

Team Kitten—Cutest Team Name, But Fierce Predators at Furnace Creek 508

By Wendy Gardiner



Pete Masiel and Wendy Gardiner

Team Kitten
www.peteandwendycycling.com

The Furnace Creek 508, a 508-mile bicycle race through Death Valley, the Mojave Desert, and desolate California towns, is heralded by its former competitors as the “toughest 48 hours in sport.”

With its endless and relentless subtle climbs, to the not-so-subtle climbs, the monotony of the desert and its harsh winds and high temperatures, it’s no surprise that this is no sporting event for the physically or mentally weak.

A record-setting number of entrants, 179 participants, to this year’s race on October 7-9, 2006 consisted of solo racers, two-person teams and four-person teams.

The solo racers were attempting to qualify to race in RAAM (Race Across AMERICA), while the two- and four-person teams were trying to see how fast they could go as a team.

Since my boyfriend and teammate, Pete Masiel, and I already qualified for RAAM, we competed in this event as a two-person team as a mini-training for RAAM. We have always been on each other’s team, but never officially in a race.

What we found from our experiences was ironic; we discovered that one of the most difficult aspects of this race was not the actual race. It was the preparation and logistics we had in the planning.

And even more surprising, we both agreed that it would’ve been easier to race the entire 508 miles solo, instead of racing as a two-person team.

The logistics seemed simple: two racers, one pace car, and at least two pace car crew members for 508 miles. Pete and I were the two racers, and our crew consisted of three friends – Ingo and Sabine Neumann (the designated crew captain), and Liz Long.

The pace car was a minivan, perfect for

storing clothing, food, tools, a cooler and Ingo’s vodka that we tossed out before heading to the race.



Photo courtesy Adventure Corps.
Pete and Wendy at their first transition. Pete is passing the “Kitten” baton before Wendy’s first stage.

We were completely self-sufficient, meaning we had enough food and drink to feed five people for 48 hours or more.

Pete and I also brought four bikes, multiples changes of clothes, and extra bike parts and tools.

The race started in Santa Clarita, Ca. which was about a three-hour drive from San Diego, where we departed. So after loading the car we started on our trek to the Furnace Creek 508 starting line.

Upon arriving at the starting line hotel, all the racers and crew members had to check in with the race officials. Instead of race numbers, all participants selected a “totem,” or nickname, for their team. And the totem was an animal that can

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only be used once, or in the future with the same racers. Our totem was, “Kitten,” which is Pete’s pet name for me for the more than a year.

Team Kitten. Fierce predators. OK, so it’s not that fierce a name, but we hoped it would be deceiving to our competitors as to our strength and determination.

After signing our waivers, we were issued our Kitten baton that we were to hand off to each other at each of the eight time stations and carry with us throughout the race.

We were photographed with our totem name. Then we had audio interviews where the interviewer referred to us as the team with the cutest name.

Wow! Kudos to the race organizer and former RAAM competitor, Chris Kostman, for really making racers feel special. I felt like a real celebrity athlete!

Pete and I spoke of how we were RAAM-qualified and that we were racing the 508 as a two-person team to practice for RAAM. All of these photos and sound bytes can be found on the website, www.the508.com.

Our pace car vehicle was inspected for all the mandatory lights, reflective stickers, totem name, and crew members. Once inspection was complete we were in search of food and waiting until the evening’s racers’ meeting.

At the meeting, we were shown videos of another Adventure Corps. event – the Kiehl’s Badwater Ultramarathon. Now these people are the real oddballs. This is a 135-mile running race through the desert. Yes. A *running* race. Kostman’s



Pete adds the slow-moving vehicle triangle to Team Kitten’s pace car while the officials, pace crew and other racers watch.

video of this event didn’t quite sell me to compete, although I was impressed that anyone would actually want to do this.

We also saw video highlights of the 2005 Furnace Creek 508. I was becoming even more inspired to do this race and to ride it with as much intensity as I could find within myself. I wanted to show this race’s competitors that Team Kitten would be a powerful force of reckoning.

After the rules were discussed and various recognitions done, Kostman brought all of the race participants to the stage and introduced each racer and his/her team name.

...we would be lucky to see any signs of life in such a place where the word, death, is in its name.

