

Find your “Opus” (2007 Furnace Creek 508)

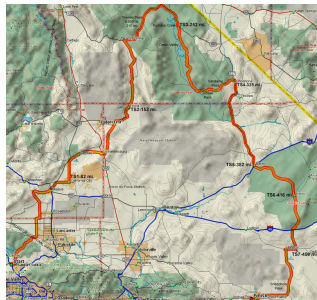
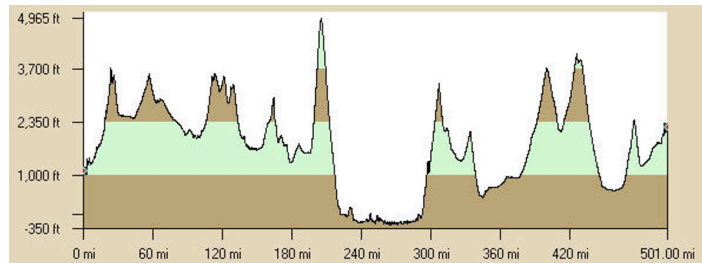
By Roby Treadwell

Photos courtesy of Chris Kostman & Paul Brunton

Music is a powerful force, it reminds us of past experience, and it divorces us from our current situation. Athletes use music to inspire their dreams and push through pain. Michael Emde is now the two-time consecutive champion of The Furnace Creek 508 Ultra-Endurance bicycle race. The 2007 race was a non-stop effort of 27 hours and 32 minutes. Music helped him chase away the pain of pushing his body to such extremes.

The “508” in the race title refers to the Race’s length in miles. The “Furnace Creek” refers to just one of the descriptive places through which the race passes. Perhaps you’ve heard of “Stovepipe Wells,”

“Badwater” and “Death Valley?” The race itself is billed as “the toughest 48 hours in sport” and the tagline is “Where the West is won.” This isn’t a race for the timid, the irresolute, or the mentally fragile. Furnace Creek tests every fiber of both body and soul. For Emde, loosing himself in the strains of 80’s Heavy Metal and Pop is his only escape.



Sheephole Summit is the culmination of the race’s major climbs that rise to a cumulative 35,000 feet. Sheephole begins at about the 480 mile mark of the race. The pass ushered in the final segment leading to the race finish located in the shining “metropolis” of Twenty-Nine Palms California. It is on this climb that the men are separated from the boys, so to speak. While race photographers snapped his likeness and while his crew viewed him from the follow vehicle, Emde bowed his head and focused on each difficult pedal stroke. Reaching for more energy, he drained his Hammer-Gel flask once again, then something happened: enter “Opus,” and their song “Faster and Faster.”

Emde had loaded his MP3 player with music designed to drive away the inestimable fatigue of his pedaling obsession. While his wife Marla and I may not always share his appreciation for certain musical genres, we nonetheless understand music’s importance as a motivational tool and a way to escape pain. I am not saying that I saw a miracle that day high in the California desert. I am not comparing a bicycle race to the suffering of human beings under conditions of very inhuman bondage. I am not comparing “The Scorpions” to “Spirituals” but I am saying I saw a man lifted by his own will, transcending his mortal pain and doing it with the aid of music.

Furnace Creek takes place in October but the story really begins for Emde in the spring and around Cheney Washington. “All roads lead to Cheney,” is the running joke among those of us who try and keep up with Michael during his preparatory training. Spokane Washington is home to the Austrian

immigrant and Emde Sports, a successful coaching and event promotion business that Emde runs with his wife Marla. Cheney is a small university town outside of Spokane Washington and it features miles and miles of nearly deserted roads. The chip-seal and concrete ribbons are perfect for the six, seven, or eight-plus hour training rides he needs to prepare for this race.

My name is Rob Treadwell. Churning my pedals in the draft off Michael's rear wheel is also perfect training for my Category 3 racing aspirations. Drafting Michael Emde during Furnace Creek training is like motor-pacing at twenty-eight miles an hour, and it is relentlessly unending. We blow through and past Cheney Washington regularly, and I barely get to admire the scenery. During one memorable ride, late in the preparatory period before Furnace Creek I found myself struggling to keep up and on his rear wheel. At over 90 miles into the "training ride" I began to fall off the 28 mile per hour pace. My own heart rate was over 175 beats per minute, above my anaerobic threshold, and I could not hang on. I sat up. Michael "diesel engine" Emde turned and looked over his shoulder as my shadow disappeared from his periphery. He smiled and asked me, "Are you okay?"

