

Vegan Team Takes on 508-mile, Non-stop Bicycle Race Through Death Valley

Matt Ruscigno, MPH, RD



L-R: Chris Kostan, race director; Matt Ruscigno, Megan Dean, Maxwell Lucas, and Brian Davidson. All of the cycling caps were hand sewn and the shirts were designed for us.

Like many great adventures, this one started as a joke. But getting on my bicycle outside of Death Valley, California on a Sunday morning, having been awake for over 24 hours and having ridden 70 miles the day before, was definitely no joke. First, let me back up. This past October I was on a four-person relay team for the Furnace Creek 508, a non-stop bicycle race that gains over 35,000 feet in elevation (higher than Mount Everest) over 508 miles and has been labeled the 'toughest 48 hours in sport.' Unlike traditional bicycle races with multiple stages spanning many days, this race is one long stage where the clock starts in Santa Clarita and does not stop until near Joshua Tree in 29 Palms. Some have described this race as a "spiritual odyssey" as the route transverses one of the most unique and fascinating geographical locations in the world-- Death Valley.

In this race you do not get a number, but choose a non-transferable animal totem logo. We picked bonobo. What would be a better totem for a vegan team than the peaceful, egalitarian chimpanzee that is humankind's closest cousin? We even took it a step further and used the race to raise money for the Bonobo Conservation Initiative that works in the Congo to improve the habitat of this endangered species.

In the small world of ultra-distance cycling, which some good friends and I have recently been immersed in, the Furnace Creek 508 is considered the major event of ultra-distance cycling. Our team included a lifeguard, a bicycle courier, a construction worker and myself, a public health dietitian. The race organizer also puts on a double century, 200 miles in one day that takes place solely in Death Valley. At this event he approached us and suggested we do a relay team for the 508. A vegetarian himself, he was excited to find out that we are all vegan and as passionate about it as we are cycling.

The format of the race made planning the nutrition component difficult. The teams use a support vehicle that leap frogs the rider in the daytime and follows directly

behind through the night. There are eight stages, so each racer rides two of them, in a predetermined order, but when you are not riding you may be driving, navigating or supporting (preparing water bottles, snacks, etc) the current rider. In the 32 hours our team took to finish, I was without sleep the entire time. This format introduces complexities into planning meals: feeding the riders when they are not on the bike, being able to store enough food, safely, for everyone in one van for two days, dealing with sleep deprivation and potential food aversions due the strenuous activity of racing bicycles.

How did we do it? First, I became familiar with what all the riders usually ate when riding, when not riding, when it was hot, when it was late, etc. Brian, for example, eats an almost raw vegan diet. We brought plenty of fruits like kiwis, apples, bananas, pears and grapes, but also more calorically-dense foods like nuts and seeds for his recovery periods. Megan, on the other hand, is a strict vegan, but otherwise less restricted. With the kind of exertion this race requires, total calories sometimes becomes more important than the calorie source. For her we also brought energy-dense foods like cookies and chocolate. Our meals off the bike included burritos, made of whole-wheat tortillas, black beans, brown rice, avocados and tomatoes that I had prepared ahead of time and stored in a cooler. In reading earlier race reports I was shocked to see how many of the entrants paid very little attention to their nutrition. Our team was at an advantage solely by putting an emphasis on how and what we ate.

Due to the heat during the day and the large amount of calories needed (I estimated 500 per hour) we did use some supplemental foods. These included a liquid meal called Sustained Energy that is predominately maltodextrin, but does contain some protein for long-term use (e.g. races that span many days) and a gel for more short-term energy needs. When not using these, our team constantly munched on fruit and other snacks-- peanut butter filled pretzels were a favorite.

My 70-mile stage did not begin until nearly 3pm, after Megan, the bicycle courier, rode the first stage from Santa Clarita to California City. She passed me our baton (we used a banana!) and I was off towards Trona and Death Valley. In this situation the rational part of your brain says, 'Don't ride too fast! Save some for the next day!' But, excitement takes over and I found myself pedaling as hard as I could. The support vehicle would pass me, pull onto the side of the road and have an assortment of water bottles and food ready. I would ride by and yell which I needed and they would jog

along and pass it to me. We supplemented water and Sustained Energy with an electrolyte drink due to the heat.

After my first stage, back in the van, I would eat some burritos to replace lost glycogen, replenish liquids lost and prepare food for Max, who was riding a grueling 100-mile stage over Townes Pass, elevation 4956 feet. It is difficult to eat while ascending a steep climb such as this, so at the top we took time to feed Max some bananas as he put on warm clothes for the cold, long descent into Furnace Creek. Here Brian, the lifeguard, was finally able to get out of the van and onto his bike for his first stage. It was 2am. Since you do not normally eat this late I was worried about his ability to consume calories, but he proved that this would not be a problem. Brian is a phenomenal athlete; he was passing numerous riders as he climbed up and over Salsberry Pass as dawn approached. Breakfast time? I woke Megan up so she could eat a little before getting on the bike for her second stage. Sleep deprivation greatly affects your sense of hunger and thirst which can lead to athletes not consuming enough calories when they need it most.

Overall, our team did very well, placing in the top half of all relay teams. We were also the first team in the history of the race to do it on a special type of single speed bike called a fixed gear. Fortunately we had no digestive/stomach problems, everyone was kept awake with Silk soy latte and dark chocolate covered espresso beans and, most importantly, we had a fantastic time. Already some of our team members are talking about racing it solo next year, 508 miles in two days with only yourself to pedal. If that happens, chances are I'll be in a support vehicle handling the nutrition.

For more information on the Furnace Creek 508 please see www.the508.com. To learn more about bonobos or to donate money on behalf of Team Bonobo, please go to www.bonobo.org. Matt also has a blog with many stories of adventure and athletic endeavors at www.nowhip.blogspot.com. The Bicycle Film Festival (<http://www.bicyclefilmfestival.com>) made a film about this race that is being shown in a dozen or so cities around the world. Team Bonobo discussed vegan diet as it relates to their team and their performance. Check out the website for further information.