I looked around in amazement at all of the people I had heard about or read about. There were people in that room, such as Cat Berge, Kenny Souza, Shanna Armstrong, and Patty Riddle, who had competed in RAAM. There was Emily O’Brien, a fixed-gear maniac, who is a strong enough racer and only needs one gear.

And I got Kostman to autograph my book about RAAM, *Race Across America – The Agonies & Glories of the World’s Longest and Cruellest Bicycle Race*.

The book, written by Michael Shermer, details the early history of RAAM and includes information about Kostman, along with his photo, from when he was competing in RAAM solo. Up until recently, Kostman held the record for the youngest RAAM racer.

After the meeting, the five of us began transforming the minivan into a pace vehicle. We put the cooler near the front, and set up the bed, which was a padded sleep pad on top of a cot. Endless bottles of Gatorade were stacked under the bed, under seats, and in boxes. Oftentimes when we opened the doors, a bottle of Gatorade fell out.

We also had enough Gu energy gels to feed a small country, and enough tubes to change all of our competitors’ flats, or so it seemed.

All racers and crew members were advised to take everything we would need because there would be no Wal-Mart in Death Valley. In fact, we would be lucky to see any signs of life in such a place where the word, death, is in its name.

After Ingo and I made a quick run to the store for various necessities, we returned to the hotel room where everyone was asleep or trying to fall asleep. As the lights were shut off, Pete and I whispered in the darkness about how nervous we were.

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All of the excitement had started to cause anxiety. Thoughts of what the desert is like glowing from the pace car's headlights released the butterflies in my stomach, and wetness on my palms.

I wasn't the only one feeling anxious. Pete was nervous, too. I told him he would do just fine and that it would be just another bike ride once we got started. A few moments later we were consumed with the darkness of sleep.

We awoke slowly and quietly the next morning, deep in thought as to what the weekend would bring. We got to the starting line with a few moments to spare for last-minute fixes. Pete did to his aerobars and heart rate monitor. The team racers lined up at 9 a.m., just two hours after the solo competitors began their journey.

Kostman told the racers to not worry about the 508 miles that lie ahead. To not worry about riding in Death Valley in darkness and to not worry about the heat. The racers laughed nervous laughs and began to clip in one foot to the pedals during the five-second countdown to the start.

Five. Four. Three. Two. One! And off they went in a flurry of colors and speed and determination followed by their teammates and pace crew cheering and running to their cars. Gentlemen and ladies, start pedaling; pace car crew members run like hell! At least that's what appeared to happen.

The race rules required that the racers make it to mile 24.6 without their crew being around for assistance. We were all to be parked on side of the road at that point to take the extra supplies that Pete carried in case of a bike mechanical problem, and to gather the cell phone and extra water bottle he was carrying.

It was the typical game of hurry up and wait. After answering Pete's phone call just 10 minutes after the race started, and picking up his arm warmers that he left on the roadside, we waited and waited at mile 24.6. We wished for a deck of cards or a board game and then realized we had something better – the video camera.

It was then that I became the on-the-scene reporter, Kitten, "live from the Furnace Creek 508 course." We laughed and laughed hysterically on and off camera at how crazy this whole event was. And even got some nice footage of Pete dropping off the supplies he no longer needed, along with the baton that we were to carry 508 miles.

We found the baton and began our "leap frogging" that we were required to do all day Saturday up until 6 p.m. To leap frog is to ride ahead of the racer, wait on side of the road with extra fluids or food, listen to the racer's needs and get in the



Photo courtesy Adventure Corps.
Former RAAM competitor, Chris Kostman, autographs a book for Team Kitten's Wendy Gardiner and Pete Masiel.

car to ride ahead and repeat.

We tried to stay no more than one mile away in case of a mechanical failure.

Only a few dropped bottles here and there were common in the beginning, with it later becoming second nature. My role as the teammate was to rest in the pace car. But with all the laughing and excitement and "news videos" we shot, there was little time for rest. With about 20 miles before reaching time station two, I began getting my riding clothes, shoes and helmet on.

