



Saturday

I got up at 11am, after much-needed sleep. Today we drive to Bishop up the 395 for the Eastern Sierra Double Century. Last week we staffed the Heartbreak double century and in exchange we get to ride the staff ride of the Eastern Sierra Double. That means riding with only around ten other people and getting personal attention from support staff leapfrogging riders in a vehicle.

I get stuff ready and catch the bus into downtown to meet Matt at Tierra Cafe. Megan and Camryn and a host of the usual suspects are there so I grub together what's left of the 'all you

EASTERN SIERRA DOUBLE CENTURY

can eat'

breakfast buffet and sit down. Matt turns up after a while, we get our fill, hang out, then go to the car. The drive is epic, and we take the freeways to Palmdale then on to Mojave after which we hit the 395. I love the desert. We take a detour to check out the aqueduct that pipes water from the Owens' valley down to LA (incidentally, a case of humanity desertifying a once-fertile valley by literally sucking the water out and piping it to Los Angeles much of the valley is now desert and Mono Lake to the north has been steadily disappearing over the years as a result). The aqueduct is fascinating; a two-meter diameter pipe through which you can hear water rushing. We digress into trying to figure out how many gallons are passing by per second, and how effective a 'terrorist attack' would be just how much poison would you need to dump in there to be effective against the massive dilution it'd encounter? Neither of us pee into the water, and we get back into the car and drive on.

Thirty minutes later we catch a couple of trucks driving north carrying garlic. It seems to make sense to stick our heads out of the windows to make the most of the smell. But hey why isn't my cap flying away with the wind? Oops there it goes.... Matt slows the car. I look back to see my cap going under the wheels of a van. I say it's not the end of the world, although it would be cool to get it back. The cap is Hugo's Strapping Young Lad Cap he gave me last year at Burningman that I wear a lot of the time. It'd

be a shame to lose it, but I think to myself that Hugo would definitely appreciate the fact that I lost it (a) being so dumb and (b) on the 395, the road we took last year to Burningman. Matt finds a section of the road where the central embankment is narrow and we take a meter-or-so of offroad driving to get on the southbound side, drive back a couple of miles and turn around again. My cap is lying in the middle of the road a couple of hundred yards back, so we run down the road on the white lines (an in-joke reference to the Badwater Ultramarathon, a 135-mile running race through death valley in which competitors have to run on the white lines on the road as opposed to the pavement so as to avoid melting their running shoes...). The hat's fine, although the pins in it are a little bent.

We drive on, past

Whitney, still deep in snow even though it's already June. We spot which segments of the road Badwater must follow. The rest of the ride up to Bishop is really beautiful, with snow-capped mountains, highland desert and fairly little sign of overdevelopment.

We arrive in Bishop just as the sun is setting and find the Planet Ultra crew. People are still trickling into the finish at a steady rate. The consensus is that the altitude makes a real impact on you. Matt's a little concerned about it, but I figure he'll blast through effortlessly. I'm not too concerned about the altitude I figure it'll be tough, but only as tough as any other double I've been on.

We talk with Deb and Brian of Planet Ultra a bit. Deb makes a joke with me about some embarrassing things we've done in the last couple of months. I joke back with her, reminding her how I forgot my helmet for Mulholland, how I missed a checkpoint on the same ride and how we came in four people from the end during Solvang. They seem to accept us. A lot of comments about Megan's tattoos and Megan and Carolanne's hair from when we staffed the Heartbreak double last weekend. I figure they think we're a little odd, but accept us purely on the merit of our apparent commitment: this will be my sixth double of the year, and we're pretty friendly when it comes down to it.

We agree with the other staff riders to meet back at the motel at 5:15am tomorrow morning. Myself and Matt go buy some breakfast for the morning and get a couple of burritos for dinner then go to find a place to sleep. It's pretty easy to the side of the town skatepark there's a hedge, and we can weasel into the gap between the hedge and the skatepark fence. There are spiky bushes (I suspect holly, but it's too dark to see them clearly), and the ground is uneven, but we bed down anyway. My initial irrational (or not so irrational?) fear of snakes crawling into my sleeping bag are swiftly overcome by my experience-driven fears of sprinklers. But, despite sprinklers going off all around us throughout the night, none end up getting us, and the worst event of the night is having to sit up to shake spiky leaves out of my sleeping bag.

Sunday

Woken by Matt at 4:30am. It's still dark; we're still dry. The prickly bush is still close to my head. We get up from our leafy beds and tidy up, folding our sleeping bags up and walking over to the motel, some 100 yards away. In case anyone's already at the reception area, we skirt around the back to the car and change into spandex. Although it's only twilight, the snow on the mountains above Bishop is clearly visible. I chew on a jalapeno bagel and a banana, we get our bikes assembled and we roll over to the reception. Everyone else is already there, and it's 5:10am. 5 minutes before we're supposed to leave. I need to pump up my tyres, but there's coffee to be scammed from the motel, a rarity before a double, so I down a cup, grab a couple of cliff bars and head outside again. The other guys are impatient (at least, one is, and the others aren't resisting him). While I'm pumping up my tyres they decide to set off, so we tell them we'll catch them. There's a total of nine of us - presumably the other seven crewed the ride yesterday. The arrangement was that we'd ride the first three hours unsupported to allow our SAG vehicle crews to sleep, then they'd come and find us. We'd been assigned Peter and Carol Gianinni, a couple from Alaska who'd ridden the day before. They'd come in last on a downright decadent SEVEN tandem, but seemed to have been in good spirits nonetheless.

