

The Furnace Creek 508 Oct. 8-10 2005 by Paul McKenzie

It's 6:45 A.M. and I've been riding my bike for over 24 hours. It's a relief to see the break of day but the town of Baker, CA is not inspiring. I'm doing the Furnace Creek 508 bike race and reality is setting in. We need to gas the support van, and since it's still technically dark, I cannot continue without my support vehicle in follow until 7 A.M. daylight according to the race rules. We stop at a gas station and the crew, Bill Ellis, Adrienne Ruggles, and Janet DeHaven take a potty break. I'm eager to go but must stay with the van. I've got 400 miles in my legs and I'm not sure how much more I can ride. There's a long way to go...

I'd been curious about the Furnace Creek 508 bike race for some time. I checked the web site, talked to riders who'd done it, but never really considered myself a candidate to participate. But earlier this year, in the Spring, I did a 24 hour solo mt. bike race. That race taught me that I was capable of riding, more or less, 24 hours straight, staying up all night pedaling. Prior to that experience my longest rides were hard double centuries which would take me approximately 12 hours.

On a bike tour in August with my good friend, tandem partner, 508 and RAAM finisher Cat Berge, I had a chance to spend some quality time with Chris Kostman the promoter of the Furnace Creek 508 who was along on the tour. I spoke with him about the event and he encouraged me to participate. He even went to the trouble of holding a spot for me when the event was near full as I made up my mind to do it. OK, I thought, I'm in. Besides, my co-worker and friend Kenny Souza planned to be there so why not? I registered late, then began the daunting task of finding a 3 person crew to support me.

I figure it will be hard to find a crew this late in the game. I post a message out to friends and also on the Santa Rosa Cycling Club chatty list. To my surprise I get a nice note from Adrienne Ruggles, and some interest from Bill Ellis. Bill had previously agreed to officiate the event for Chris, but checked with Chris to see if he could be relieved from those duties to crew for me. I crossed my fingers as I knew Bill would be a brilliant crew chief. He's raced the 508 and he's officiated, not to mention his experience in PBP and many California brevets. When Bill agreed to come on board I was elated. My wife Janet rounded out the crew. Janet has no experience crewing for ultra cycling events, but I know having her there will be invaluable for her moral support as well as her organizational and food prep skills.

Prepping the bikes, spares, and equipment is overwhelming. I work like a dog in the days leading up to the event. I totally underestimate the task of properly preparing for a first time 508. The next time, if there is one, will be much easier. So many things to cover. Two bikes, extra wheels, tires, reflective tape, vehicle prep with flashing roof lights, signage, T-shirts for crew, food, storage bins, spare parts...blah blah blah. Janet pitched in by doing all the food shopping. You don't want to go all the way there and have your race ended by not having the right supplies!

I have almost no experience with aero bars. I try several pair just days before the event until I find the right ones...I think. I mount them just 3 days before the race and have only one short practice ride on them. Most other competitors have been training with their bars for months or years! The Syntace XXS got the call because they work well for me in my standard road racing position — saddle railed back and long stem.



Sandwiches for everyone!

Adrienne drives to our home Thursday evening, staying overnight, and Bill shows up early Friday. We load the van and are on the road to SoCal before 9 A.M. using the commuter lane. We arrive in Santa Clarita in the early afternoon and I register while the crew puts the final touches on the van and the bikes, including mounting the "totem" signs. Janet gets a production line going and makes sandwiches for everyone. Chris and his staff are efficient and I'm registered and we've passed bike and vehicle inspections in an hour or so.



Adrienne and Bill packing the van

My totem is "Muddy Mudskipper," a somewhat dubious character on the cartoon series, Ren & Stimpy. I was serious at first, trying to get Mt. Goat, then Marmot, but those were taken already. The idea of the totem is that it's a real animal, and it's good if the first letter of the critter is the same as the first letter of your last name, but it's not required. During the event, racers are referred to by their totem, not their real names, a unique and fun aspect of the 508. All support vehicles have riders' totems posted plainly on all four sides of the vehicle.



Teams Relucent Tandem and Muddy Mudskipper at start. Fuzzy, Andreas, Craig, Jennie, Bill, Paul, Adrienne, Janet

After a nice Italian dinner we head off to the hotel for some good sleep. Up in the morning and to the start line we go. We roll at 6:30 A.M. for 7.7 neutral miles. This year, there is a washout on the original course so the ride is 5.8 miles longer or about 514 miles including the detour. The solo group heads out and the energy in the group is good. I ride with Kenny, we laugh and joke and catch up. Then the race begins. Pace is good, I'm able to hang with the front group while half the field is dropped immediately



"Alright, let's get crackin!"

on the gradual climb. On the first steep climb, I ease back just a bit to save some energy as the bunch is a bit excited. The crews are waiting for the riders at mile 30, as they are not allowed to follow during the initial congestion.