Just before reaching time station two, Pete had asked Ingo to go to a KFC in California City for our usual fried chicken we get on long rides. In all the excitement, I forgot to order a meal for myself. For our friends who know us, KFC is one of our favorite meals we enjoy on *long* rides and races.

We stopped at the KFC during a training ride for the 2006 Heart of the South 500. As soon as we had eaten, we felt so much stronger and faster that we decided that KFC was going to be part of our nutrition plan. We went back there during the actual HOS 500 race and during a 257-mile and a 360-mile brevet ride we did this past spring.

After getting the food, we hurried to the time station where I would be ready to take the baton and start riding.

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Pete pulled up next to me, handed me the baton, and kissed me before I started riding stage two.

82.25 miles down and 426.25 to go. Within seconds I was off to begin my 70.25-mile stage. I took off like a pack of wild dogs were chasing me! It felt great to be on my bike releasing all the excitement and anxiety that had been building. I felt strong and fast and confident and ready to shoot for our goal of 27 hours.

Back at the time station, Ingo loaded Pete's bike onto the bike rack, while Pete crawled into the car and settled into the cot. He changed clothes and ate his KFC meal and tried to rest during his ride in the car.

The week prior, Pete and I had studied the stages and the course description and made guesses and set goals on how fast we would ride each section.

We planned when we would start and finish each stage to where it all added up to 27 hours. Originally, I had more conservative estimates that had us finishing in 36 hours. But after more discussion, we had our time goal of 27 hours on paper.

Pete had reached the first time station about 40 minutes behind schedule. My goal for stage two was to finish in four hours.

It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon. The sun was shining in a sky speckled with white, fluffy clouds. The winds were slight and the temperatures moderate. All was going good until the nice roads soon turned gravelly and bumpy, and the smooth ride I was enjoying ended.

My cruising speed in the low 20s soon dropped to the low teens. I looked at my brakes thinking they must be engaged. Or maybe I had a flat. Something had to be making me go this slow.

Then I realized that I was on one of those subtle climbs where you can't tell you're climbing until your speed drops. One

glance over your shoulder reveals a long, gradual climb up to this point.

Just to entertain my curiosity, I stopped to check my tires and discovered I did have a flat. All those times I had joked with Pete telling him that I must have a flat because I was riding so slow, was actually what really happened.

The pace car, about a mile back, was nowhere in sight. I started walking my bike and within moments they came up next to me



Pete kisses Wendy before she begins riding as Furnace Creek 508 competitors watch.

with questioning looks on their faces. "Flat! Flat!" I yelled. Then it was a flurry of activity as three car doors opened and four people began running around to the spare bike, and then towards me. Pete replaced my wheel with the flat with a wheel he removed from one of the spare bikes. So this must be what's it like in the pit of a NASCAR race!

I was amused with the hilarity of the moment. Everyone was rushing while I enjoyed the time I got to stand instead of pedal. Within seconds I was back in the race.

A seven-mile climb I was on seemed to be infinite, and I perked up when a guy walking along the roadside told me that the top was less than a quarter mile ahead. My enthusiasm and speed picked up as I approached the top. And as

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Photo courtesy Adventure Corps.

Wendy racing in the Mojave Desert.

with most every climb, there's a rewarding descent. I inhaled the California air and tucked down low on my bike and enjoyed the ride to Trona, which was the location of time station three. I had finished 22 minutes later than predicted.

Since it was now dark, our transitions were more of a challenge. We all had to arrive together and get the next person ready, while the other one loaded up the bike.

A clumsy transition resulted in a 40-minute delay. Finally,

we were ready. I handed Pete the baton and off he went on his 99.2-mile stage to Furnace Creek. *152.53 miles down. 355.97 miles to go.*

I got into the minivan and talked excitedly about how much fun I was having and how great I felt on my bike. After changing into comfortable, loose-fitting clothing, I ate the remainder of Pete's KFC meal he had left for me.

I didn't even think to get one for myself, so how nice of him to share. And then I tried to rest. Pete was now riding the stage dreaded by many because it included the infamous Townes Pass, a 13-mile 3800-foot climb with sections as steep as 10 to 13 percent.

