

The Golden Dragon Breathes Fire At The 508

Prologue

My 508 almost ended 2 weeks before the race. Perhaps it should have, but then there would be no story to tell.

On my way to one of my last training rides, I felt my right knee twinge. Since I had no history of knee trouble, I figured it would go away when I warmed up. Sure enough, the endorphins from the ride blocked out any pain until I was on my way home. But, by then it didn't twinge, it hurt, a lot.

I was too frightened to go to a doctor, for fear he would tell me I couldn't ride. I decided to stay off the bike until the 508 and hope for the best. But I was really freaked out! I'd been planning the 508 for 3 years: the first year I did reconnaissance as a crew member for Jim "Shrike" Kern. Last year I did a 2 woman team with Margie "Sun Dragon" Bidick. 2005 was my year, I was ready in all possible ways. And I was watching it slip through my fingers like sand.

In the next two weeks, I do only one short ride. The knee feels not bad, but not good either. Lots of people told me not to ride, not to chance permanent damage by pushing an injured knee 513 miles (ahh, thank you mother nature for the detour). I don't listen, I can't listen, I have to have it, I am obsessed. I also believe in my own incredible, dumb luck.

Santa Clarita to California City

*Fellas, I'm ready to get up and do my thing (yeah go ahead!)
I wanta get into it, man, you know (go ahead!)
Like a, like a sex machine, man, (yeah go ahead!)
Movin' and doin' it, you know
Can I count it off? (Go ahead)
One, two, three, four!*

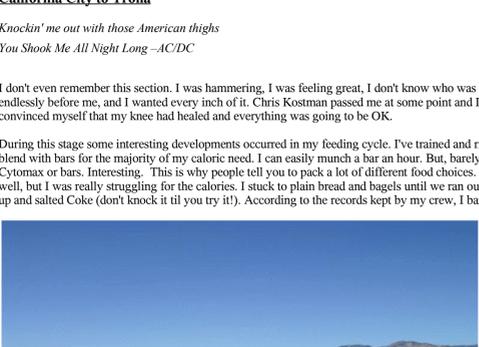
Sex Machine—James Brown

The pack starts under yellow flag conditions. Before the ride, I worried about being too slow, that I would be last up the hill, that the team riders would pass me before I met my van. As usual, once I clicked in, all doubts disappeared. I felt great and had two weeks of energy coiled up in my legs.

The climb up San Francisquito was easy. The windmill climb was easy. I was pounding away and didn't even notice the miles. My crew was awesome; almost immediately I stopped worrying about what they were doing, they had it under control. They were absolutely flawless throughout the entire ride—there was never a minute I had to worry about anything except keeping the pedals moving. The weather was perfect, no heat, no wind. Did I mention that I'm the luckiest person I know?



Feeling fresh on the road to California City



Chris and Jae and the van

California City to Trona

*Knockin' me out with those American thighs
You Shook Me All Night Long --AC/DC*

I don't even remember this section. I was hammering, I was feeling great, I don't know who was pedaling my bike but it sure wasn't me! The road stretched out endlessly before me, and I wanted every inch of it. Chris Kostman passed me at some point and I remember telling him that I was born to ride this course. I convinced myself that my knee had healed and everything was going to be OK.

During this stage some interesting developments occurred in my feeding cycle. I've trained and ridden thousands of miles on a Cytomax/Sustained Energy blend with bars for the majority of my caloric need. I can easily munch a bar an hour. But, barely 100 miles into the ride, suddenly I couldn't stand either Cytomax or bars. Interesting. This is why people tell you to pack a lot of different food choices. I switched to bottled Gatorade, which seemed to go down well, but I was really struggling for the calories. I stuck to plain bread and bagels until we ran out somewhere around Baker. After that, I subsisted on salted 7-up and salted Coke (don't knock it til you try it!). According to the records kept by my crew, I barely consumed 8000 calories during the entire race.