We take off... 5:27am. It's beautiful, and my suspicions that this would be the most awesome

double are confirmed over and over again throughout the day. The mountains are breathtaking, and we're really out hundreds of miles from any major cities. By my reckoning, the nearest is probably Reno, some 300 miles north, although I didn't check a map. We thunder down the first loop around the valley to catch the other guys. I'm feeling good, but Matt's not feeling it today. Not too surprising, considering he'd had a broken sleep of a two-hour and one-hour session on the Friday night then four hours sleep in a bush last night. Plus we're starting 4000 feet above sea level and he drove five hours yesterday.

We catch up with four of the other riders around mile 15. Chuck and Albert, plus two others I don't remember the names of. Chuck and Albert will end up not completing today. We ride for a bit, but get some comments about going a little too fast. Chuck mentions he never uses his big ring before the first checkpoint. Yikes! I'd pretty much been in my big ring from the start...

Myself and Matt boisterously joke around for the next 15 miles, and Chuck seems to warm to us, joining in on some jokes about 'the next checkpoint is at the top of that mountain, right?', and so on. We pass three runners and Matt yells 'Badwater!!!' at them. They seem happy enough to be acknowledged by cyclists, but whether or not they're training for Badwater is another thing. They ARE out in the middle of nowhere, though... We hit the first checkpoint, but as it's the staff ride all there is are toilets and water, since our SAG crews are still asleep. Chuck goes ahead, saying he'll see us at the foot of the climb. We push on quickly. The climb up Sherwin grade is epic. One member of our group breaks away and relentlessly climbs ahead of us. We follow, but it's not easy to keep up, and Matt's still struggling with the altitude. I'm amazed I'm still doing OK. Near the top the Gianinnis catch up and we stop to get water and hammer gel. I end up using hammer gel almost exclusively throughout the ride. They're friendly and supportive. We ride on.

We hit the ridge and take a left on the 395, the route to Burningman and a favourite of mine. We shift onto a side road and, despite a couple of confusions with directions, work out we're on course. The Gianinnis pass us to tell us that Chuck is way back. We're still going steady and we're probably at around 7000 feet above sea level now. After a while the Gianinnis catch up again to tell us they're going to do a loop and head

back to Chuck and Albert, and will likely not see us for a while. They take lunch orders.

Now comes the tough part - we head up to Mammoth, but a climb from 7000 to 8000 feet, cold, annoying suburban roads with jocks in SUVs and a blasting headwind, it feels like some sort of sick joke. This is the worst part of the ride for me, if only because the tough conditions are in the midst of touristy mediocrity. When we get off that stretch onto the Mammoth scenic loop, there's less climbing and we're in alpine forest territory with snow on the ground around us. Suddenly the ascent becomes a steep descent and we cover a lot of miles in a short time. Matt, needless to say, is off over the horizon within minutes. He must be going near to 50mph, as I'm doing over 40 for much of it...

The Gianinnis pass us with Chuck in their truck. 'Not my day', he says. Too bad.

Check point three has restrooms so we stop. I also throw my token snowball at Matt. Albert arrives as we leave, doing well. The next thirty miles to lunch are great, though a loop at around 7000 feet next to a series of lakes, referred to as the 'June lake loop'. We spot skiers on the slopes. Some glorious downhill of straight deserted roads. I look at my odometer: 42mph. Probably my fastest yet. It feels great on a straight road, passing motorbikes going the other way.

We roll through Lee Vining then miss the lunch stop by a mile or two. That puts us in bad moods, but we turn back and find it. Subway sandwiches are pathetic excuses for food, but are acceptable after riding over 100 miles. At this point I also start chugging red bull. Albert rolls in. At this point he also decides to call it a day - he says he's just not into it. And mentions that last weekend he rode a 600km brevet...

Alright. Let's go. For a few seconds, another 90 miles seems daunting, but once we're on the road I'm OK. 10 miles against a headwind is draining, but ok. Around this point, I start to feel a little twinge of pain in my right knee. SAG out? You've got to be joking. That thought process takes 2 seconds. It's not agonizing pain, but it's pain that feels like a warning (and it turns out that my body was quite right). Still. Keep going. A turn eastwards leads to a couple of miles of what might be the most sensuous cycling I've ever done, swooping through dips and bends in the road with a strong tailwind downhill. 'Flying' is a great

description. We catch one of the guys who was ahead of us and end up leapfrogging him all the way home. The next ten miles are uphill through near-deserted territory, miles from any major highway. Matt's on form with his steady uphill pace. Scenery is amazing. Pine forests give out to meadows at over 8000 feet. For stupidity's sake I blast the final 200 yards in my hardest gear. Good for my knee? Maybe not.

The crest is called Sagehen pass. High on endorphins, I make what I think is the best joke I've made all month. "Hey, are these sagebrush bushes? Yeah? So where are the chickens?". The Gianinnis, who are awaiting us at the top, offer me hammer gel and water and smile, clearly not understanding my devastating wit.

We leave with a warning to watch for crosswinds. Mile 130 at 8000 feet means 70 miles with 4000 feet in the bag to power us. And the next ten miles are a blast, more tailwind- and gravity- driven swooping roads, marred only by unpredictable side-gusts that threaten to tip me from my bike. When I dare to look down at my computer I'm often doing 45mph. And yet Matt's on the horizon again. When I catch him, he reveals that he reached 53mph. Insane.