Michael spends most of the year as a successful Category 1 bike racer in the Northwest. Death Valley is a long way from Seattle, and ultra-endurance is quite unlike weekend criteriums and stage-races. Ultra-endurance is a new love for him. He loves anything to do with the bicycle. Suffering and bike riding are as inseparable to him as bike racing and winning. Furnace Creek is now an obsession, and hopefully it is a gateway to the ultimate endurance bicycle race: "Race Across America."

Once the training rides have been completed, and the assemblage of racing kit is complete, the crew of three (Marla, Paul and myself) and Michael begin the drive to the official starting point of Furnace Creek in Santa Clarita California. It is a 24 hour drive from Spokane to the race headquarters inside the Hilton Hotel. The drive through the Idaho, Montana, Utah, and Nevada landscapes melts into a blur as the crew members take their respective turns behind the wheel of the Honda Odyssey Minivan that will become a rolling hotel and command center. The vehicle is full of the training and racing supplies, extra wheels (lots of extra wheels), ice-chests, boxes of supplements courtesy of Hammer Nutrition, extra clothing, and a myriad of other bicycle and nutritional needs. Chief among the supplies are Marla's special cookies. I just might crew this race for the cookies! Personal space is at a premium and legroom a luxury. Ultra-endurance bike racing is not a glamour sport. Did I mention I get carsick? I agree to crew for him during Furnace Creek just to verify that my suffering has value? I am able to experience the race with my best friend.

By an agreement made between Emde and his crew, he is NOT allowed to choose ANY of the "road-trip" music. Throughout the night Marla and I play "Name That Tune" with the satellite radio and swap stories about the concerts we attended as impressionable youth. She and I share a more "classic" appreciation for Rock-and-roll. The debate over the merits of Pink Floyd vs. Led Zeppelin rages across the entire State of Montana.

The actual arrival in Santa Clarita is an anti-climactic affair, any sights, sounds or tourist attractions like Magic Mountain Theme Park are simply ignored as the crew looks for the nearest available bed. Sleep will be a luxury on this trip and any chance for a quick nap is hastily taken. The

reality is this: Wednesday at 11:00 am we leave Spokane and we will not sleep until at least 8:00 pm on Thursday Evening. Friday morning will begin at 6:00 am and will not end until nearly 11:00 pm. Saturday, race day, begins at 4:00 am and will not end until Sunday night at around 8:00 pm, long after Emde has crossed the finish line. Monday will see us off toward home; it will begin about 7:00 am and not end until our arrival in Spokane on Tuesday late in the afternoon. We joke that Furnace Creek is the “Fastest, slowest week you will ever experience.” For us, there are three nights of sleep in a seven day period. I wouldn’t miss it for the world. The cookies and music appreciation are only a bonus.

One major key to Michael’s success is the expertise of his wife and training advisor Marla. Her experience runs deep in the endurance field. Their work at Team Emde Sports includes training a variety of endurance athletes ranging from cyclists to Ironman contenders. Marla’s experience includes an assistantship with the US National Triathlon Team as well as the everyday training duties of managing the personal needs of her client athletes. Both Marla and Michael have competed as athletes, both train athletes and the competitive spirit runs strong in the family. Their young daughter Martina competes in the family run “Kid’s Bike Race Series” that they promote every year. In her youth Marla managed a music store in the Puget Sound area of Washington State and as a result she was also able to gather a fine repertoire of musical knowledge that Michael seems happily willing to ignore. Madonna makes Michael’s list, Marla does not share the same view of “The Material Girl.” Madonna is not allowed “in” the van.