Before reaching Townes Pass, he climbed a short, steep climb in the dark. On the backside, all of us and not just Pete, went on a wild ride. Sabine called it the Magic Mountain ride, as she was driving this time. She looked as if she had been driving a pace car for years. She confidently followed Pete within 15 feet as he reached speeds as high as 55 mph!



Photo courtesy Adventure Corps.

Pete on Townes Creek Pass.

Ingo recorded the action with the video camera while I sat in the back with my eyes covered. I didn't want to watch, but would peak often to see that we were driving in the dark down a curvy mountainside at speeds in excess of 40 mph!

While we held our breaths and watched in fear, Pete was pointing to the clouds. "What's he looking at?" Ingo asked. We all looked, including Sabine, to see a beautiful desert evening with wispy clouds brushing past a full moon. It was a spectacular sight, but not one to be enjoyed while clinging tightly in the car as we hastily followed Pete.

Finally the fast ride ended at the base of Townes Pass. Pete's speed was now in the low teens and then dropped even lower. We could see ahead the caution lights on other pace vehicles just within reach. Pete pushed and pulled with every pedal stroke. I asked Sabine to tell him to get into an easier gear. "Why was he pushing such a hard gear?" I thought.

The response from Pete was the he *was* in his easiest gear. "Oh...," I said. I tried to think of things to tell him to help with the climb and suggested that he zig zag.

Zig Zagging, or going back and forth across the road, is a technique cyclists use on steep grades. It gives the racer a brief opportunity to rest on each traverse. A few seconds here and there add up to a lot on a hard climb.

Pete began zig zagging across the entire road. It helped somewhat, but I could tell he was approaching his limits. Kostman drove up in the officials' vehicle and took a picture of Pete in this

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section that I saw later. If Pete was approaching his limits, he certainly didn't look like it in the picture with that smile on his face.

The top was now in sight and the temperatures had dropped. Pete grabbed some gloves and arm warmers and then took off on another roller coaster ride – this one was 17 miles – to Stovepipe Wells and then to Death Valley's Furnace Creek.

Once again his descending was fearless. After adjusting the Nite Rider HID lights on his handlebars, he tucked in and began a smooth, expert descent on winding roads while Ingo, Sabine and I held our breaths.

We reached time station four at 12:22 a.m., more than 90 minutes off our schedule. We underestimated the road conditions and climbs



Liz Long, Ingo and Sabine Neumann—the Team Kitten pace crew—wait for Pete Masiel on the Furnace Creek 508 course to hand off a water bottle. Crew members for another racer wait while the windmills turn in the distance.

The climbs aren't like the ones I was accustomed to the mountains of north Georgia where some of them come at you at grades as easy as six percent and as fierce as 25 percent. They were obvious and it was expected to go slow. The Furnace Creek 508 climbs were not so obvious and pesky.

Our transition was not as smooth as it should be. We watched cyclist after cyclist check in, switch racers and go. We had problems with lights and clothing and various other little things that added up to more than 35 minutes.

Pete told me that I needed to pass eight people in order to get back in the position where we were before the transition. I could tell he was disappointed with the whole situation. I calmly told him, "OK," that I would catch and pass eight other racers, while thinking to myself that this would be impossible.

I started riding stage four, 73.6 miles from Furnace Creek to Shoshone, around 1 a.m. At the time it didn't occur to me that it was

that late and that nearly everyone I knew was asleep at this time. To me the time was either "day" or "night," or the lap time displayed on my Polar S725 heart rate monitor.

325.33 miles down. 183.17 miles remaining. Although we were already off our planned schedule, I still monitored my lap time in order to push myself to go faster against the clock. Soon I was on a gradual climb and not enjoying it. Fortunately, that only lasted a

few minutes before my speed and spirits picked up on a flat and gradually descending road.

I started riding faster and faster and felt stronger and stronger and enjoyed the ride from my aerobars.

The cool desert wind on my face was exhilarating. Since the terrain was flat, the full moon shone down on a vast, desolate sprawling desert.

It was a peaceful and serene moment. My mind drifted to various thoughts. I thought of how lucky I was to be able to experience this moment. I thanked God for giving me

the ability to ride like I do. I was thankful for Pete and all the excellent coaching he gave me on cycling the past two years. And I prayed for the safety of my family and friends.