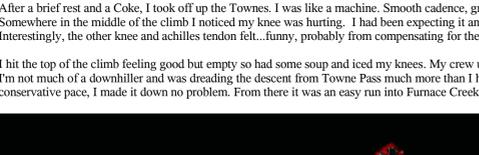


The open road

Trona to Furnace Creek

*In the midnight hour she cried- "more, more, more"
Rebel Yell --Billy Idol*

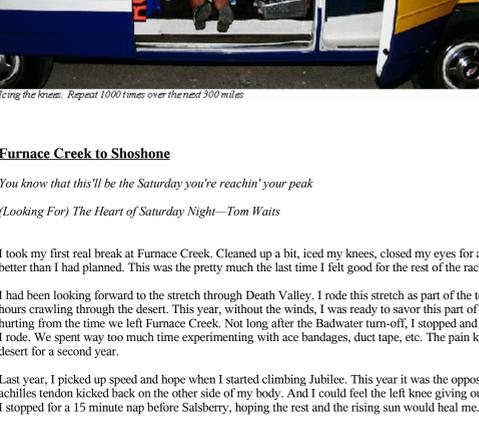
Still zipping along, feeling good over the Trona bump. I started the descent into Panamint Valley as the sun began to set. It was one of the most beautiful sections of the ride. My crew started to do direct follow rather than leapfrog so we switched from my mp3 player to the cd player. I put my 2 way radio on, but we didn't end up using it that much. It was easier for the crew to yell at me from the van window. They were spinning tunes, it was like a party on wheels as we approached the dreaded Townes Pass. How would I do on this tough climb? Would I suffer? Would it break me? Hell no!!!



Sunset over Panamint Valley

After a brief rest and a Coke, I took off up the Townes. I was like a machine. Smooth cadence, great rhythm, it was awesome, I was unstoppable!!! Somewhere in the middle of the climb I noticed my knee was hurting. I had been expecting it and had been trying to get as far as I could before it broke. Interestingly, the other knee and achilles tendon felt...funny, probably from compensating for the original knee injury.

I hit the top of the climb feeling good but empty so had some soup and iced my knees. My crew urged me to head down before I got too cold. I have to admit, I'm not much of a downhiller and was dreading the descent from Towne Pass much more than I had dreaded the climb. But with a big night rider and a very conservative pace, I made it down no problem. From there it was an easy run into Furnace Creek.



Icing the knees. Repeat 1000 times over the next 300 miles

Furnace Creek to Shoshone

*You know that this'll be the Saturday you're reachin' your peak
(Looking For) The Heart of Saturday Night--Tom Waits*

I took my first real break at Furnace Creek. Cleaned up a bit, iced my knees, closed my eyes for about 15 minutes. It was about midnight and I was doing well, better than I had planned. This was the pretty much the last time I felt good for the rest of the race. Hold on to your hats, things are about to get ugly.

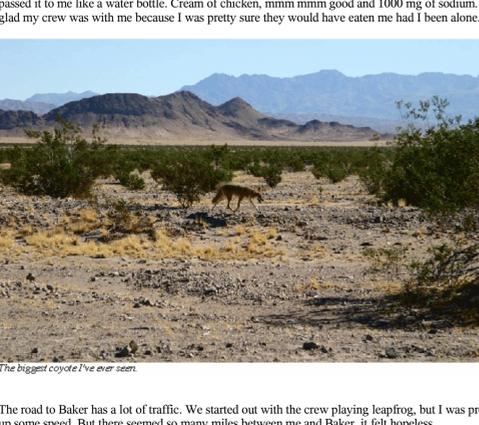
I had been looking forward to the stretch through Death Valley. I rode this stretch as part of the team last year and the winds were out of this world. It was hours crawling through the desert. This year, without the winds, I was ready to savor this part of the course but it was not to be. My right knee had been hurting from the time we left Furnace Creek. Not long after the Badwater turn-off, I stopped and asked my crew to fashion an icepack that would stay on while I rode. We spent way too much time experimenting with ace bandages, duct tape, etc. The pain kept getting worse and I found myself crawling through the desert for a second year.

Last year, I picked up speed and hope when I started climbing Jubilee. This year it was the opposite. I started to climb but the right knee rebelled and the left achilles tendon kicked back on the other side of my body. And I could feel the left knee giving out. By the end of Jubilee, I was feeling nauseous from the pain. I stopped for a 15 minute nap before Salsberry, hoping the rest and the rising sun would heal me.

No such luck: Salsberry was an exercise in pain management. My yoga teacher is always telling us to use our breath to release tension from our bodies so, for the next 9.5 miles/2300 ft, on every exhale I chanted "you are releasing the pain from your body".

