

## The Bumble Bee at the Furnace Creek 508, 2008



Ultra cycling is a relatively small extreme sport that encompasses races 200 miles up to 3000 miles. In races 24 hours or longer the cyclist is usually supported by a crew vehicle that ensures that the biker receives food, drink, cloths and other needs. Bumble Bees according to the law of aerodynamics should not be able to fly. Seven years ago, a Bumble Bee, who did not know of the law of aerodynamics, took of and flew into the world of ultra cycling. At the Furnace Creek 508, I was standing there, having received the totem 'Bumble Bee' about to take my first pedal stroke on a journey that changed my life. Due to ultra cycling I decided to stay in the USA and do a PhD after I had finished my masters in preventive veterinary medicine, rather than return to Sweden.

The Bumble Bee had planned to make 2008 a year of a few good ultra cycling races. Sitting in the doctor's office in early spring, hearing the results for an ovarian cancer test, the ultra racing plans came tumbling down. Realizing that ovarian cancer is one of the deadliest kinds, I went in for hysterectomy surgery in April. Doctor instructed me to not do any sports or strenuous activity for 6 weeks, but the Bumble Bee figured *'What the doctor does not know about will not hurt me'*.

The remainder of the summer the Bee was busy preparing her permanent flight back to the 'Old World', more precisely Belgium, where her Drone Bee Marc Leuckx was waiting to be united with his girl. The Bee was not certain that she could squeeze an ultra race into her hectic life. Mavis (Ischyodus) Irwin convinced the Bumble Bee that she needed to be out there to make the 508 the 'finale' of the 'New World' adventure. I reconsidered and decided to do this for the sake of meeting friends one more time, to see if I was still 'ultra' material and to dedicate the race to two women, Lillian and Britt, who died this last year after a long fight against breast cancer. So in the midst of booking containers for shipping to Europe and closing up my life in Pullman, Washington, the Bee started training. A quick call to race director, Chris Kostman, who let me register for the race long after the registration selection took place. The Bumble Bee was preparing for flight again.

The selection of crew came natural; Mavis Irwin as crew chief, my cowboy friend John Bauman from Springdale Washington as driver and my very dear ultra cycling friend David Glasgow as navigator and driver. I had limited time to prepare for the race trying to organize shipment of my stuff and car to Europe, and Mavis was fantastic in organizing many of the

details of the race, making t-shirts and inventory lists of food, bike mechanical stuff, cloths etc. Kerry Ryan, owner of Actionsports shop in Bakersfield, and the guy who has always taken care of my bike needs lent me a climbing bike for the race. This could have been very risky to bike on a borrowed bike in a long race such as 508, but I knew that Kerry could set me up just right, and he sure did. I got to borrow is feather light Cannondale bike with nice carbon fiber wheels.



The morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> of October started out misty and slightly nippy. A strong field from all over the world with the field limit of participants having been reached and limited through a pre-selection procedure. The 508 is renown as the hardest and most popular weekend ultra race. I was the only racer starting in just a jersey, and I was slightly concerned that it would start to rain prior to mile 25 where the crews would join the racers. Climbing in the morning kept me warm, and I found myself moving up the field. After I met the crew at mile 25 we dipped into the desert, and we were there greeted with tail winds and sun. The first day the racer crews performed leap frog support with roadside handoffs (to prevent traffic interference with many racers close to each other during the first day). I found myself switching positions with Michael (Bulldog) Secrest, Dominique (Crazy Horse) Briand, Joel (Southern Vole) Sothern and a few others. I was trying to pace myself since I knew I was slightly undertrained, due to all other tasks I had in moving to Europe.

I came through the first time station in California in 10<sup>th</sup> position, exactly where I wanted to be 4 hours 6 min for 86 miles. As I stopped for a pee break at around mile 100 about 5 riders passed me including Graham (Python) Pollock. I thought he had been ahead of me! I found myself going at such a high speed that I did not want to eat any solid food, and I instructed the crew to increase the electrolyte drink calories. After the climb to Randsburg my crew left me for a while to fill up the support van with gasoline. I had only half a bottle, and thought to myself that they would need to be quick with their stop. But the crew did not appear, and after half an hour I was seriously wondering if they had a mechanical problem with the car, or some other problem. I was dehydrating and also needing food, because I

would quickly go hypoglycemic. I was concerned about the upcoming descent to Trona since I get very light-headed when I go hypoglycemic. After about 45 minutes I waved with my bottle to the crew girls of Southern Vole, and they had seen me bike alone for a long while and immediately gave me one of their drinks. I gobbled it down and then felt more comfortable to descend to Trona. A few miles down the descent I saw my crew vehicle and a sighed with relief, smiled and concluded that I did not need to DNF due to lack of support crew.



As I went through time station 2 in Trona in total time of 7 h 11 min, I was just behind Crazy Horse. We traded places and a few words each time we passed each other. After a small climb I descended into Panamint Valley. The tail winds blew us across the valley, and the crew had a hard time with the road side hand-offs because of my high cruising speed. Mavis would run as fast she could, then lean forward, hand me a bottle... and then I would see her tumble off the road, as I grabbed the bottle. As we turned towards Towne's Pass I got pay-back time for the previous favourable winds. I struggled up Towne's Pass and could not find my rhythm, which was revealed by the fact that I was climbing sitting, which is unusual for me. My friend Hugh Murphy was there photographing me, and telling me that I was dropping Bull Dog. Since I did not feel I was climbing well, it was encouraging to hear that others were climbing worse than me. At the crest of Towne's Pass, it was still daylight. We did a complete cloths change and prepared for the night lighting. Quick, quick, and we all tried to get my cloths off and on, and Mavis desperately tried to squeeze my left foot in my right shoe. Then off I went down Towne's Pass in daylight, something that very few of the front runner 508 racers will ever experience. I got a spectacular view of a rainbow created by a storm rolling through Death Valley. Soon thereafter as I came into the valley, I got a mouthful of sand in my mouth and sand in my eyes as a sand storm was preceding the rain. Thereafter hard head winds and a few rain showers ground down my speed to a crawl. The roads showed signs of flooding, indicating that we have just missed a few flash floods ahead of me. I pedaled on hoping to get through this tough part, without wasting too much energy.