Reality came back as I saw blinking lights in the distance. Those lights were the lights of the other cyclists who had passed us. The roads were deceiving because what looked like a short distance to the blinking lights, was actually a lot further because the roads curved inward and outward.

But when the lights were within reach, I put my shark fin hand signal on my helmet. This was our inside joke simulating *Jaws* going after some shark bait. This was all done in fun and not meant to insult the other racers. One of the first cyclists I passed was Shanna Armstrong who was racing the event solo.

She looked strong and was upbeat and was going through the quiet desert listening to techno music blaring from her pace car's sound system. After a brief conversation with her, I pressed forward again into the silence and darkness of the desert.

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One down. Seven to go. There they were again. Another set of lights. And then another. And another. The scary music from *Jaws* played in my head. I held up the number of fingers representing the number of cyclists I passed. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. I passed solo racers and team racers.

As I came up on one pace car, I pedaled to the driver's side and said, "hi!" to the crew. The driver just glared at me without saying a word. The same thing happened when I said, "hi" to the racer. Either none of them spoke English, or this team was having issues. To say that all racers and crew members were as happy as I was, is a huge understatement.

The success and failure of a racer in an event like this is largely dependent upon the crew. Everyone has to get along and work together and be positive. Our pace car had four people in it at all times through day and night. I felt tension in the car after finishing my last leg. Something had happened. It was like missing an episode of *Lost* and having no idea what was going on.

So I wasn't insulted when the crew or racer didn't say anything back to me. In fact, this team wasn't the only one. The next racer and pace car I passed gave me the same response.

In 45 miles I had passed not only the eight that Pete told me to pass; I had passed 11 cyclists! I felt unstoppable, that is until a racer from Wild Rooster came out of nowhere on Jubilee Pass and blew by me as if I were on a tricycle. At the time I thought this guy was a solo racer, but later found out he was on a two-man team.

I tried to ride his pace and mimic his pedal stroke in order to pick up my own speed. As my speed increased, so did my heart rate and I decided it was best to back off instead of leaving all I had before the finish. So Team Kitten watched as Wild Rooster disappeared into the darkness.

The climb up Jubilee Pass ended, then there was a quick descent followed by the road turning towards the left straight into a headwind at the base of Salsberry Pass, a 9 ½-mile climb! The climb in any other ordinary day would've been fairly easy since the grades were mostly five percent.

But something odd must happen in the desert around 4 a.m. where the headwinds and crosswinds are so strong that it feels like someone was pushing and pulling my bike sideways and backwards!

I was in my easiest gear pushing and pulling with all I had. About 30 minutes later, a loud voice inside of me starting yelling, "Damnit! Damnit! Damnit!" I didn't go any faster, but I sure felt better. I decided to try zig zagging, but quickly saw that the crosswinds were so strong that I struggled to aim my bike back in the opposite direction.



Wendy Gardiner waits with Sabine Neumann at a Furnace Creek 508 time station.

The pace car vehicle pulled up next to me. Sabine said Ingo was getting sleepy and that they needed to change drivers. I told them to go ahead and stop while I rode. It's not like I was getting very far anyway. They had no idea of the winds until they got out and were practically blown over. "Oh hell!" I heard one of them exclaim. Now they see why I was struggling so much, especially since I call myself a good climber.

About 20 minutes later, Pete told me to stop and walk to rest.

Great idea. I was riding at around 4 mph and walking around 2 ½ mph. I looked back and saw all four crew members dart off into the bushes. Potty break.

It took a little over two hours to go 9 ½ miles. In fact, I was going so slow that a spider had found time to build a small web in my aerobars while I was climbing. No kidding. I looked down and saw a web that hadn't been there before. That was almost as bad as the time I actually saw a butterfly go between my spokes as I was creeping up a climb in my home state of Georgia!

The wind would let up for a brief five seconds here and there where I would pedal as fast as I could to gain ground.

I was not having fun here and determined that if there is a hell, then this must be it.

One thing Pete always tells me when we're climbing a difficult road

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is that it will end. I get consumed with the moment and forget that he's right. It will end. However, he forgot to tell that to me, and I really thought the climb had no end.