My mantra actually worked for a while!

Did I think of quitting? I don't remember. I know I was disappointed on how long that stretch took me and worried about running out of time. I know I probably calculated the number of miles and the feet of climb and decided I couldn't make it. I'm sure I thought about how much permanent damage I was doing. But I kept moving forward, for no other reason than that was the direction my bike was pointed.



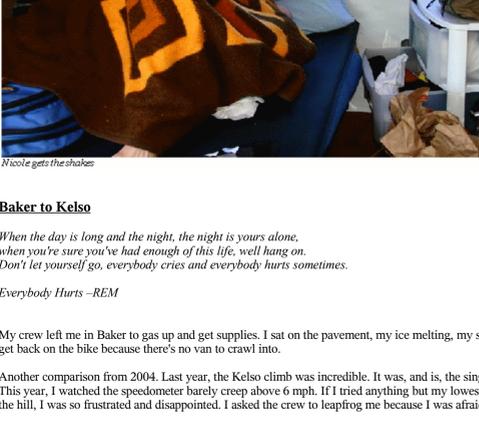
Ohhh it hurts!

Shoshone to Baker

*God, it's so painful when something that's so close
Is still so far out of reach
American Girl- Tom Petty*

The road to Baker was long. This was the longest stage for me, it seemed never ending and my condition was deteriorating quickly.

We didn't stop at Shoshone because I wanted to cover as much ground as possible before it got hot. That didn't take very long. I bet pass wasn't too bad, but both my knees hurt and the achilles was starting to feel just as bad. I had some Campbells "Soup at hand" near the top... the crew passed it to me like a water bottle. Cream of chicken, mmm mmm good and 1000 mg of sodium. We passed some giant coyotes by the side of the road. I was glad my crew was with me because I was pretty sure they would have eaten me had I been alone.



The biggest coyote I've ever seen.

The road to Baker has a lot of traffic. We started out with the crew playing leapfrog, but I was pretty uncomfortable, so they began to follow me and I picked up some speed. But there seemed so many miles between me and Baker, it felt hopeless.

About 10 miles out of Baker, I felt weak. I thought I was overheating so stopped to cool down for a few minutes. Within a minute of getting off the bike, I got the shakes. I was laying in bed, covered up, shivering all over. Not good. Chalk another one up to my awesome crew. They made me drink a very strong saltwater solution and, pretty soon, I started to feel better. I even ate something.

I finally made it to Baker, but it took forever.



Nicole gets the shakes

Baker to Kelso

*When the day is long and the night, the night is yours alone,
when you're sure you've had enough of this life, well hung on.
Don't let yourself go, everybody cries and everybody hurts sometimes.*

Everybody Hurts--REM

My crew left me in Baker to gas up and get supplies. I sat on the pavement, my ice melting, my salted coke all gone, feeling sorry for myself. Guess I have to get back on the bike because there's no van to crawl into.

Another comparison from 2004. Last year, the Kelso climb was incredible. It was, and is, the single best climb I have ever done in my life; I was breathtaking. This year, I was so frustrated and disappointed. I asked the crew to leapfrog me because I was afraid the van would overheat.

My crew was awesome. Every 1/2 mile or so, they would be on the side of the road waiting for me. Chris would run alongside and spur if I needed anything (amputation would have helped), Jae waved from the drivers seat and Tom did his silly dance (very silly) to cheer me up and see me on. I didn't crack as much, I couldn't. If I let go one inch, one centimeter, I would have fallen apart.

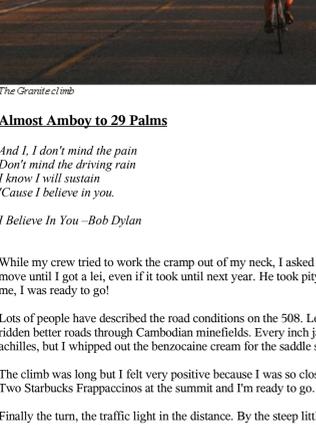
The pain had changed in quality from a stabbing pain, like when you twist your ankle, to a grating bone on bone pain. Permanent damage ...I was sure of it. About a mile off the summit, the achilles became too much for me. Ice felt hot to me, I couldn't take another pedal stroke. I got off the bike. Chris wrapped my ankle. Jae and Tom prepared my second bike, thinking that a change might help.