I am behind the front group by a couple hundred meters now, trying to respect the no drafting rule. I descend to Elizabeth Lake road and a course marshal directs me to turn right. "Right Turn?" I question. She nods and says "yes, right turn". I make the right and wick it up. Another rider, Griffin, is just ahead. I pedal and pedal, looking at my cyclometer and wondering when we will come upon the crew. It was supposed to be at mile 30 or so, but I've gone longer. Oh, I thought, the 5.8 mile detour needs to be added to the 30 miles so it must be 36 or so. 36 miles pass and still no crew. I keep going for a few miles and then become suspicious. I pull out my route sheet while riding and nothing makes sense. It says LEFT at Elizabeth Lake Rd. I look up and there's Griffin stopped ahead. We look each other in the eye and nothing really needs to be said. We are off course. 10 miles off course! It's a disaster, the race is ruined! I violently flag down the next motorist who is alone driving a mini-van. He stops, I explain we are in a bike race and are off course. We urgently need a ride back 10 miles. He says no problem and we remove our wheels and load the bikes in the van. We drive back to where we went of course. I'm freakin' out, so upset — Griffin calms me down, "not much we can do about it," he says philosophically. I make sure our driver drops us off before the intersection so we don't break the rules by driving on the course rather than riding. We unload the bikes, put the wheels back on and take off. By now we are 50+ minutes behind the field with an extra 10 miles in our legs. Bummer.



Cappuccino, per favore!

I'm angry and demoralized. I start hammering on the pedals but quickly realize that I will end my race soon if I continue to ride hard. So I channel my anger, dosing it into the pedals a little at a time. I'm yelling at my crew about what happened. They are calm and settle me down. We've got a lot of work to do, and we've come a long way to do it. They're wonderful, keep me focused and we begin to settle into our on the road leap frog support routine where the van drives ahead and tends to my needs at the side of the road. Time to pick my way back through the field.

I pedal and pedal, passing the slower riders one by one. I'm shaking my head in frustration, wondering how this could happen to me. But I'm moving along OK now. I will no longer be competitive, but at least I can attempt to finish the race for me and for my crew.



175 miles, still smiling

I think about the crew as I watch the van ahead. I think about how three people have come so far to help me race. I think about this van full of people with the sole purpose of helping me out. I become emotional about it, and I know I must give my best performance for myself and for them. I am grateful to be alive and grateful to have such good people helping me.

The first two hundred miles go by pretty fast. The winds are always there. Sometimes a horrible head or cross wind, but sometimes a glorious tail wind. I arrive at the base of Townes Pass at dusk, having averaged 19.1 mph in the 200 miles and 11,000' of climbing. We mount the lights and I begin the 3800' grind up the 10-13% grade. I look up the road and see many support vehicles, lights flashing, crawling up the steep pass following their riders. I tell my crew, "I'll make you a solemn promise...I will pick off several riders on this pass." I go to work and pass the first rider in a short time. Then something happens. I am no longer gaining on any of the riders. It's taking forever. I ask Bill, "how far to go?" I think I'm near the top. "About half way," he replies. "Shit". I keep grinding. There's a brutal headwind. Thus far I'm always able to maintain a good cadence, but the headwind combined with the 13% grade brings my cadence down too low. 39/27 just isn't enough gear. My legs are screaming. As I get about 3/4 the way up the climb I magically begin passing multiple riders.



Townes Pass done, new chamois, iPod

They're cracking, and I'm not. It's inspiring and my crew tells me later they'd play "Another One Bites The Dust" on the iPod in the van whenever I'd make a pass.



