

Kick ass wind, rocky-washed out roads and relentless hills.



Welcome to the Furnace Creek 508 sponsored by Adventure Corps held over the October 16-18th weekend. I must say that before I decided to enter this I was anticipating riding this event solo but fortunately saner heads prevailed. Not to say that I won't attempt it someday, and I stress the word attempt, as there are no guarantees as to whether a good rider with proper training can actually complete this race. To say it is difficult is to put it plainly, not an exaggeration.

Having only ridden any ride over 35 miles in almost a 20 year layoff, I have transitioned from my first ever century, the Solvang Century in March, to the Furnace Creek 508 in 8 months. My decision to team up with another rider for the event was so that I could recon the course and make a decision for next year as to whether I should attempt the entire distance solo, and to be honest I still haven't made a decision as to whether I could or should do it. Time will tell and conditioning, conditioning and more conditioning is the answer, I think! My helmet is off to those brave souls that make it solo, and this year was doubly difficult due to the incessant winds from the low front moving into the Southern California coast. The gusts were enough to actually blow over some riders, my teammate, Vern Watters of the Marin Cyclists, for one. Fortunately I have some "ballast" and was able to keep the wheels under me, even on the crazy 60 mph downhill run I had on my first stage, California City to Trona, 71.32 miles in 3:56. Fast for me, and I will admit, somewhat wind aided as my next stage. The next stage which included a long climb to Randsburg, a total of 73.6 miles took me over 9 hours.....guess which way the wind was blowing?

Taking the baton, (yes, we actually had a wooden baton we had to carry), around 2 AM in the morning, I rode onto Highway 190 and into a tremendous headwind for hours. I'm uncertain how many riders I did pass but there were many, which I contribute to some added personal ballast. At the end of the flat and rolling section I was faced with two climbs totaling 4500 feet, the Salsberry Climb, out of the valley. I was beat, really exhausted. I decided the best plan was to fuel up, so I climbed into the front seat of my Saturn SUV SAG vehicle and slept for a half-hour, a ½ hour of the total of about 5 hours sleep I had for the entire event.



Resting somewhere near Trona

After the well needed "combat-nap", I once again mounted my "trusty" Cannondale Optimo "steed", this time equipped with a MP3 player containing Jimmy Buffett and Dire Straits and paced myself up the long pulls just after sun rise arriving

at the next time station just before noon. Whew, was I tired, and now 325 miles into the race. Facing two more legs, 34.9 and 58.2 miles, I tried to fool my legs into believing they would last and that it wouldn't be so bad.

All in all, day one was over and Death Valley and the worst part of the desert were behind us. Now, the final push, the ride to 29 Palms, via the towns of Baker and Amboy, and the finish. My teammate and his SAG driver, his wife, had taken a "funky" motel in the town of Shoshone, so we were able to talk the management into letting us sleep and shower there for a few hours as well.



Team Mahi Mahi/Robert, Vern Suzanne. A "relaxed" handoff

Somewhat rested, a long hot shower and dry cycling "kit" my SAG vehicle and trusted, angel-like driver/monitor and nanny drove to the next time station, Kelso, where I would head southwest, a leg that was not entirely that bad, although the somewhat "gentle" uphill for 22 miles did take its toll and like a (insert cool metaphor here), night arrived and the steepest part of the climb. Ouch, my legs were heavy and even with the steady beat of Dire Straits I was struggling as I went from averaging 14 mph +, to 8 then 6, focusing hard into the night looking for the crest of the climb. Finally, after several false plateaus the top and I stopped for a breath before making what I thought would be a fast descent, and it was somewhat despite a road on which I wished I had brought my mountain bike. Descending in the dark on a road, and I use the term lightly, at speeds in excess of 25 mph, I darted, dashed and jumped over countless ruts, washouts and gigantic holes, fearing a gigantic crash as one of my 16 spoke Rolf wheels folded or I had a blowout. I must say that the Michelin Carbon tires I had were great and I made it but not without the great driving of my SAG vehicle. Kathy was able to stay close, very close and keep the headlights on the road ahead so that I was able to keep good speed. The only "scary" part was coming over small rises, where I "flew" into the dark, not knowing what was on the other side. Didn't see my heart rate at that time, but it must have been high!!!



SAG Angel Kathy with "friend" Flat Stanley

By now we were nearing the dreaded time cut-off, 7 AM (for teams), and no delays could be "tolerated", so I pushed hard, and, low and behold, as I approached the next time station I spotted some red lights. I feared the worst, a cyclist accident, a fellow "suffering" 508'er down, but fortunately, well not to fortunate for me, as it was a RR crossing with a VERY long freight train slowly passing. No worries, I said, keeping my speed up, watching the gate like a hawk and bingo, the gate went up and the lights off just as I hit the warning area. Wow, what great luck as the time-station was just across and my anxious teammate, Vern, chomping at the bit to start his last stage.