Then the 45 mile ride through Death Valley at night. You can usually see lots of blinking lights ahead, but this time I only had one flickering light in the distance. Unfortunately cloud covers hid the otherwise fantastic star sky that I have seen previous times. Seven mile before the climb I asked for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and a hand

wipe, because my hands were sticky. David wrote down instructions to Mavis who is deaf, and Mavis had problem reading David's writing, she read 'Hand wrapped peanut butter and jelly'. She therefore made the nice folded sandwich, and I thought I am got a sponge or something, so I used it to wipe of my handlebars with. The resulting handlebars were an even stickier experience. Although slightly frustrated with my increasingly sticky handlebars, I could not help but laugh at these communication errors that sometimes occur in ultra racing. At the end of Death Valley I caught the blinking lights ahead of us, and it turned out to be Crazy Horse. I found my climbing rhythm going up Jubilee and Salisbury, a 10 mile climb, and I dance out of my saddle up the climb. My feet that were soaked since Death Valley, and were starting to get really cold on the climb. I could feel them starting to freeze despite shoe covers. As we crested I put on all cloths I had remembering previous 508 chilly descends.

As we pull into Time station in Shoshone in 17 h 53 min I saw Python and crew. We decide to fill up the Vehicle with gasoline, and that turned out to be a good move. I pass Python going up Ibex pass, only to have to pull over for another pee stop, and then passed him again. I am feeling alert and excited about going into Baker, the 400 mile mark. We pull through time station in Baker at 3.26 am and start up the 20 mile gradual climb. The crew kept nagging me about eating, but I was getting a bit sick and tired of eating, and not drinking enough in the cold night to keep my caloric intake at around 250 calories per hour. A few swigs of 'Clifshot mocca' and speaking to Marc on the cell phone gave me an energy kick. A bit over halfway up the climb I pulled up to another biker, Chris Ram Ragsdale, a very strong young rider and another good friend of mine. We chatted a few minutes, and Chris told me that he just could not stay awake. I tell my crew to give Chris a few of my 'no doze' (caffeine pills). I moved on and the light in the horizon indicated that the new day was coming soon. I think that no one can better appreciate that dim light in the horizon indicating the start of a new day than an ultra rider. Before I crested the climb a biker passed me again. It was the Ram who went by looking strong and happy and who yelled out to me '*Those caffeine pills sure work*'. The Baker climb is not only challenging by its long gradual climb, but the road conditions are about as bad as they can get. The weary ultra riders having now spent close to or more than 24 hours on the bike usually do not appreciate the butt, hand and feet massage that the bumpy road provides.



As we descend into Kelso, official daylight hour 7 am had arrived and my crew no longer had to trail me with the headlights. Going into Kelso my average speed was 17.37 mph and I reflected on that if I wanted to break 30 hours, I would have to stay above 17 mph. I was fighting a chill and a bottle of hot cocoa really hit a spot. Then we approached the last time station, 'Almost Amboy' with only 60 miles to go. I pulled through yelling out my totem 'Bumble Bee', and was happy to hear that I had no penalty time to serve at this time station. Those that have received penalties have to stop here to serve the penalty time, which must be a killer for rider to stop at this point. Then I turned into a very stiff head wind. My feet were thawing up, and the pain that followed was almost unbearable. I grinned in pain, and tried to ignore the feet as I ground on. The final climb up Sheephole grade was not too bad. We got pulled over and reprimanded by a race official regarding a hand-off. I promised the official that the crew would leap frog support me until the finish line due to heavy fast traffic. The last 25 miles to the end were excruciatingly painful struggling into the head wind, with every pedal stroke feeling like knives slicing through the soles of my feet. The crew did their best to cheer me on, and my motivation to finish was simply to get pain relief. During the entire race I have been unaware of times, speed and position, and the crew said nothing.



As I pull into Twenty-Nine Palms finish line, I stepped off the bike to hear that I had broken 30 hours. My aspirations had been achieved with a total time of 29 hours 43 minutes. There has only been one other woman in the 25 year history of the race to break 30 hours and that was Seana Hogan in 1998. I came in 3<sup>rd</sup> position overall. This was better than I had been hoping for. My crew chief was overwhelmed by emotions and relief. For a young ultra cycling crew member, such as Mavis, also handicapped by being deaf and mute, the support she provided during this race was amazing. At the finish line, Chris has put up a live video camera, and Marc and my parents could see and here me.



I am very content with this finish of my 7 years of ultra cycling in the USA. For me ultra cycling has meant belonging to a family of unique friends, where love, concern, support and high regard for one another characterize our relationships. I know that although I am leaving USA, I am not leaving my ultra cycling family, because in this family, challenges and distances know no limits.

So, what is next for the Bumble Bee? No one knows, not even the Bee herself. Decisions are usually taken late, but I don't think I am done with my flight attempts, because according to the laws of aerodynamics, bumble bees are not supposed to be able to fly. But, the Bumble Bee does not know this, so 6 months post-surgery with a somewhat erratic life and training, I had one of my best performances in a race.

See also a You Tube video made by Paul McKenzie with a few sentences from me at start and finish. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zysSRh3t7Zg>

Thank you for reading. See you out there on the road!  
Cat.