

The Ischyodus Challenge

After I did the 508 in 2007, I wasn't ready to write about my experience. Among other reasons, my account will be a little hard for some people to believe. Somebody asked me why I didn't write. I told him that I should have.

I grew up in a rural town in Idaho, where I never saw a real road racing bicycle. Sure, I saw pictures of them in the newspaper, but I never saw one in person. In 1993, I pulled a 1970's steel framed road touring bicycle out of the city dump, fixed it up, and called it a racing bicycle. I rode it between my home and school 23 miles apart once a week with my heavy backpack strapped to my back between 1997 and 1998. Everybody called me crazy for riding the distance back then. So little did I know that I would be going far beyond that.

I think my long distance cycling started in 2001 when I am living my dream out of fear that I would lose my legs. Between 1998 to 2004, my legs, back, and arms were losing strength and at times I had trouble moving. Nerve-pitching pains were also haunting me day and night. Part of this was because my pelvis was twisted out of place due to my 5th lumbar vertebra being fused to just one side of my sacrum and pelvis. I couldn't walk more than about 50 yards without my legs collapsing. Of course, I was forced to give up physical sports and find new hobbies to do.

I however did have this one dream I was scared I never might be able to fulfill if I didn't do something about it soon back then: Owning and riding a brand-new real racing bicycle. I seriously thought I would not have a chance if I postponed burning money on one. So, I spent \$1,700 of my college savings on a beautiful, light-weight road bicycle. I was emotionally living my dreams before it may be too late. It took a few months, but I started to realize that taking spins on my extremely special toy had restored some of the muscle tone I was losing, especially in my legs. Riding the bicycle in the end did literally keep me out of a wheelchair.

In 2005, I developed a friendship with Cat Berge after I congratulated her on her RAAM finish. This eventually led to doing the Furnace Creek 508. I

wanted to ride solo in 2006, but partly due to my still unbalanced leg muscles, I got injured. I instead crewed for Cat and Paul McKenzie as a 2-person team. I then fixed what took me out of 2006's 508 and trained for the 2007 version.

For this first 508, I had both of my parents on my support crew mainly for communication reasons (I am deaf and a sign language user) and recruited an ultracycling veteran from Kansas, Robert Giacin, to kind of buffer my inexperienced parents' worries when things went wrong.



I remember being tired the few days before starting my 508. I was physically tired from all of the training. I wondered what on earth I was doing to myself, but I had already invested a lot of time and money into this. All I wanted to do was just ride and finish the race. Thus, not feeling at my best, I sluggishly started racing at my own pace, trying to control my competitive instincts and ignore other riders.

I thought I had made it clear to my team to stop often and keep me within sight, but things were out of tune the first 70 miles. My parents decided I was riding too fast for them to be able to sign to me, let alone hand off things to me like we were required to do on first day due to the traffic. So, they were trying to find positive slopes and stop signs where I would slow down. I started to get frustrated, especially after I told them I needed a new water bottle then watched as they drove three miles ahead of me. I got dehydrated and was forced to slow down until I reached my crew.



After giving my crew an eyeful (like an earful, but in sign language) for having their rider being out of water, I grabbed a new bottle and pushed on, starting the windmill climb. Robert was a bit taken aback by my bluntness, but like my parents explained to him, deaf people are usually extremely straightforward and they want people to be straightforward with them too. This kind of personality is environmentally developed because deaf people are cut off from the social interactions in the larger, hearing world. Of the communications deaf people get from the hearing world, they usually want everything right on the table in "full scoops." In other words, I took advantage of the stop to stand two feet in front of my crew and sign with my arms, hands, head, chest, and all of my fingers to say my message clearly for once and all. We were soon in harmony with each other.

As I rode over the rolling hills toward Randburg (about 100 miles from start line), I started to feel wonderful apart from a couple of burning muscles. I became completely confident that I could ride and finish this race. The story following behind me was however the opposite. A guy crewing for another solo rider was concerned enough to pull up to my crew and say, "She's done. She's not going to make it. Look at her shoulders rolling." He was surely familiar with the riding behaviors and typical signs of a rider nearing the point of DNFing. Apparently, my right shoulder was dropping more than the left, indicating that I was favoring my left leg. I had no idea all of this was being discussed behind me until I was told about it weeks after 508, but yes, of both my legs, my left one was the weaker one and I was

pedaling with mostly my right leg. I might have been comfortably fast on the flats and loving to climb, but I couldn't climb effectively.