But it did. And I was given a fast and fun descent for the next 12 miles to the start of time station five in Shoshone. *325.33 miles complete. 183.17 miles remaining.*



*Photo courtesy Adventure Corps.
Pete and Wendy at the Furnace
Creek 508 awards ceremony.*

It was 5:53 a.m. when we got to the closed Chevron time station. The only person around was asleep in a car in the empty parking lot. There was a sign on the car designating him as a race official, so we anxiously banged on the window for him to wake up and record our time. No we were 2 ½ hours behind schedule.

As we hurriedly made potty stops, prepared lights, gathered food and clothing for Pete, I knew I had missed another episode of *Lost* because everyone was angry again.

While I was trying to find a secluded place among the low shrubbery for a bathroom stop, Sabine was running frantically looking for an electrical outlet to heat up some water. Ingo and Liz helped Pete with the lights. Sabine found an electrical outlet and ran back to the car while Pete was waiting and ready to ride.

It was dark and cold and the wind was howling. I told Pete good luck with the wind and was thankful to be getting into the comforts of the car.

We took off behind Pete and I began to eat the best meal I've ever had – instant soup. I never knew instant “chicken flavored” soup could taste so good. I have eaten at a few five-star restaurants before, but absolutely nothing came close to how good this dinner in a styrofoam cup was. It's amazing how some food tastes so good after a hard ride!

Whatever had happened before I got in the car was unclear to me. But Pete appeared upset and angry, as did the rest of the crew. I was the only one happy because I was off my bike and out of the wind.

Pete started his 56.3-mile stage towards Baker slower than his usual pace. I was angered that I thought he was giving up and backing off. He didn't mention it until later, but he was struggling with his low-back pain. We all pleaded for him to “pick it up,” or else. Or else... Well, that meant that I would get ready to ride this

section if he didn't start cooperating.

Sabine reminded Pete that she was the crew captain and that whatever she said was what we were to do. That obviously made Pete come back to his senses because he started to speed up and warm up. He motioned for the pace car to come up beside him so he could hand Sabine his extra clothing. Game on. This was it. Pete got into his aerobars and was ready to start working again.

He cruised this stage at great speeds straight into a new day's sunrise. We shot another news video in the car at sunrise announcing that we were “live on the Furnace Creek 508 course.... still.” Yep, we had just past hour number 21. I started this new day by brushing my teeth and spitting into a cup that Sabine emptied out the car window. Baths were done with Baby Wipes and deodorant was applied and reapplied. With my belly full and shower-fresh feeling, I got ready to take a nap.

Since it was now daylight, we were able to leap frog the course again where Ingo went ahead and dropped me off to wait for Pete in Baker. *381.6 miles completed and 126.9 remaining.*

Sabine and I posed for a picture near a café as we waited for Pete's arrival. We looked at the results board to see who had come and gone. Clipped in and ready, Pete came up beside me with the Kitten baton, kissed me and then I was off to ride my shortest leg of 34.9 miles to Kelso.

This section included a long, gradual 25-mile climb. Another cyclist came up next to me and said “hi” and asked if I was a solo or team racer. I told him that I was on a two-person mixed team, and he looked at me in awe. “Good job!” he said. He was on a four-person team, riding at our same pace.

Wow! We were rockin' and a rollin'! as Pete says. That explains why this guy looked all clean and rested and eager to ride fast. He slowly pedaled out of sight. About 40 minutes later, the Team Kitten pace car pulls up next to me with the side door open. Pete was there smiling and said he had a surprise for me. A cold Red Bull. Oh hell yeah!

I knew I was craving something, but wasn't sure what it was. So how did he know to get me a Red Bull? We rarely drink those types of drinks, but the few times we have, they have been during ultra-distance events when the energy level is low.

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Pete also sprayed me with the lawn sprinkler he had bought especially for this hot day in the desert. He showered my legs and arms with cold water that evaporated within seconds into the desert's dry air.

I reached the top of the climb just as Ingo drove around me to drop off Pete at the next check point. My speed picked up just about the time I noticed the entire road looked as if it had been dug up!

Kostman wasn't kidding when he wrote in the course description that the roads were terrible. I don't ride a mountain bike, but I was really wishing for one on this section. It was a miracle that I didn't slide down that descent with all the gravel and pot-holes.