“Alpine Ibex” is Michael Emde’s “totem” for Furnace Creek. Riders do not use their names as signifiers during the race. Each rider gets to choose his own “totem” and they are approved by race organizer, head official, and “totemizer,” Chris Kostman. Chris is an ultra-endurance legend, the former holder of the record for youngest RAAM finisher, and his company “Adventure Corps” promotes The Furnace Creek 508 and a host of other ultra-events. Adventure Corps proudly proclaims: “We’re Out there!”



The start of Furnace Creek 2007 is less than you might imagine, especially since it is a World Cup Ultra-Endurance event. Ultra-cycling is not a national pastime and Americans, as a rule, are unaware of the sport’s existence. Competitors for the 2007 race have traveled from Europe, Canada and all-over the United States. Their friends and family are there to see them off, but present are few, if any, media representatives. Grinding away for 508 miles on a bicycle is an unheralded individual effort.

While the riders stretch their legs on the race’s opening climbs outside of Santa Clarita the team vehicles must make their way to the first bike/car rendezvous point. The riders are without assistance during the first 25 miles of the race, and as race organizer Chris Kostman with sarcastic humor notes: “Many of these athletes actually ride more than 25 miles in a day and many do it unassisted.”

The teams still simmer in anticipation during an hour-and-a-half of uncertain worry.

Enter Michael Emde. He is first among those to reach the hook-up with his team support vehicle. Michael likes to “attack” early, set the tempo and control the race. A member of another team remarked after the race: “We saw him hit the rendezvous first, and we figured he’d blow himself up at that speed. Then we checked his name, and saw that he won the race last year. We knew then that he was gone!”

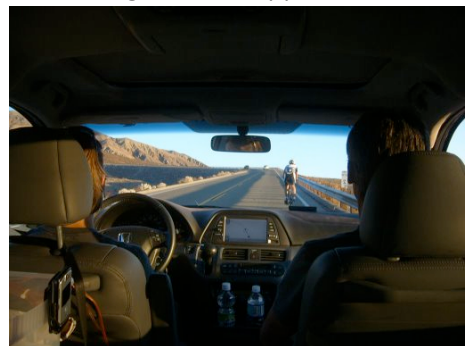
One may surmise that leading a 508 mile race from the very beginning could become anticlimactic, but that is far from the truth. Riding in front of a pack of motivated world-class athletes does little more than paint a big red bull’s-eye on Emde’s back. The fact is that no reliable communication exists between race organizers and the team vehicles during the race. Cell phone service quickly evaporates. “You can’t hear me now” in the wide expanse nearing Death Valley. The price of leadership is that every rider behind Emde does get a time-check at the race’s eight checkpoints. He receives only sporadic and unofficial time-split estimates. He has no one to judge his pace against save himself.



Unofficially the “sketchy” reports pegged Team Ibex’s lead to the nearest competitor at about 10 minutes after the first 80 miles of racing at the checkpoint in California City. Over the next few miles the reported gap grew as the second climb toward Ransburg became a long and steady grind. The climb was punctuated by a passing emergency fire vehicle that seemed ridiculously out of place in a part of the world so desolate that there could surely be nothing of consequence to burn?

Suddenly, while fighting a strong headwind out of Trona, California, just outside of the second check, the team vehicle for “The Crow” appeared. In 2006 this rider finished 3rd overall. The “plan” was for Team Ibex to remain out-of-sight, and hopefully “out-of-mind” of the chasing athletes. A team car of another, so close, sent us into a mild panic. “The Crow” had made a bid to unseat the defending champion.

There is little that we could do from the confines of the van to assuage Emde’s apprehension at the new threat. There was serious respect for the gaining rider, and it put new purpose into The Ibex’s legs. Looking over his shoulder, Emde attacked the race’s ultimate climb. Towne’s Pass rises above the Panamint Valley to a height of nearly 5,000 feet over just ten miles. It features grades of up to 13 percent, averages 10 and the climb is a winding obstacle of legendary proportion. No one climbed it like The Ibex that day. Emde is one of only a few riders in race history to ever reach the Towne’s Pass summit in daylight. Emde covered the climb in just over an hour, a pace that ripped the legs off his nearest competitor. At race end, the report was that



Emde entered the climb with a 10 minute lead and exited it with 20! He was unaware of this “good fortune” during the race of course. He continued to attack in a wild decent into the wastes of Death Valley. A group of touring riders on BMW motorcycles passed the Ibex caravan with respectful nods of what must have been equal measure of surprise and respect. We were traveling at 50+ miles-per-hour only 5 or 6 feet off Emde’s rear wheel!