Of course, I had lots of faith in myself that I could finish. To ensure that I had a good chance, one of the rules I embedded in my mind before the race was to stay on the bicycle and keep on pedaling the best I could. I reasoned that I could lose a lot of nickels and dimes of time if I didn't try to keep my feet on the pedals as much as possible.

Approaching Trona, I started to feel nauseous. I was eating the kind of food I ate during training, but something was wrong, perhaps because this was a more stressful situation than the training rides. Finally, I vomited without stopping my bicycle. Naturally, my parents became worried, "Robert, she's vomiting! Should we stop her?" Robert chuckled, "No. She just ate too much and will be all right. Hey, her vomiting technique is graceful. I look horrible when I vomit from my bicycle!"

Up to the Trona Bump point, I was wearing two jersey layers. Unlike most 508s, this 2007 version was abnormally cold and it didn't help to have headwinds. The cold finally penetrated through both of my jerseys, forcing me to stop to don a jacket. I then labored up the Trona Bump, thinking I was climbing Towne Pass. That climb was kind of a nightmare. Oh how happy I was to be

descending! "Wait, something isn't right," I thought, "This is clearly not the other side of Towne Pass." My heart sank. I was off by miles, seeing the long road toward the infamous Towne Pass. I just had to soldier on, unsettled stomach and all. My throat became acidic, so I started to hold down the stomach contents, feeling worse but continuing to drink and take the calories that would be easy to digest. As it was, I fought off nausea all night long.



The headwind became more insanely and chilly cold. I was forced to stop again for the fourth layer of clothes, my warmest cycling jacket and leg warmers, which I wore during the wintertime in Salt Lake City. I later heard that some solo riders dropped out on Towne Pass due to the cold, which was understandable. I was practically dressed to go skiing in what was supposed to be a race in hot weather.

I reached the top of Towne pass and after a quick change of shorts, I jumped right back on my bicycle and went straight into a nose dive down Towne Pass. Oh yeah, I may be struggling up climbs, but I was still surely riding a race, minimizing my time off bicycle. I passed a rider going about 20 mph near the top of descent, who forced me to slow down in order to safely pass. After a spell of flying 50 mph, I passed another rider near the bottom. I heard my mother chose to close her eyes. Poor mother.

With Towne Pass behind me, I had accomplished the goal of going moderately slow before Towne Pass. No one however hammered the point home on continuing to go moderately easy after Towne Pass. This point went out of the window as I was riding over the rolling hills of the Death Valley

plains, enjoying myself as I weaved around the crosswind's tumbling tumbleweeds. Who was to complain after a full Saturday of headwinds?

Throughout the night in Death Valley, I rode slightly above the range of what my body said could carry me forever, ignoring the wise veterans' tip of continuing to pace myself. I wasn't sorry when I reached the Jubilee and Salsberry Passes, which were feeling even more physically demanding than any of the climbing I had done on the course so far. I fought up the climbs, riding from one side to another up them at a few points, as about a dozen more teams passed me.

The sun came up as I was going down Salsberry Pass and I was so glad the sun came because the welcoming light made me feel more awake. I rode past Shoshone without much of a look at the time station staff, being focused on my riding and enjoying a brief spell of tailwind. For the first time ever since before Trona, my stomach felt more stable and I was craving something hot and salty. So, I asked for the salty noodles. My mother heated some water and made a bowl for me. I wanted to grab it and eat it while riding, but a mother being a mother said I had to stop or she wouldn't give me my noodles. Blackmail! I pouted, but my calorie intake was so low the last 18 hours I gave in and stopped for my meal. I was a bit worried I might lose this meal later, but I wanted to eat all the same, "Let's see," I told my crew. As it was, I did vomit a hour later, but I didn't lose all of the nice, salty noodle meal. My mother said the undigested noodles I threw up were actually tapeworms, which surely cheered me up.



I felt so wonderful, spinning easily all the way from Shoshone to Baker, that I gave the Baker time station a big shout out. Cindi Straiger was there, looking a bit surprised to see me looking so good, so late in the race. I got excited and wanted to keep on going, but I apparently needed to take a minute to reposition my pelvis, which was slipping out of position and in turn putting strain on both of my knees. I asked Cindi about the women ahead of me and when I learned that despite my noodle stop, I was only 3 minutes behind the second woman, I became even more excited. I ignored Cindi's advice to keep on taking it easy and set off after her. Big mistake. I was riding even harder and soon hit the wall.