I slowed down to a speed in the high teens. About 20 minutes later and nearly down the descent, Ingo comes back with the pace car. Sabine tells me to take my time because the race was held up by a train.

So there we sat for *an hour* with many of the other racers. One guy Pete and I spoke to kept talking about how awful the last stage's climb was. Great. That was *my* stage he was describing. At this point, I was not looking forward to riding again. Pete and I ate and drank and chatted about the race since this was the first time we had time to talk beyond five-second increments. He was pretty disappointed at being held up by a train for an hour, especially after working so hard thus far.

Finally the train moved and the race was on again. We reached time station seven, which was just on the other side of the train tracks. *416.5 miles down with 92 miles to go.*

Thank goodness for the car. I was exhausted and my quadriceps were sore from the abrupt starts and stops we had to make as a two-person team.

When I mentioned earlier that we both thought racing solo was easier, this is the reason. A Furnace Creek 508 solo racer will certainly disagree, but I found it ironic that Pete and I both had the same thoughts, especially with how we had muscle tightness from a lack of warming up and cooling down between stages.

Now Pete was on his shortest stage of 33.8 miles. With how strong he was riding, I didn't think I would have much time for rest.

I didn't change clothes and I took a nap in the back seat instead of the makeshift bed. Ingo needed the sleep since he had been up for a continuous 24 hours.

I speak of how tiring the race was from a racer's viewpoint, but just as tiring is the pace car crew's job. The job description doesn't sound too appealing.

Must be willing to drive anywhere from 4 mph to 65 mph for unspecified times. Must be alert enough to navigate through the desert at night. Must possess some cycling knowledge to know when to stop the pace car to hand off food and fluids. Must be a team player and a cheerleader. Must be willing to not shower and to use nature as your restroom. Must be patient with a good sense of humor. And must be willing to stay awake for hours on end.

Why anyone would be willing to accept this challenge is a mystery. But Pete and I have numerous friends who have stepped up and done such a crazy thing.

Anne and Trev Martin. Paula Johnson. Carl Soriano. Jeff Kemp. Charlie Mion. John



Members of the 2006 Furnace Creek 508's Team Kitten, Wendy Gardiner and Pete Masiel, finish third as a two-person team in 33 hours, 14 minutes.

Photo courtesy Adventure Corps.

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Conkell. Neil Fleming. Rusty Barlow. Olin McGraw. Carl Skow. They had helped us in previous years as being crew members during the Heart of the South 500 in Alabama in 2005 and 2006.

And now Ingo and Sabine Neumann, and Liz Long are added to this list of friends who will do anything to help us.

These people put aside their busy lives and what makes them special is that they make our dream their own by taking on the challenge of being a pace car crew member.

Maybe they do it because of the curiosity, or for the victory celebration at the finish line. For whatever it is that drives them, Pete and I can't thank them enough.

Just as I had guessed, Pete blasted through stage seven giving me just not enough time to rest. I wearily got out of the pace car, clipped in and waited for Pete to arrive at our final time station, number eight. *450.3 miles ridden. 58.2 miles remaining.*

Our time goal of 27 hours was now long behind us. So now the goal was to just hurry up. The final stage from Amboy to Twenty Nine Palms consisted of a flat 20 miles followed by a ten-mile climb, a seven-mile descent and an 18-mile climb to the finish.

The terrible roads returned and then I officially fell apart on the second-to-last climb. My body position was awful. With my back and shoulders now aching, I was riding with poor form.

The throbbing in my legs intensified just as a pain on the bottom of my left foot started. The awesome desert scenery of vastness was now mind-numbing and monotonous. I struggled to find something, *anything*, to entertain my thoughts.

Sabine told me to count the utility poles, so I began doing "up and downs" from pole to pole. Although that kept my mind busy,

my speed was flailing. Reluctantly, I stopped and pulled over.

Here's where another job description for the pace car crew comes to play. Must be willing to rub the aching feet of the racers.

Sabine rubbed my feet. Pete poured cold water on my legs. Liz rubbed on my sore back muscles and Ingo gave me food and drink. I was a mess.