Marla was at the van’s wheel, and while her driving is legendary among the Ibex crew returning for another Furnace Creek (namely she and myself), our virgin support member Paul marveled at her composure. The road dips and twists, and as the headlights quickly adjust to the orientation of the rider, the small light on the bicycle only illuminated a few seconds worth of fast approaching pavement. One small miscalculation, an ill-timed pothole in the road could have initiated a chain of events that may not only have ended the race, but resulted in catastrophic injury, or worse. Lest it be construed as overly dramatic, consider the ramifications of trying to stop a nearly 3,000 pound automobile in the distance it takes a Lycra clad rider and bike to skid, tumble and slam to a stop from 50 miles-per-hour. Furnace Creek at night is not for the faint-of-heart. Marla is all heart, big, caring and resolute, but not one fiber of “faintness” can be found therein. Both Emde’s were there to win.

Music officially entered the race program here. Once darkness fell, the team’s mission changed. What had begun as a “leap-frog” servicing of rider by standing on the side of the road and handing bottles of liquid nourishment to him as he sped by, now morphed into an operation of close support. Bottles and supplies were handed directly to the rider from the van’s side window. The van also provided the greatest share of Emde’s lighting during the night and perhaps just as importantly, the roof mounted 300 watt sound system was employed to keep Emde awake and inspired during the tortuous miles ahead.

For anyone who has experienced the vastness of Death Valley, if even by daylight, it may not come as a complete surprise at how desolate a place it can become in the Sun’s absence. Without any visible landmark, save the distant mountains almost imperceptively silhouetted by the starlit sky, one can become lost in the void. There are no lights in the background and as the night deepened it became easy for me to dream of “easy victories, cookies and sleep.” Listening to Bon Jovi, a decided Emde favorite, morph into the seductive phrases of German techno would force me to shake my head in wonder. German is such a lilting poetic language when set to music, especially without the tuba.

“Lights!” Fast approaching and in groups were suddenly visible. I must admit, sitting there in the darkness, listening to the strains of Jon Bon Jovi and unknown German pop artists, seemingly light years from my last sleep, I had lost track of the moment. I had become lost in the hypnotic rise and fall of Emde’s legs, emblazoned in my mind by the illumination of the headlight. The rhythm of the music and the unending ribbon of mysterious and unseen asphalt had taken a firm hold of me.

If it was possible to have quickly gathered my thoughts after such a dreaming reverie, after a seemingly endless drive into nowhere, then that is what my mind raced to do. I found it inconceivable that a human on a bicycle could have covered such an improbable gap in so short a time. It was terrifying to come to grips that it was likely The Crow marshalling for another assault because it was

evident that our champion could simply go no faster. A check of the van's speedometer showed a pace of nearly 25 miles-per-hour after nearly half of the race had already elapsed! I must admit, I succumbed to doubt, for an instant and to my shame.

"It's the BMWs," calmly noted Marla, "they stopped at Stovepipe Wells.

Riding in a van for 500+miles, over a period of a day and nearly half-as-much again, while behind a solitary bicycle rider is not a tedious affair. The night-time operation is carefully orchestrated to manage the nutritional and clothing needs of the rider over varying conditions. The rider signals his needs by raising his hand into view while holding the item to be replaced. At speeds ranging from 15 to 30 miles-per-hour the driver pulls alongside the bicycle and holds a steady line. It is up to the bike rider to maintain the correct speed and distance while reaching out to first pass off the empty and then accept the full container. The "relativity" of the two moving objects hides the inherent danger. A false move or obstruction in the road means certain disaster. The effects of sleep deprivation and physical fatigue only add to the risk.

Dignity was not a prime concern during the race. At night, "Pit Stops" were carefully planned without respect to modesty. The point is that every second counted. Having to "go" meant having to "wait" until the rider needed to stop. Even though Emde had been drinking large quantities and those in the van had tried to limit their intake to a minimum the "needs" of four people would rarely coincide.