Death Valley at night

I get to the top of Townes Pass and it's time for a break. It's a huge effort and I'm glad it's over. I still feel good. I change into a new chamois and jersey and don warm stuff for the 5,000' descent into Death Valley. I put on my Light & Motion headlamp, essential for the fast descent with dips where the rider cannot rely on the lights from the follow vehicle. The next time station is Stovepipe Wells. We roll through there quickly with a stop to remove all the warm gear as the temperature in Death Valley is quite warm. Shorts and a jersey will do it. I pull out my iPod and crank my favorite tunes, a good move. This makes the fast cruise through Death Valley quite pleasant. I keep my cadence high, and with the tailwind, I'm

moving along nicely. And so is everyone else! I see two scorpions on the road, two fox (an adult and later a small youngster), and then a big fat sidewinder rattler sitting right on the road! To the best of my knowledge I'm not hallucinating. Chris Kostman rolls up alongside me in his van. We chat, he asks how I'm doing as he snaps a few photos. Chris talks to all the riders on the course as he drives from the back. He also shoots tons of photos and posts them on the web site (www.the508.com)



Fast Truck Gecko Kenny Souza, scortches Death Valley

as soon as humanly possible. I ask Chris how Kenny Souza is doing and I find out he is leading. Michael Emde is second, and Tinker Juarez is third. I'm thrilled for Kenny and his inspiring performance. By this time, he's hours ahead of me!

Now up Jubilee and Salisbury passes. I feel great, continuing to pick off riders one by one. At the top of Salisbury, Cindy Staiger gives us time checks on the other riders. Though I am feeling great, the group I'd like to be with is still far ahead. Oh well. I keep cranking, I keep passing riders, I keep listening to music, my crew keeps feeding me and we keep making good progress. I'm drinking lots, and unfortunately having to pee quite often. I guess the crew is OK with this as they are happy to stop for a break too.

Day begins to break finally. I've been riding for 24 hours and still feel pretty good. We roll into Baker at 6:45 A.M. Crew needs to gas the van and I am not allowed to go ahead alone until 7 A.M. Those are the rules. So I have to wait for the van. This is costly as it's a lengthy break. We later figured out that the van should have followed me along the course until 7, then returned to Baker for gas. Oh well, next time.

On the Baker-Kelso climb I crack. Nothing left in the legs. I ask Bill how long the climb is. He says 20 miles plus. I just can't deal with that. I grind and grind but just can't keep any speed. Those long, gradual desert climbs are the worst. It takes me 2 hours but I finally gain the summit. But I have to stop. My ass is raw, I've got a horrible case of hot foot so I can barely press on the pedals, and my wrists are in great pain. All three contact points on the bike are wrecked, and I'm on the worst pavement I've ever seen. Seems they graded off the layer of sand to expose the rough rocks, then just poured down some tar. Huge rocks sticking through, almost like riding cobbles. At the top I sit in the van trying to change into a new chamois. I'm done, I can't pedal another stroke. I'm nauseous, bloated, and can't eat or drink. The dreaded DNF thought comes to mind. My whole body is in pain and I can't imagine pedaling any more.

Then I look at my crew and realize the sacrifice they've made to be here. 3 people, 4 days out of their lives, all the prep and the work. I'm at mile 425. I can't quit now, but then again, how can I ride another hundred miles?

But I suit up, grease my ass, and get on the bike. Going down the descent is excruciatingly painful. I lose a ton of time descending with the brakes on as I just can't take the shock from the rough pavement. My entire body is screaming with pain. I'm a half hour slower through that section than my peers. It is for sure my darkest moment so far. I'm not convinced at this point that I can make it.



Roy's Motel Cafe, Amboy, CA - Route 66

But after I get down the pass, I eat and drink and my pedaling becomes fluid again and I begin to climb well. I pass the riders who went by me while stopped at the top of the pass, and I begin to ride strong again. The crew is carefully tracking my calories. They frequently remind me it's time to eat, but I can't. Adrienne uses advanced psychology. She says, "Would you like to eat some Shot Bloks, or would you like to eat something else?" Eating nothing isn't an option that is offered.

Up over the next summit with a good push, then a 20 mile desert descent. I can't descend fast. My neck is too sore to tuck, and I also fear falling asleep on the bike. I'm terrified of nodding off. I might die if I do nod off. I focus on staying awake and just stay in a not terribly efficient position to try to be comfortable. I make it down to the last time station near the Route 66 abandoned town of Amboy. Now the 60 mile push to the finish. I have a good tailwind for a while and ride very strong over the last significant climb, Sheephole summit. Then the right turn

toward 29 Palms with 22 miles to go. Seems like a piece of cake but a 25 mph crosswind combined with a 1% uphill grade make holding an 11 mph pace a monumental effort. Somehow, I make it to the finish. Somehow, I manage a smile. And I'm proud to finish and

grateful to have such a great crew! They truly made it possible! I'm 15th overall, 5th in my age group, and within an hour and a half of my age group record. I was definitely competitive. I only wonder how I might have done without the mishap at the beginning. Kenny told me he cracked in the last 22 miles but hung on to beat Tinker Juarez by just 9 minutes. Kenny's time is a new course record. Would I do it again? Please don't ask...

