

Almost Impossible: A Fixed Gear 508

By Sam Seal Beal

In the phrase “almost impossible”, the key word is “almost”. When I first saw the 508 course as a crew in 1998, I thought it was *almost impossible* unless you had a motorcycle. But a year later I finished my first 508 and also qualified for RAAM – something that truly seemed *almost impossible*. And three years later I successfully finished RAAM. Last fall, when I first heard about Chris Kostman’s crazy plan to have a fixed-gear category at The 508, I thought it was *almost insane*. But then I started to think about it. This essay is a brief summary of how I approached it and how I made *almost* a positive term.

Some goals are simply too hard to predict – you just have to go to the edge and find out what happens – but even Columbus had a plan. I have been riding a fixed-gear every winter since my first 508. It’s good for your legs and a nice change of pace. At first I found it difficult to ride anything but pure flat roads. I also tried single-speed riding - one gear with a freewheel – but I missed the sensation of pedaling full circles. The biggest problem I had with the “fixie” was forgetting it doesn’t coast. Inevitably I would come out of the saddle to “hop” the bike over a pothole or crack, and momentum would almost vault me over the handlebars.

My first decision in preparing for a Fixed 508, was to ride nothing but fixed gear miles for the nine months prior to The 508. I entered a couple of double centuries and the Davis 24hr ride. I experimented with different gear ratios. I showed up at the Spring Death Valley double century with a 42:15 and ended up using that gear for the rest of my training. At the Eastern Sierra double century, the descent from Sagehen Summit was fast, bumpy and long. I learned that I could do the climbs, and the bumpy descents. After that I became convinced that a successful Fixed 508 was not only possible, it was achievable and within my previous 508 finishing times). Bottom line – have a plan and a goal.

My last two 508 finishes were PRs – personal records. So this became my goal for 2004 – beat a younger Seal! Over the summer, I followed the workout pattern that John Hughes developed for me in 2000 – intervals, tempo rides and long distance pacing. I rarely went over 75 miles and rode the same roads I usually ride in preparing for an event. Fixed gear riding teaches you to accelerate by spinning, rather than by down-shifting. By jumping from 100rpm to 130rpm for a few seconds on a fixie you can catch almost anyone’s wheel. This is fun, a useful skill, and it will make your legs stronger. Bottom line – fixies are fun to ride and you can kick butt on gradual climbs.

The 508 course is fixed-gear friendly, except of course, for Townes Pass. I picked a gear ratio that would be fast on the 3% grades that dominate the course but almost impossible to ride on the double digit sections of Townes – thus I would walk them. You can walk 15 to 18 minutes per mile uphill, which means you will lose about 30 minutes to a typical rider pedaling up Townes Pass. And even less if you ride the bike every time the road tilts down (or the cross-winds switch to tail-winds).

With the tailwinds on Saturday, I had several 30 to 35mph descents on the way to Townes Pass. That equates to 135 to 160 RPM with my gear ratio. That sounds *almost impossible* but your legs are not turning the pedals on a descent – *the pedals are turning your legs*. It's a weird sensation. You relax and watch your knees bob up and down like a camshaft, and feather the brakes when you think the “engine” may explode.

Thanks to those tailwinds, I made the turn on 190E to Death Valley in time to see the sunset on Townes Pass. That was a first for me and it was cool. But when I started going uphill, the crosswinds stopped me dead in my pedals. At first I had this sinking feeling that I could not continue, then I remembered walking. DuraAce cleats are easy to walk on; your hands are free to grab food and fluid bottles; the music is clearer; and the change in muscle usage feels good. I walked two thirds of the climb. A high point on my little hike was being greeted by Race Officials Rick Amoeba Anderson and Mike Whale Wilson. I rode the last few hundred feet to the top and kept going. The pavement on the long descent into Death Valley is so smooth you can easily control your speed. The worst part was envy when a “coastie” went by at 55mph. Bottom line – you can deal with Townes Pass.

Pushing wind is similar to climbing. On the *death march* from Furnace Creek to Ashford Mills, I pushed more wind than I ever had, including the Death Valley Double of 1996 and the Oklahoma panhandle section of RAAM 2002. The wind's howl over the mineral flats at Badwater was truly eerie. I made a game of it by chasing team riders. Again the advantage of the fixie is maintaining speed on long gradual climbs – or long flat headwinds.

But long gradual climbs *with* 30mph headwinds proved to be too much for the gear ratio I was stuck with. By the start of the Kel-Baker climb I was struggling. Also, my Achilles tendons, hands and butt were so sore that I couldn't descend faster than 25mph. When the Boar passed me on the backside of Kel-Baker, spinning 30mph, I just couldn't respond. Bottom line – pad your bars and your seat.

I set a PR on the Granite climb, and I kept within 5 minutes of the Boar's van, but lost sight of him on the long descent on Indian Valley Road. After the turn to Amboy, I was just “riding to finish”. Climbing Sheephole pass at night was a new experience, but still endless and busy with cars speeding by. (This is the one road on the 508 course that should be preserved in its “insanely sick” condition, just to keep it special). In Wonder Valley, I discovered that once again, someone had moved Utah Road further to the west. And the last bump on 29 Palms Highway felt like a mountain with 40mph desert winds in my face. Bottom line - the lights at the finish line, the cheering, the photographs with your crew, and the medal is an experience that makes all the hours worthwhile. Bottom line – don't quit unless something is *really* broken.

All three fixed-gear riders: Boar, Seal and Parrot, finished the toughest 508 in anyone's memory. I believe that if the conditions had been better, the Boar would have made the turn onto Utah Rd before sunset, and I might have seen him do it. Bottom line – fixed gear 508 is possible. I encourage all coasties to try it.

PS. Don't forget that making the 508 possible on *any* bike requires at least 3 C's: Conditioning, Commitment and Crew. I also rely on a fourth C – my wife Connie. Along with Lorne Sachs and Dennis Horton, they made my fourth and most memorable Furnace Creek 508 possible and successful.