The roads are highland desert now, reminding me of northern Nevada. We're still getting the unpredictable side-gusts but unfortunately now we're on the flat with little tailwind. We steadily move on, over rolling hills through sagebrush and scrub. Then down another amazing descent. A pick-up truck waves but to wave back would be to invite a broken neck and a lot of missing skin, so I grin broadly as I swoop by. Before we know it we're at the final checkpoint, some 30 miles northeast of Bishop. The Gianinnis are waiting for us, and we stock up.

30 miles with a tailwind. How bad can it be? We maintain above 20mph all the way, often cruising at 26mph. It's trance-like. I tell Matt I'd be psyched for Towne Pass at mile 200. He replies that this is one of his worst doubles. We crush on. Traffic gets worse and I begin to get a little bored, there's more signs of human habitation and some of the trucks passing us are a little too close for comfort. We catch the guy ahead of us and ride the rest of the way with him... two miles before the finish my knee make a sudden change for the worst. I keep up, but I'm not taking turns at the front anymore - in fact, I'm trying to push almost exclusively with my left leg. If that'd happened

any earlier, it'd been a SAGed DNF for me for sure.

Rolling into Bishop is a relief at the end of those two miles. We're the last three of seven people to complete the ride. It's 7:47pm - 14:20 total time, including a missed turn up at lunch. I'm pretty happy with that. We chat with the other guys and go and get changed.

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Afterwards, we wander down the main street and get burritos in a local restaurant. They're REALLY good. We ask the waitress what was up with the runners we saw early that morning and mention Badwater. She nonchallantly replies that a lot of ultramarathon runners live around here. Cool.

We trundle back to the car and get our sleeping bags. Seems like a good plan to head back to where we slept the night before. We bed down, and the prickly bush is obliging enough to not prickle me.

However, no double would be complete without one minor mishap. And this one's no exception, as the sprinklers in Bishop seem to have different schedules for different days. Evidently the 'near the skatepark hedge' sprinklers get to take a break on saturday nights, but are back in business on sundays. The moment I feel them getting the foot of my sleeping bag I'm over the fence and getting back to sleep on the concrete of the skatepark but Matt isn't interested in moving. I fall asleep, then get woken a little while later by Matt muttering and jumping over into the skatepark with me. He's soaked, and had a pool of water IN his sleeping bag. Still, it's safe in the skatepark, and we fall asleep rapidly again. I guess he got wet in solidarity with me for my soaking on the central coast a few weeks ago...

Let's look for flat roofs... I said. Matt and I are in Paso Robles, just north of San Luis Obispo with a rental car, two bikes, some weird vegan mung-bean patties, spandex and sleeping bags. It's around 11pm and we've got 210 miles to ride the next day starting at 5:40am. We'd driven up from LA blaring hardcore (SoiA, Congress) and metal (Carcass), joking around, discussing grand cycling plans for the year and stopping off in Santa Barbara to sticker for BikeSummer (and look vainly for our friends from S.B. Critical Mass from the Solvang double we did) and eat thermonuclear vietnamese food in Goleta. So... where to sleep?

We check out behind the bike shop. There are some old

CENTRAL COAST

pallets but there's a lot of vegetation

and it's pretty exposed to the elements, plus I just peed there, so who's to say how many other people had the same plan? We drive around the park in the centre of town a few times and pinpoint the ride start point. Then we notice a construction yard literally straight across the road from the start point. We hang out for a while and walk past the bars full of people of our age, we suppose, but a lot more money. They're all pretty drunk and it feels like I'm in small town England again. After a fruitless wander for a store to get food for the morning, we clamber over the fencing around the construction yard and find a half-completed wooden staircase to get up to the second floor. It's pretty cosy, with two walls and a wooden floor, and a nice view of the stars. Bed at 1am, so four-and-a-half hours sleep for us. That's pretty good by our standards.

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We wake just after five. There are voices near by. I stand up in my sleeping bag and spot a whole crowd of roadies in spandex already at the start point. What a luxury, sleeping 20 yards from the start point... but damn! Better get going! We get everything tidied up and find a rear exit from the construction yard, feeling pretty conspicuous carrying sleeping bags despite the fact that it's still pretty dark. We make it to the car just as Lee, the regular double century sag driver walks by. Did he see us? You sleeping in there? he asks. Not sure if he meant the construction yard or the car. Ha ha, we reply. Where are you guys from?. LA.

Driving home tonight? No, we've probably got a place to say in San Luis Obispo we reply, lying through our teeth. I've got a hotel room with a spare bed tonight if you guys need it he says, and walks on. Figure he realised we were lying.

We get changed behind the car then I move it and get some water, Matt goes to the start point. By the time I get to the start point, the safety talk has ended and people are clipping in... Matt's signed us in and grabbed our numbers... and we're off, putting on gloves on the road. Matt didn't have time to get any water. But hell, less weight for the hills, I guess... the first twenty miles we try to stick at the front, successively passing people as the group of 130-something cyclists gets split up into it's natural speed categories. Matt takes the

DOUBLE CENTURY

lead for a few

minutes and earns the honor of one of the lead guys talking to him. I take the lead for a bit. Rolling country roads, the sun rises. It's pretty nice. We're heading west for the ocean. Unfortunately after twenty miles the obligatory drop something essential event happens when my expensive nightrider light promptly falls from my handlebars on a rough road. I go back to get it, knowing I've lost a lot of time by doing it. I crank ahead trying to spy Matt.... is that him sprinting up a hill? We're heading into some pretty steep hills on deserted country roads now. And they keep getting steeper. I pass rider after rider, pushing myself. The roads get steeper still. I'm panting out of control and before I know it I'm passing people walking their bikes. Eh? Aren't double centuries supposed to be for experienced cyclists? One of them's sporting a 508 jersey. Ha! Then suddenly we're at the first checkpoint. Mile 34. This is my fifth double, so I'm mentally trained to not think about how many more miles there are until well after the 100 mark, but I arrived a little behind Matt and we're set on realising the mantra, checkpoint not rest-stop. I put some air in my tyres, wolf down a muffin, pee, top up the water and we're off again.