All photos courtesy
Janet DeHaven,
Chris Kostman
Adrienne Ruggles.

Finish line photo, l to r, Chris Kostman,
Adrienne Ruggles, Paul McKenzie (Muddy
Mudskipper), Janet DeHaven, Bill Ellis



Comments from the Crew

From Bill Ellis:

This was my first experience crewing for anyone. I'd done the riding part before, so I figured I'd have an idea of what to expect based on that. What I didn't expect was just how tuned into the rider I would become. It's a funny thing how you start to notice just the slightest little change in rhythm and cadence when you've been watching someone pedal for several hours. After 21 hours, I suspect I now can pick out Paul in the largest of pelotons! Paul was actually very easy to crew for. There were a few times where he really didn't want to eat, so we'd give him a little more time, usually 10 or 15 minutes, then try again. Having been there, I knew exactly what was going on, but also new the consequences if he didn't get those calories. Paul also knew, so we didn't have to push too hard. The other thing I didn't expect was just how satisfying it was to watch Paul finish. I was very impressed with his ride, and felt a great deal of pride with our entire crew!

Bill's Note to the Santa Rosa Cycling Club's Chat List:

Paul did great! It was amazing to watch him throughout the race. I can't really say that I've watched someone ride for that long a period of time, or with that much focus before! Paul was off the bike for around 90 minutes. We didn't really time our stops, but did track every time and everything he ate, and were able to put together a reasonable guess as to his off the bike time. He maintained a cadence and smoothness in his riding from start to finish. This was particularly impressive in the climbs! It was particularly fun for his crew every time he passed another rider, which he got to do a lot off! Early on in the ride, before the riders get to join up with their support crew, an official mis-directed a group of 9 riders including Paul. This ended up putting Paul about 50 minutes back from the group he was expected to be with. By the time he made it back and we met up with him, all but about 4 or 5 riders were in front of him! Although clearly upset by this, Paul displayed the patience and wisdom of a most experienced cyclist (that he is), by NOT pushing his limits to try to make up the loss, but by settling into a pace (which averaged 19.1 mph by Townes Passe!), that was well within himself, and one that would carry him through 525 miles.



Last minute intructions from the Crew Chief



Bill Ellis executes a running bottle hand-up

Crewing with Adrienne and Janet was equally great. We really gelled and were able to focus on our immediate mission in life! We settled into primary roles, with some limited rotation. Janet was the master chef and nutritionist. Not only did Paul get some very nice meals, but so did we! Adrienne's navigation kept us all on course, and her imaginative and inspirational song writing abilities kept Paul and us entertained for 525 miles! Unfortunately, I cannot reveal any of these verses, as this is a family chat list... I managed to get my weekend exercising in by running hand offs. Most of the time we were able to find a nice gradual uphill. There were unfortunately a couple times where it was just flat, and it was time for a new bottle!...ouch!

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All in all, I feel very privileged to have been a part of the Muddy Muskippers!

A Poem From Adrienne:

*508 miles; contained excitement; gassing up on the way out of town;
Anticipating needs; handoffs; cheering and singing; taking pictures;
Chocolate cake at sunset; Chasing a string of red lights up a mountain;
Whooping in pursuit of a rider in the dark;
A million stars never seen in cities; coyotes crossing the road;
Chocolate covered espresso beans; chocolate cake at 2am;
Climbing into the night; passing, always passing; Dawn;
Jumping jacks to stay awake; puking up espresso beans;
Cobblestones in the desert; climbing; "Another One Bites the Dust;"
Passing, always passing; 20 mile descent; Coca Cola; tailwind; the final climb; windy descent;
"Against the Wind" on the van stereo; headwind making palm trees blow like in a hurricane;
Town limit sign; toilet paper finish line tape; hugs and cheering;
Shower, glorious shower; celebration meal; 40 hour day; pride; satisfaction; sleep*

More From Adrienne:

I had the opportunity to crew for Paul “Muddy Mudskipper” McKenzie at the Furnace Creek 508. What an incredible experience! The four of us- Paul, Bill Ellis, Janet DeHaven, and I- drove to Santa Clarita on Friday, Bill and Paul talking strategy much of the way. After a carbo-loading dinner, Paul and I attended the pre-race meeting while Bill and Janet shopped for perishables. We learned all sorts of things from: how not to get disqualified, to the best way to complete bottle hand-offs. After the meeting, we ate some cake in celebration of Paul’s birthday, and — after a second piece of cake — got to bed early.