*Photo courtesy Adventure Corps.
Crew members Liz Long, Ingo Neumann and Sabine Neumann with Team Kitten racers, Pete Masiel and Wendy Gardiner at the Furnace Creek 508 finish line.*

That 15-minutes of encouragement and support from Pete and our friends was just enough to give me that extra something that can only be found deep inside your mind and heart.

It's that extra spark that it takes to go beyond your pain and doubt, and to stare a challenge in the face and tell it to kiss your ass!

I started riding again and saw up ahead another cyclist – Blue Dog. This was a solo racer who was riding strong overall, but appeared tired just before the crest of this climb.

Pete told me to go talk to him, so I did and I told him that I was his personal cheerleader. His face lit up and he smiled. "Really?" he asked. Yep. I told him he was looking good and riding strong.

Just then Pete showered me with the garden sprayer again and asked Blue Dog if he wanted some water. He did and that's all it took for Blue Dog to flee from Kitten on the last descent. Blue Dog was gone and not far behind was a tiny Kitten chasing him.

I tucked in and enjoyed the ride before I'd have to work again on the last climb. The descent was great.

The scenery was nice again, now that it was a blur. The last climb came and Pete coached me from the open side door of the mini-van.

To say I was cranky was an understatement. Everyone seemed just too darn happy, which made me even more irritable. "Twenty more miles," they shouted happily. Twenty? Damn. You would've thought they had told me 200 more miles with the look on my face.

Team Kitten—Furnace Creek 508

“Get your speed up to 20 and keep it there,” Pete told me. I was working as hard as I could and my speed was at 15. How depressing that was. At this rate we had over an hour left of this race.

Finally, we entered Twenty Nine Palms. After passing a few intersections we pulled over and got Pete’s bike off the rack. Rules allow for teammates to ride the last one-quarter mile together.

So as we pedaled alongside each other, I looked at Pete and thought, “Wow! We just did this!” His face was covered with a big grin and he shouted, “Hell yeah! Hell yeah!” just as we turned into the parking lot for the finish line.

We pedaled side-by-side through the finish line ribbon with big smiles on our faces. Team Kitten had done it! 508 miles in 33 hours, 14 minutes. We finished third place in our division behind two awesome teams.

The first place team’s female racer, Christina Peick, a professional racer, had competed in the 2003 Women’s Tour de France finishing in 37th place. Her teammate, Martin Kirstensen is also a professional cyclist and an Ironman triathlete. Their finish time was 28 hours, 20 minutes.

The second place team consisted of Cat Berge, who was the only women’s solo racer in the 2005 RAAM. She finished in 11 days, 11 hours, 20 minutes. Her teammate, Paul McKenzie, is the team director for the Luna Chix professional cycling team. Their finish

time was 28 hours, 49 minutes.

At the finish line, Kostman put Furnace Creek 508 finisher’s medals around our necks and then congratulated us. Mine and Pete’s photos were taken along with a group picture of everyone who made up Team Kitten.

I made a statement after crossing the finish line that I was never riding this course again. Laughter is all I heard. I guess this is a common statement after a race like this one.

It’s easy to have thoughts such as these, especially when nearly every muscle in my legs were throbbing. But days later, when the pain has subsided and friends are congratulating us on a job well done, the enthusiasm to ride again builds.

It builds into such a fury that it’s only a matter of days before talk about “next year” begins. So with a year to train and get more in sync with the transitions, next year’s competitors need to watch out. Team Kitten will be back and ready to pounce. And next year...we’re putting our paws down!

It’s that extra spark that it takes to go beyond your pain and doubt, and to stare a challenge in the face and tell it to kiss your ass!

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Pete Masiel—my boyfriend, coach and trainer. He believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself. He pushed me beyond my limits. And he always encourages me whenever I’m in doubt.

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All of mine and Pete’s former pace car crew members.

Chris Kostman—Furnace Creek 508 race director. Thanks for a first-class event! I had a blast...except for all those darn hills and riding!

- Wendy Gardiner

Pete and I would like to thank another important group who were instrumental in our success at this race – our sponsors.

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Polar. Listen to Your Body. Find out more about heart rate monitors at www.polarusa.com. Pete and I wouldn’t consider doing any training ride without our Polar S625 or Polar S725 heart rate monitors.

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