Crazy downhill for 10 miles, it seems. Some of it feels dangerous. Matt corners like a demon on his new bike and always drops me, so I crank a little to catch up. Then we hit PCH and turn north. We'll be on it for about another 40 miles. We make good time, past Hearst Castle, pushing 22-23 mph on the flat. I spot a

seal on the beach but it looks too much like a wet stone to point out. Matt's doing good. I start to fade a little, feeling tired. We pass a few people, one of them catches on behind us but we slowly leave him behind. The sun's well up now. Doubts start setting in for me. Not that I can't do it, just that it's too much, too difficult. Keep going. I always have this lull somewhere around mile 70-ish. We hit another rest stop, which we treat appropriately as a checkpoint. Usual jokes... to the crew: downhill from here, right?; to each other: wanna go for a bit of a bike ride?. And off again.

It's mile 86, and time for the big climb Nacimiento road up from the Pacific. I guess this is Big Sur now, and it's a 7 mile climb. The first couple of miles are really steep and Matt shoots off. I mentally wave him goodbye, tell myself I'll catch him near the top. The climb is super hot, I pass a couple of people then slow to a crawl as I pull myself up away from the ocean. Occasionally I do our trademark siren call out into the mountains but I don't head a reply from Matt. Cars pass occasionally but it's a small road. One drives down past me and yells, L.A.!... Or was it Allez!? - as in the bike I'm riding? I'll never know. I get to the top and figure lunch is soon, so skip the watering point and blast down the hill. People overtake me as ever, but I'm making pretty good speed even on the flat. And then I hit a pothole pinched flat. Damn. Stop and repair it, and crank on, slurping on hammer gel.

We pass into Fort Hunter-Liggett. We were told we'd need to present ID to get in, but the guard is speaking to a motorist so I zip past the car and am not followed by shouts nor bullets. I figure it's almost lunch, and approach a steel grille bridge over a river when I see a cyclist lying motionless a couple of yards into the bridge. I wonder what's up. Lee, the SAG guy, has stopped, as has another cyclist whos' crouched beside the one on the ground. As I go by I take a look. It's ugly. He (I later find it was a girl) is lying on the bridge, eyes open but vacant, blood all down the face. Bad. I pass Lee and manage to ask what happened. Face first is all he says, but he's not really paying attention. Feel nauseous, ride on slowly. It's only another mile to lunch. Two ambulances pass going towards the bridge as I head on.

I later find the girl was airlifted to a hospital for facial reconstruction. Apparently she lost some teeth her front wheel got caught in the bridge somehow. Nasty.

The next hour was somewhat shaky for me.

I get to lunch 40 minutes behind Matt. The uphill and the puncture really took their toll on my time, and we agree it's best if Matt takes the keys and I see him at the end. He jokes that I'll catch him. Yeah right! I eat lunch and head on as quickly as possible.

Off on my own now, no-one ahead or behind. It's hot and my jersey's unzipped unfortunately a good trap for a bee, which flies in and stings me. Damn! Keep going, no shade. Down out of the army base then left I recognize the road, it's the same road that we came up the other direction on during AidsLife/Cycle, the charity ride from San Francisco to LA ten months ago. Going up it's called The Quadbuster, so going down is a pleasant breeze. Then a right onto a twenty-odd mile jaunt through blazing heat and side-roads. I started well on this section and it's really scenically pretty but the heat gets to me. I push past a cyclist sitting under a tree waiting to be SAGged out - it's too hot I'm done for, he says, refusing offers of food or water. I go on. The SAG vehicle passes me and mercifully stops to top up my water. Before I get to the next rest-stop the SAG is back again, this time with the guy from under the tree as a passenger. They wave and honk, and are gone.

The next rest stop is still blazingly hot but we've only got fifty or so miles to go and amazingly it's still daylight good going for me. I eat what seems like half a watermelon and head on, drafting one guy who's not particularly keen on talking for a few miles before he drops me. Push on, then up a steep hill for a couple of miles to a crest, then a glorious but short-lived downhill. A final awful push through headwinds which I stand for, just to get through. Final proper rest-stop in Bradley, a town of three or so streets. I eat a lot. People are sat around in catatonic states clearly the heat is getting to everyone. The guy beside me says, I'm toast... been training too hard... did a 400km last weekend, and Devil Mountain the weekend before..... I get back on my bike and go.

It's getting dark and it's time to check to see if my light falling off my bike at the beginning of the ride still works. Miraculously, it does! I rig it on with an elastic band as extra insurance against the broken clip and push up the final five miles of tedium before a steep downhill. From here on in it's tailwinds all the way, a blasting 20-mile stretch all the way back to Paso Robles. The final mini rest-stop is crewed by really nice, interesting folks so I stop and eat some melon

before pounding back to the finish. I yell the siren call to the oblivious finishing-point crew and they ask my number. 69... some guy was looking for you. Matt's just there on his cell phone, having got in over an hour earlier. 210.7 miles, 13000' climbing, 16 hours 12 minutes. Yes!