I'm sitting by the side of the road thinking that this was it, the end. I had reached my limit and couldn't go on.

My wonderful crew tried to urge me on: "try the new bike, just get to Kelso and you can quit"

The conversation in my head sounded like: "2 more climbs, I can't do 2 more climbs, I'll die. Only 2 more climbs, that isn't much. You've already done the permanent damage, you'll never ride again so this is your one shot. This is it."

Over the top, down the hill to Kelso



Wrapping the ankle...huh, where'd the ice for my knee? Only the tape is left!

Kelso to Almost Amboy

*On disco lights your name will be seen
You can fulfill all your dreams
Party here, party there, everywhere
This is your night, baby
You've got to be there*

Ladies Night--Kool and the Gang

By the time I reached the Kelso time station, I was spent. Strung out on pain. The crew left me to nap but I was too wired so I asked Tom to stay with me. "I can't make 2 more climbs," I whined like a little baby. "Nicole," said Tom, "You have maybe 8 more hours of pain then you'll have the rest of your life to enjoy it."

Tom "Daddy Long Legs" Lawrence knows. He's a veteran.

"Let's do it!" Back on the bike, I felt better than I had since Death Valley. About halfway up the Granite climb, I ask when the climb going to start. I even noticed how beautiful the scenery was. I feel good, maybe my luck has changed. Turns out my luck didn't change for long, but long enough to get me too close to the end to quit!

You would think the long descent into almost Amboy would have been great. But I was really tired and strung out. It was getting dark and the unlined blacktop freaked me out. I got a bad cramp in my neck and could barely keep the bike straight. My crew thought I had fallen asleep but in my demented brain, I thought I was going so fast that they would hit me if I tried to pull over.



The Granite climb

Almost Amboy to 29 Palms

*And I, I don't mind the pain
Don't mind the driving rain
I know I will sustain
'Cause I believe in you.*

I Believe In You--Bob Dylan

While my crew tried to work the cramp out of my neck, I asked around for my leg. The time station workers said they were out; I told him I wasn't going to move until I got a lei, even if it took until next year. He took pity on me and produced the last deformed lei, more like a crown than a necklace. That was ok by me, I was ready to go!

Lots of people have dreaded the road conditions of the 508. Let me tell you, the miles from Amboy to the start of the Sheephole climb are the worst. I've ridden better roads through Cambodian minefields. Every inch jarred my knees, achilles and my now uncomfortable backside. I couldn't fix the knots or achilles, but I whipped out the benzocaine cream for the saddle sores. That brought the discomfort under control and let me ride the road.

The climb was long but I felt very positive because I was so close to the end. Finally I reached the summit, but still had the hardest part of the ride ahead of me. Two Starbucks Frappaccinos at the summit and I'm ready to go. It won't be bad. Wrong. It was it was slow, it was painful, unending.

Finally the turn, the traffic light in the distance. By the steep little climb I was in so much pain I was seeing flashing lights and was pretty sure I was going to pass out. My knees felt like something was going to explode out of them!

But I'm almost there, I could walk from here. I will make it.

There it is, the toilet paper finish line. There's Jim and David, who stayed up to hold the toilet paper for me. I've dreamed about this, I've wanted it so badly. It is finally mine. So much happiness, no more pain.

The crew and I (mostly Tom and I) drank a whole bottle of champagne. Then Paul "Prairie Dog" Vlasveld showed up with another bottle. We drank that too. We are toasted. And happy, so happy.

You can look up my results if you want. Time and my standing relative to everyone else stopped mattering somewhere on the road to Baker. What matters is that I reached the limits of my endurance and kept going.

Epilogue

*If the sun refuses to shine, I would still be loving you.
When mountains crumble to the sea, there will still be you and me.*

Thank You --Led Zeppelin

After the ride I dutifully got my MRIs. No rips, no tears, no permanent damage. I'm taking all the right steps and aggressively trying to rehab my knees. For 3 weeks, I couldn't ride. I was so incredibly grateful for the first 10 mile bike path ride I took.

Every day I get stronger and I hope I will be back on the course next year.

It goes without saying that I couldn't have done this without my crew. They were fantastic in every way. Chris, Tom, Jae, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

My wonderful Crew