Everyone asks, so I will try and explain the basic procedures with as much dignity as possible: Emde would relay his coming intention to stop and inform us of needed items. After a collective "Thank God," the team would rummage around the interior of the van for a requested item. For example, He needed a thermal vest which had been carefully laid out at the beginning of the race. The garment evidently had managed to lose itself, and everyone had their own idea on where to find it. "Eventually" Emde would stop and the circle of headlight would provide enough room for one member to grab the bike as he and the others relieved themselves. The rider by rule cannot proceed at night without the vehicle and its illumination directly behind so the hapless assistant, in an obvious reversal of the common idiom, had to agree "NOT to take one for the team."



Outside of Baker CA, with the exception of a few "quiet zones" in the midst of what must be

the loneliest of America's population, music can still be played over the PA systems of the team vehicles. The surreal landscape of the desert melds into a drive-in music video of pumping legs and unimaginably bad roads. This section of the race has "pavement" that can only be described by using that term in only its most loosely defined interpretation. Emde has to negotiate through a veritable mine field of potholes and missing pavement. The surface looks as if it only a thin layer of asphalt has been poured over an old river bed. Imagine

spreading a knife full of crunchy peanut butter over an English muffin and you have some idea of the conditions of the road. The vibrations transmitted to a rider's body, after nearly 24 hours in the saddle must be horrendous.

The climb out of Baker affords the most practical vantage for observing any potential rivals following behind. The headlights of approaching vehicles can be clearly seen for miles. Unfortunately for Team Ibex the road from Baker crosses Interstate 40, a popular route between Los Angeles and Los Vegas. Every headlight, no matter how distant became the specter of an approaching rider. We had not received a time gap in hours. We could not know that Emde had stretched his lead to nearly an hour. Eyes strained in the darkness for the tell-tale blinking of hazard lights that marked the slowly moving support cars of fellow racers. Music blaring, lights flashing, the caravan continued into the 4 a.m. pre-dawn blackness.

It was then that The Ibex pumped his arm into the air; he motioned the van forward and proclaimed that the song now cascading from the speakers was for his wife Marla. The song was another by Bon Jovi, a "power ballad," a love song. Think what you will, but memories are made in the context of the moment. The emotions of that expressive gesture were unforgettable, and while we couldn't understand all the lyrics of the song inside the van that night, I knew then, as I know now, that Marla knew the significance of the dedication. Tired as he was, hurting and cold Emde validated the sacrifices made on his behalf by his wife. He was not riding alone.

Not long after a shooting star lit up the sky during a twisting descent into a black valley the sun emerged over the jagged rock formations lining the course. Day brought new life to rider and crew. Red rimmed eyes cleared and the music of Alice Cooper forced the cobwebs from brains that struggled for comprehensive thought. The music was designed to drive legs with a throbbing beat and energetic guitar riffs, but it was not designed to gently usher in a new day with majestic dignity. The tool of choice, nearly twenty-four hours into the race, was not an auditory finish hammer, but a sledge. Emde was tired, he needed tempo, and he needed Alice.



Crossing the sodium chloride flats outside of Amboy CA signals the approach toward Sheephole Summit. Being so close, yet with such a formidable barrier yet to surmount puts an incredible strain on Emde's mental perspective. By now he simply wants the race to be over, he only wants to finish, stop torturing his body, he wants to celebrate and sleep. Music is the only refuge, the only distraction in an otherwise featureless place.

The top of Sheephole signals the final barrier on the race course for external sound. As the climb progressed to the driving pop beat of Opus I only wished that the music and the effort would continue to coincide, driving Emde further and faster than he could do alone. I had to place my finger on the off switch, and our crew pumped its fists and stamped its feet on the van's floor as Emde

struggled to the top. “Faster and faster...faster and faster,” the refrain repeated until the rider overcame the crest, and while he settled in for the descent the song faded and the switch was thrown. The sound of the desert returned, and it was empty silence.

Michael Emde finished the Furnace Creek 508 in 27 hours and 33 minutes. Two-time champion, three-time podium finisher and musical director to the jackrabbits, scorpions and crew of Team Alpine Ibex.