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The age-old question: where to sleep? But first where to eat?! We buy burritos and fries and orange juice and eat. We're both tired. Matt's inaugural ride as a true roadie has taken its toll on him (14 hours 48 minutes?!), and the ride was damn tough for me. We drive around for a bit looking for places to sleep. The construction yard is out of the question the finishing point crew will be there for a while yet. Eventually we find a school and decide to sleep in the grassy garden. We park the car, put the bikes in the back seat and head in. Amazingly, we can walk further in and we find a grassy area between two buildings. Matt curls up in the hedge with his tarp while I content myself with the middle of the grassy area.

Mistake! Sometime in the night I'm awoken by clicking noises, then the sound of falling water. Is it raining? Tck-tck-tck-tck... it's sprinklers. Before I know what's happening, I'm getting wet, rapidly. Too sleepy to deal, I run over to Matt and tell him. But I didn't realise he's safe in the hedge. I drag my wet stuff back through the sprinklers and onto a concrete ledge where I get back into my sleeping bag. Last thought as I rapidly fall asleep : Hmmm, I'm wet. I wonder if I'll get cold?. Zzzzzz....

The morning is glorious. We get up and head out. Stop to put gas in the car (an intelligence test that I pass... just...), then stop in San Luis Obispo for food and coffee (mmmm) at a kick-ass cafe. We also get directed to an independent natural foods shop where Matt spends many minutes deciding on which vegan cake to get. Then drive on, chewing on bagels and raw chilis while slurping orange juice... a final stop in Santa Barbara to sticker more and leaf through books in a bookstore.

Double century number five a resounding success.

The 2004 Different Spokes Mulholland Century can pretty much be credited with being why we're riding double centuries in 2005. Last year myself and Matt signed up for it, got up at 4am, took public transport as far as we could then cycled the final ten miles to the start point. Then followed an intense 100 miles including a moment that will always live in our memories where we drafted a guy who we now simply refer to as Deathride Guy for about ten miles against strong headwinds. Deathride Guy made such an impression on us due to both his arrogance and his ability. Anyway, Matt recalls seeing California Triple Crown jerseys at lunch and went home to look up the Triple Crown website that evening... by the end of 2004, he'd ridden three double centuries (albeit getting lost on one so not finishing), myself joining in in 2005.

It seemed appropriate to head back a year later and relive that ride. How would we do? Since then, I'd ridden the 585-mile, 7-day trip from San Francisco to Los Angeles with AIDSLife/Cycle and completed five double centuries (albeit missing a rest stop on the Mulholland double, meaning I didn't get credited with finishing) while Matt had ridden some 10 doubles. Plus, of course, innumerable smaller rides and the standard commuting fun of a car-less kid in LA.

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I woke up at 5am to the sound of Max making pancakes for us. We had a crew of four this time around: Myself and Matt, plus Max and Allen, Matt's housemate. Sadly MattPro couldn't make it due to work. I dragged myself off the couch of the A-house. Another ride on very little sleep I'd still not caught up on sleep since the Central Coast Double the weekend before and I'd not managed to crash out until around 1am. And on top of that, I'd been awoken at 3am by Emilio and members of the band Wolves In The ThroneRoom coming in to sleep.

We stumble around each other getting the bike rack on the car (my, how far we've come... this time Max has borrowed his Mum's car so we can travel in style), getting into our spandex, filling water bottles, munching on pancakes al carbon. We're finally in the car around 5:45pm and chugging down the freeway at a stately 50mph blaring a metal mix tape of mine courtesy of Matt's friend Brad. Needless to say, it's a

suitably grim way to wake up.

We roll into the start point feeling pretty special. Or maybe 'unique' would be a better way of putting it. We get the bikes together, get to the start line and register. Kathie Clarke is there, who's involved in Different Spokes and a ubiquitous friendly face. We say hi, get some food and water and set off. It's 7:10am.

The first ten miles are tough for me. Max is sprinting ahead, Matt after him. I'm struggling to keep up and my legs are feeling the lack of recovery time since the Central Coast Double. We turn onto Old Topanga and a steeper bit comes up - I catch with Matt and Max, but Allen has been dropped. We crest and start the long descent to the ocean when I hear a noise. Did I drop something? No it was Max with a full rear-wheel blowout twenty yards ahead of me. We group up, Matt lends him a tube and we talk. Should we go on? You'll catch us, right?. Max says something affirmative. Myself and Matt take off. We're convinced Max will catch us, considering the speed with which he took the first ten miles. We stop at the mini-stop at mile 15, eat a muffin and grab a tube, then on to the ocean. Take a right, and crush the 10 miles to Pepperdine University going a steady 22-23mph. Good. For us. Take a right and through Malibu Canyon where it feels as if you're in southern France for another ten miles with crazy panoramic views of the gorge and the road snaking it's way on. Before we know it we're back at the start (the ride is a figure-eight) at the first full rest-stop.

Yeah, we take too long. We take off back the way we came but after five minutes Max blasts past heading to the first rest-stop he could be only ten minutes behind us! It's good to see that Allen has caught up and is hanging with Max, too. We push forwards and climb through Mulholland heading west. Slowly but surely we overtake people. The dreaded steep climb with the exposed rocks just east of Kanan isn't as bad as it was on the Mulholland Double but it's certainly a challenge. I'm able to spin better this time (although I later calculate that the lowest gear on my new Specialized Allez is 43 gear inches, exactly the same as the lowest gear on my Nishiki...). We crest that climb gasping then and it's an easy few miles to lunch. 11am, and it's mile 58.