I crawled up the climb toward Kelso, feeling the toll of the last 34 hours. I was tired, I was feeling unwell again, and this climb was over the infamous rough section with four different colored pavements carelessly filling small potholes dotting the original road. In a sense, one could probably compare this road to European cobblestones. The road was so energy draining. Robert started to suggest that I needed a nap. "No!" I told my crew and kept on pushing, but I was riding as if I was towing a broken small car with my bicycle. I finally gave in and lay down for a suggested 30-minute nap.

I tried, but couldn't sleep. I however stayed put for 30 minutes while my cramping right leg got some massaging, then got up again. Immediately, I started to cough violently. We had a new problem! My lungs were congested and I was coughing uncontrollably. After what seemed like forever with dose after dose of inhaler medicine, my coughing was reduced enough I could resume riding. I however was breathing shallowly. My parents became worried that I was going to kill myself and told me to go slow.



I fought up Granite Pass, and about halfway up, I saw a sign saying "It's just a hill, get over it!" I could see the top of the hill up ahead. I was almost there! I kept on turning the cranks, trying to avoid stopping. To my disappointment, the sign wasn't quite accurate. I found not just one, but what looked like five more hills. I climbed up each one of them as if each one was the last one to get over. On the descent toward Almost Amboy, I started to shake from the pain. My weak muscles had been burning ever since about the 20th mile, hurting as on my worst days between 1999 to 2004, only I wasn't in bed this time and the pain was of a different sort.



I took my first dose of ibuprofen for the race then attacked the last major climb, Sheephole Pass. As I labored the pedals up the climb, I watched the passing cars' taillights diminish seemingly forever into the sky. I was disheartened, "Where is the top?" About 3/4 way up, I saw a car coming up behind us with a cyclist in front. It was Ann "Wolf Spider" Wooldridge, pedaling with her head tilted on one side, her face full of determination. I hadn't seen her in about 35 hours and I was humbled she passed me so close to the finish line. Immediately I tried to chase her. After a few cranks, all I could do was watch her support van's taillights diminish away into the sky. I pushed on, I had my own ride to finish. (I congratulated Ann at breakfast the next morning. She did awesome and as humbling as it was, it was honestly fun to be creamed by a person

with a good sportsmanship personality like her. I also learned many years ago that we are capable of enjoying losing as well as winning because our purpose is the challenge itself.)



I dragged myself over Sheephole Pass and onto the fake flat section toward Twentynine Palms. Seeing me shaking in pain again, my mother urged me to take another dose of ibuprofen, expected to last me until the finish line. My mother also tried to give me a psych lift, "You are done with all the climbing!" I gave her a dirty look, she wasn't at 508 last year. There was in fact a half mile-long hill about two miles before the finish line. I kept on cranking, just cranking. Oh how my eyes lighted up when I finally reached the finish line, touching the same tape all the riders ahead of me had touched.

For a time, I kind of didn't want to stop riding. I rode round the finishing line site with probably a look of amusement in my tired eyes. I think I just did one circle around the site, but Lee Mitchell claimed I rode round the place about five times. Thus, I will let you decide which story is true. Once I stopped my pointless extracurricular riding, Cindi signed what she learned at the Baker time station, "Wonderful!" (See picture below.)



After collecting my official finisher's medal, we went straight to the hotel room. For the next two hours, I sat in the hot bathtub, coughing up huge pieces of mucus all over the bathtub before we could get it under control. My leg muscles were also so sore I needed help getting out of the bathtub, getting on and off the toilet, putting on my pajamas, and getting in bed. I managed to get out of bed on my own later that same morning and used the toilet all by myself. However, my father had to carry me down the stairs for the post-508 breakfast. Oh how my crew team was treating me like royalty! Another team's crew member told me how they were standing at the bottom of the stairs, watching and laughing at their sore rider as he was figuring out how to go down the stairs.

I promised my parents that I would not do this kind of riding for the next two years since I am in graduate school and need to focus on my classes. In 2010, I will still be in graduate school, but I should be done with the required class courses and just have the research work to do. Thus, more flexible time to train for another 508 solo ordeal. Of course, I had so much fun the last time that I want to do this kind of riding again and again, especially if I think I can race myself well for whatever body condition I may be in by then.