The riders took off at 6:30 am and vans did too. The crews couldn’t follow our riders for the first 30 miles or so, but when we finally met up with Paul, we passed some bottles and we were back on the road. The first day of the race, we provided leap-frog support, meaning we would get ahead of Paul and pull over, ask questions or give him stuff as he flew by, and then wait until he was up the road and leapfrog again. Bill was the main handoff person so he would take a water bottle and run in the direction that Paul was riding. Paul would grab the bottle and keep rolling. 12 hours of handoffs had Bill pretty tired.

Paul overcame being diverted off-course by a race official and was overtaking riders the entire race. Saturday — the first day — saw us out of the LA basin (and the smog), through California City (although “city” is a pretty strong word for it), and past Trona. While Paul rode on ahead of us, we gassed up in Trona, searched for a fabled breakfast burrito (to no avail), and checked the times of riders in front of us. The next handoff (wisely done on an uphill so Paul would be going slower) was Bill giving some food and me reporting rider times. Paul’s friend Kenny “Fast Truck Gecko” Souza was in the lead. With that good news as stimulus, we reached the base of Townes Pass at dusk; with 200 miles behind us. Paul informed us that he was going to pick off some riders on the climb and he was true to his word despite the nasty winds.



A quick change of clothes at the top had us flying down the hill in the dark into Stovepipe Wells. Tailwinds in Death Valley kept spirits high. One of these days, I’ll have to see the place in daylight. The night was warm and beautiful and Paul was feeling great. He passed several more riders on the climb up Jubilee, out of Death Valley. It was quite a sight to see pace vans gliding up the hill into the night. At the top of the next climb, we traded driving duty, Paul put on warmer clothes, and we were off down the mountain, headlights ablaze.

Grinding the Kelso climb, mile 425, “Let’s get this puppy in the books!”

We hit Baker as the sun was rising. Janet nipped into the mini-mart for more yogurt (a great food for tired stomachs), I gassed up the van, and Bill got a report on when other riders came through the time check. Back on the road, Paul faced a 20 mile gradual climb. A change

of clothes at the top and we were descending again. The pavement was very possibly the worst I have ever seen. It looked as though someone poured asphalt in a straight line, but other than that did not prep the road. There were grapefruit sized rocks in the pavement and huge ruts.

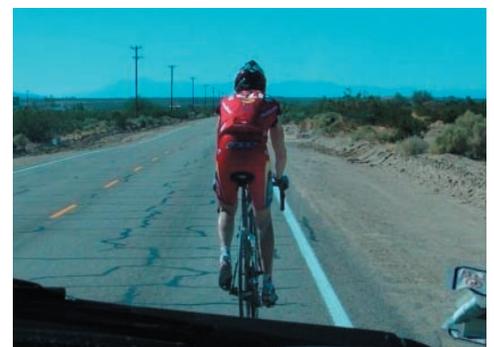
The next climb, out of Kelso, had us blasting “Another One Bites the Dust” on the stereo as Paul picked off riders. A straight 20 mile descent took Paul to the last time check at “almost Amboy,” with a Hawaiian theme. With 58 miles to go (and 465 under his belt), he was flying along with a lovely tailwind. One last climb and descent and we were on the long, straight, windy home stretch. The wind made 23 miles seem like 50. Ironically, Bob Seger’s “Against the Wind” came on the stereo. We decided that Paul might not see the humor in the situation and didn’t play it for him.

Paul “Muddy Mudskipper” McKenzie pulled into Twentynine Palms in the early afternoon to raucous cheering and applause, and with a time of 32:01. By the time medals were awarded, we were showered, fed, and had recapped the race sufficiently, we had all been awake for 40 hours. I’m extremely proud to have crewed for such a fine rider and worked with truly fantastic crew members. It’s an experience I will never forget. Can’t wait ‘til next year!

And From Janet DeHaven:

I was happy to be a part of the Mudskipper crew. I think we all had our strengths and worked well together. Adrienne was a great cheerleader. Keeping us (and other support groups) laughing with her lyrics. I got one on video. “Paul, Paul he’s our man if he can’t do it, no one can!!”

Bill the Crew Chief was on top of all the details. Time, route, gear.... all the essentials of the race. His experience being a course official, and his own experience racing the course gave us the insight to how best to keep Paul fueled up physically and mentally to keep riding strong. I was happy to be of help in the food department and keeping the van organized. It was fun being a part of the Mudskipper Team!



Final 20 miles, the Hurt is On!