Lunch is done with fairly quickly and we head on. This time it's a couple of miles to the tough technical

descent of Potrero Canyon Road. We experienced Potrero in an altogether different light on the Mulholland Century when we went UP it. People were stopping and walking, and I later described it as a 'Spiritual Odyssey'. So when Matt suggests we turn around at the bottom and climb it today, it's hard to resist. And hey, it'll give Max a chance to catch us. We turn and climb it. It's tough, but somehow the stupidity of climbing a ridiculous hill that's not even on the route makes it manageable. As we reach the top, a group of riders begins to descend so we turn and ride after them, catching them by the bottom.

This is the point at which we met Deathride Guy last year. This time, in a way, we ARE Deathride Guy. Ok, so we're not being vocally arrogant, but Matt IS wearing his Devil Mountain Double jersey that says 20000 feet of climbing... 206 miles... I DID IT IN ONE DAY! in large letters on the back, along with an elevation chart. And as we start pacing across the plain towards the ocean, we drop everyone else. It feels good, but I know Deathride Guy would have been going a good 2-3mph faster than us. We pass a few people and one guy latches on behind us. At least he's polite enough to ask if it's ok if he tags along with us without taking his turn leading. We've been holding a good pace (again, around 23mph) but two miles from the next rest stop at mile 80 I get a flat. Damn! I yell out to Matt, 'Looks like I got a flat' (which he hears as, 'Truck coming by fast'). Stop, repair it. There's a seal on the rocks below that some girls are taunting. Maybe it'll eat them? Onwards to the next rest-stop.

Brian from AIDSLife/Cycle is there, so we banter a bit and eat a lot. I eat six veggie wraps (tortilla, cheese, lettuce and mustard), something I'll regret over the next ten miles. We joke around, tell Brian how to spot Max (old-school woolen jerseys ROCK!), then on.

Miles 80-90 are tough, and we knew they would be. It's a climb from Leo Carillo beach up Mulholland Drive to the crest of the mountains and it's INSANELY hot. We put in some pretty good work after we've warmed up (sic) but it's really not fun, at all. I'd usually get some enjoyment from this climb but the heat is really unpleasant. We pass people progressively again, including one poor guy walking. I stick with Matt much of the way until he sprints the last half-mile (which we did last year, I can't make myself do more than a few tens of yards though). There's a mini-rest stop at the top where they

thankfully have ice. I come my closest to on-bike vomiting just before the rest stop. Too much food, heat and exertion together. Still, it would have been good practice for puking while riding with the intention of not getting any vomit on the bike itself...

By now we figure Max isn't going to catch us. We set off again and it's a pretty easy ride back, although there are a few smaller climbs. We pull into the finish at 3:30pm. Eight and a half hours how did that happen?! We were going at a fair pace for a lot of it. We thought seven would be good. There was a lot of climbing and the heat was intense. Also, there were many more rest-stops per mile than the average double century.

We hang out in the shade eating and drinking. We're pretty beat. The heat has had greater effect on me than it ever has during a double. We wait for Max and Allen. After about an hour, Allen comes in in a SAG vehicle. He'd ridden with Max to mile 90 (memorably referring to the 10-mile climb as having filled me with odious rage!) but had serious shooting pains in his knee. It hadn't improved and he'd decided to SAG it back. Remarkably, at this point we learn the furthest he'd ridden in a continuous ride in the past year is 30 miles! Crazy kid... He says Max decided to push on but was feeling the heat.

Max rolls in not too long afterwards, looking red and a little tired. We realize the climbing today was more than the entire climbing for the Solvang double we did a few months ago.

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We bundle our salt-caked bodies into the car and drive back to LA. There's a bikesummer meeting to get to and food to be eaten.

*The climax to A Year of Cycling Brutality: The 2005 Furnace Creek 508: The Goat's perspective.
Friday, October 7th to Monday, October 10th, 2005*

I'm feeling totally spaced out. There's what looks like will'o'wisps floating in the sky – balls of hovering fire –

– had spent the morning doing final packing, making burritos (6 x 'Pasta Burritos of Death' (macaroni in tortillas), 14 x 'Bike or Die' burritos (rice, beans, avocado, tomato, raw garlic, salad), screening 'Bike or Die' slogans and satanic themed 'Team Goat 508' logos on our crew hoodies and my starting jersey and armwarmers. I was psyched. This weekend was to be the culmination of 2005's 5500-mile-plus training rides (including eight double centuries), hours of reading literature on nutrition, training and



over the plane between here and the distant mountains, with columns of smoke rising from them. The sun has just set and I'm feeling really uncomfortable from a

steady twenty mile descent that's left me with an aching upper-body and an uneasy realisation that I really am seeing things. I piss in the bushes and make a remark to the final time station's crew about reading a story of how a rider in past years thought he saw a farmhouse right here in the middle of the barren desert, due to hallucinations induced by sleep-deprivation. As soon as I say it I get the self-consciousness of a drunkard who knows he's drunk but is trying to appear sober. Surely they realise I'm pretty out there myself? I guess that's why Chris Kostman's AdventureCORPs slogan is "we're out there". I talk to my crew about it. Matt seems concerned. Max suggests carrying on and having a power nap if need be. Matt disagrees, suggesting we stop every five miles and stop and talk to me if need be. I drop a NoDoz caffeine tablet and get back on the bike. Only about sixty miles to go, then it's all over...

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We rolled into the hotel parking lot around 4:30pm on Friday. We – myself, plus crew Matt, Megan and Max

studying route details, hundreds of hours of 508-related discussion with Matt, new equipment, attempts at nine hours of sleep per night, two weeks of caffeine abstinence before the race, eating and drinking a lot and countless cycles of confidence and worry about finishing. I knew I wasn't fast, but as the race grew closer, I felt more and more sure I was on top of everything and that, unless something unexpected and dramatic happened, such as a major injury or a mechanical failure, I would finish.