I was breathless after the speedy, dangerous downhill and fast run on the flat but feeling good as I knew I had one stage left, the final stage and the finish, which we now knew we would be able to successfully complete, barring any accidents.



Vern

Again, we "jumped" into the Saturn and driving off to the final Time Station. Amboy. Arriving Kathy and I pulled near the cool Time Station decked out with hula girl cutouts and music,(no Jimmy Buffet though) a very appropriate scene, out in the middle of nowhere! Sleep, I needed some sleep, so sitting again in the SAG , Kathy and I rested, and as it turned out, slept to well,as we were startled awake by Vern. As it turns out he had done a great leg, a hour ahead of our predictions. Fortunately I was fairly ready, grabbed the bike and took off, and I could here the crew at the TS offering congratulations.....knowing that I was now on the road to the finish, but I still had tribulations as my stage had a large climb in it and a uphill finish into 29 Palms. None-the-less, I cranked the road out, pushing hard, trying to drink and eat but by now my stomach was refusing anything and the road was increasing more up, and up and up. Tired as hell, though I did seem to find some hidden energy to spin, I pushed, again, thanks to Kathy's great driving I was able to see well....another bad section of road. Then Eureka, the last big summit....., Sheephole Summit,(El 2400'). I pressed hard downhill, again fearing a disaster, but I knew I had a spare set of wheels in the SAG so I continued to push until we cam to the last section.

I was cold now, a chilly desert wind hitting me in the face, again, and my clothes were drenched from the long previous climb. Stopping, I grabbed some coffee, with a shot of a Starbucks "jolt", 500 calories and enough caffeine to launch a space shuttle, changed into some dry clothes and pushed off for the last 15 miles, uphill. I was tired, really tired but kept spinning, trying to focus my eyes in the dark looking for the turn that would take us to the final "drag", twenty-nine Palm Drive, and the finish. The wind was brutal, the devil playing his last card, and I slowed but soon, the left turn appeared, I felt great, a new good road with street lights, buildings, "stuff"....I stood and built up speed. I crossed names of streets I knew I was looking for then the light that was the last turn, yeah, the last turn but Mr. Wind was there to greet us!! No worries I said and pushed...there were burger joints, gas stations then downtown, where the hell was the hotel and the finish. Farther Kathy said. FURTHUR, yikes, my legs felt like mush but I knew it was almost over and I could hear the cold bottles of beer in the cooler in the back of the Saturn calling my name. I pushed, then I saw it.....no, not the hotel, not yet, but a monster hill! At least that is what it looked at...a hill at mile 506.5, so I dug in, stood, sat stood and made it, and breathless I glided down the hill and THEN I saw it, the hotel, the finish, the FINISH.



Robert and Cannondale

Left turn, a puddle, a right turn, a up-hill driveway, a porte-cochere and the banner. I was done! Without stepping off the bike a leaned heavily on the aero bars and closed my eyes, I could hear the Saturn behind me....Kathy called out, Hey, look this way, and POW, bright light, flash. I kinda smiled but certain I looked half dead. Off the bike, please get off the bike....I though I would sit down but out came Chris for the welcome home "official finisher", then the finishers medal, geeezzz, a medal. Pretty cool, then the beer. Man did that taste good, one of the best I have ever had! Unfortunately Vern was not able to meet me near the finish, as we had planned, so we could cross together. We did talk via cell but he was exhausted as well and was sleeping.

Get this, we called the hotel where I had made a reservation and the room was still being held! WOW! We checked in at around 5 AM, another beer or 2, a shower and sleep, great sleep.



All in all, it was tough, very brutal at times, but I must say I enjoyed the event. As Chris Kostman says, a "spiritual happening" and I feel pretty good about finishing what is described as "the World's Premiere ultra marathon Cycling Event"!!

The stark desert scenery, desolate roads and the challenge were all there. Next year....solo? Hmmmmm, don't know, but I'll give it some thought. In the meantime, I just say....."Who are those solo guys/girls"? My helmets off to 'em!

See you on the road, next time.

Team Mahi Mahi

Robert Baldino
Kathleen Rae SAG
F. Stanley SAG Assistant
Vern Watters
Suzanne Watters SAG

Official 2X 508 Team Finishers



Link to 508 Results website: <http://www.adventurecorps.com/webcast/2004fc/index.html>