by comparison!!



Let's do it again!

The Crew:

Left to Right: Jon, Scott, Carl, Lisa, Mike, Tom

The Motto:

“Just do what they do....”

And so we did.