The parking lot was full of other support vehicles. We looked them over. It had a fairly party atmosphere to it. The great thing about ultra cycling is the camaraderie involved among those involved. We exchanged nods and smiles with neighbouring crews and started electrical taping our crew logo to the van, feeling pretty badass with our homemade 'Caution bicycle ahead' sign and pentagram identifiers. Afterwards, I went to rider check in where mugshots were taken and I got a bag full of assorted goodies and a t-shirt and cap. I told myself I'd not let myself wear either unless I finished. Chris Kostman welcomed us, and we ran into Karen, a girl we'd

ridden with on the Mulholland and Devil Mountain doubles earlier in the year. It turned out that she was riding in a two-person relay team under the Chupacabra totem... the Mexican goat-sucking vampire. This was one goat who wasn't going to yield so easy, although I felt fairly sure I'd see them later in the race, despite a two and a half hour lead for solo riders over relay teams. I told them I'd see them in death valley.

Outside we had our van inspected and my bike got a looking over. Eric Ostrich Ostendorff wandered by. We chatted for a bit. I'd first met him at the LA Wheelmen Fargo hillclimb and loved his fun write-up of his first 508 attempt where he'd placed third place despite anticipating coming in at the tail-end of the pack. Max had even put together an Ostrich-inspired ice helmet – a beater helmet with a tupperware box glued to the top with a mesh base, into which we could place ice in the heat of the day in the mojave desert. Unfortunately Eric wasn't riding on account of an accident a couple of weeks before but was going to crew the ride instead. He seemed unphased by this unfortunate turn of events and cheery as ever. I was happy we'd see him out on the course.

We packed up and drove to the rider meeting via wholefoods for some snacks. The rider meeting was a lot of fun, including a rad video cover the previous year's horrendous headwinds through death valley. We all hoped it wasn't going to be the same this year. The fact that the 508 was this weekend was slowly dawning on me. It was quite exciting.

After the meeting we crossed the parking lot to a chinese restaurant and ordered piles of tofu and rice in one form or another. I was feeling a little anxious to get to bed but after the meal we still needed to get water guns of one sort or another. WalMart was the venue for such products, my first time ever in one. We bumped into who we would later find was Medicine Horse and her team outside and greeted them loudly, then wandered the depressing aisles for a while until we found the toy section. It turned out that the 'summer range' had been replaced by the 'winter range' of toys, so water guns weren't an option. We wandered around grumbling until we found the household utensils and the spray bottles. I'd sure be glad of those later.

The father of a friend of Matt's works in Santa Clarita and we'd managed to swing out connections so that

he'd arranged for a free hotel room for us on the other side of town. We found it easily and figured on a half hour drive back to the start point. Megan and I crashed out while Matt and Max went to fill up with gas. I couldn't sleep. I'd slept too much throughout the week and despite being in bed around 10:15pm, was still awake after midnight. Still, some sleep is better than no sleep, and a hotel bed is better than a bush surrounded by sprinklers.

Saturday

I'd set the alarm for 5:08am, and jumped up and had a shower. We were out the door by 5:35am and I'd had my first sip of coffee in two weeks (yum). We were at the start point before 6am and got prepared. We were pretty cute in our matching Team Goat hoodies. It seemed to take a while to fill up bottles with gatorade and perpetuem (a drink formulated for ultradistance sports consisting of a balance of carbohydrate, protein and fats. My main calorie source would be from perpetuem, a single bottle providing anywhere between 260 and 400 calories. I'd determined on my ride down to San Diego a few weeks previously that 400 calories per hour is a good target for me to aim at) and hammer gel (a syrupy complex carbohydrate mix). I kept forgetting stuff (glasses... bagel for the ride out... bandana to keep sweat from my eyes...) but finally seemed ready. I rolled over to the start line with my cut off cammo shorts on and dashed to the toilet. The area was filled with riders and it was all quite exciting. I recognised fewer than I thought, but wasn't particularly concerned about not being able to keep up as I was just riding to finish. I stripped off my shorts. My starting attire was pretty cool, if you ask me: black shorts, white jersey homemade by Jen Diamond screened with Team Goat and the chainring/pentagram logo on the front with 'Bike or Die' screened on the back. Topped off with matching white armwarmers saying 'Bike or Die'. Then at the last moment, just as Chris Kostman started the one-minute countdown to go, I realised I'd not pumped up my tires. I quickly pumped my front tire and set off at the tail end of the pack, my crew laughing at the predictable late start, albeit only by seconds (unlike our 40 minute late start on the Devil Mountain Double earlier in the year!). I stopped again 200 yards down the road to pump up my rear tire but caught up with the pack half a mile further on. The first seven miles is a friendly neutral ride through town to bouquet canyon and I chatted with a few people, including

Jenn Medicine Horse, Basenjie, Emily Archaeopteryx (the only rider younger than me at 23 years old - we'd been stoked about reading that she'd be riding a fixed gear conversion on a frame older than mine!) and various others I didn't get the names or totems of.

Bouquet Canyon came soon enough, and the race was on. We thinned out a little, but still rode side-by-side and drafted a little. It's hard to space out this early on, and as Chris has said at the meeting: 'what happens in the first 15 miles of a 508 mile race really doesn't matter!'. I chatted to some really nice guys... werewolf, desert duck, california regular newt and a host of others. Werewolf is particularly impressed with our 'Bike or Die' slogan. I recognise him from the devil mountain double. We chat all the way to the top of Bouquet but the line thins a little as we turn on spunky and head up the steep grade of Alpe de Spunky, as a sign says on the side of the road. Feeling good, and glad of my new 39:28 low gear to spin and avoid any trace of lactic acid overload. We pass a guy wearing a 'Coroner' jacket sweating profusely. Surely he's not riding, right? I never did see him again, so I presume not. Right turn on San Francisquito and I get a bit negative about the whole thing. I sure as hell aren't passing anyone, and although I'm telling myself I'm riding to finish, I'd love the ego boost of passing a few people right now. And where are my crew? I'm almost out of water...

The downhill is fast, with crew indicating we should slow at the bottom. The girl at the base looks like she's indicating we turn right. I go right following a few other guys. This must be the right way, right? A headwind blows us fast, and we pass the base of Bouquet. Is this really right? Why didn't we just come straight down bouquet? Why isn't there anyone behind me or roving SAG? Why have those guys up ahead stopped? One has a route slip. We did make a wrong turn. We're seven miles down the road in the wrong direction. Damn.

We turn around. I power it back against the headwind. This is no-nonsense riding and I'm not going to just sit there and take it slow. The other guys grab on and we hold a paceline back the seven miles. They're pissed. I'm OK - what's 14 miles in a 508-mile race? They thank me for pulling them back in and take off. Then there's my crew! I've been out of water for a while now and feeling dehydrated. I throw my bottles on the side of the road and they give me more. I yell, "Sorry, should have told you I'm riding the Furnace Creek

522!" and push on without stopping. They drive alongside me and pass me a route slip and we agree to meet in ten miles.

Down, down, down into the antelope valley - I hit 55mph on the downhill, breaking my previous record top speed by 3mph. I'm stoked - I'm riding the 508, I'm in uncharted territory, I'm doing a good speed and, conveniently, I'm at the back, but not due to poor performance. Things can only get better if I pass people ahead of me. There's no way I can give myself a hard time for not being able to hang with people if they're all already ahead of me! I can just 'sit back' and enjoy the full epic ride through my beloved mojave desert. The windmills climb is visible and the whole day is ahead of me. Yes!

I pass my crew and they hand me some flowers. Apparently Medicine Horse gave them to them to pass on to me! Cute! I'm even more stoked and crush it across the valley. Isn't this where they filmed the closing sequences of Seven? Seems like it. Then the windmills climb comes. I take it at a decent pace, passing my crew on the side of the road. "You're doing a great speed" they yell, as I pass them. The climb gets a little steeper but never particularly demoralising, although it's getting hotter. I pass a couple of people, including Medicine Horse's support vehicle. Did she really give me those flowers or where my crew fucking with me? I decide I'd better resolve it next time I see them. And before I know it I'm approaching the top and can see Matt standing on a small hillock pointing out the turn I need. We switch bottles and they assure me the flowers were genuine. Ok! Now it's downhill all the way to Mojave, an amazing smooth straight run with a tailwind through fields of wind turbines down into the mojave desert proper. Barren hills stick up out of the plane sparsely and a few cinder cones can be seen on the far horizon. How far away? 100 miles? 50 miles? I have no idea. Before I know it and I'm passing Medicine Horse. I yell a quick 'thanks' for the flowers and I'm gone. Then I'm in Mojave, waiting for a turn arrow that doesn't come until cars come up behind me. Another cyclist catches me, saying he never would have done without the light. We leapfrog each other the 15 miles to california city spinning happily along at over 26mph with a tailwind across the desert. I'm feeling good. And thus to time station one.

Megan, Matt and Max are waiting for me. We switch bottles again and I piss in the bushes. What's that in

that other bush? It's an old bike with a broken chain and missing a saddle. I grab it and run out of the bushes saying, 'ok, I'm switching to my other bike'. I think some people found it funny. Matt urges me to move on, so I get back on the bike and head north the 12 miles to the next turn. Apparently I'm only an hour and forty minutes behind the lead group, and including my wrong turn, that makes it only an hour. Matt advises I pace myself.

Unfortunately there's a headwind, and I've been spoilt up until now with tailwinds. People pass me and I begin to lose confidence. I pass Cow's support vehicle stopped with the hood up – bad news. I hope they get it fixed. It'd suck to DNF due to support vehicle failure. I pedal on, then stop to piss again. When I get back on my bike I hear a crack. I know what it must be – a spoke must have broken. My fears are confirmed when I look down between my legs and see my wheel is out of true. Damn! I'd built the wheel a couple of weeks ago and was conscious that I'd misplaced my 32-spoke, 3-cross design by overlapping spokes too close to each other. I'd decided it should be OK, but this was bad. Fortunately my crew is waiting for me on the next corner, sat around on an old couch on the side of the road. I love those guys. I tell them about the wheel and they want me to get on Max's bike which we brought along as an emergency replacement bike but I'm too stubborn and want to finish on my bike. We switch out wheels, replacing my nice Shimano 600 hub / OpenPro rim seven speed new wheel with my old anonymous six speed wheel with a broken axle. Fuck it. I get back on the road and it rolls OK.

The next stretch was supposed to get hot as I rolled across the Mojave desert with a large dry salt lake on my right and mountains ahead. I was drinking plenty. Chris Kostman drove by in a roving SAG vehicle as I was traversing a series of short rolling bumps in the road and snapped photos of me. My crew stopped and gave me a 'wet bandana sausage' (as Max referred to them) – tubes of cloth containing ultra-absorbant gel which, when soaked in water, can be tied around one's neck. They then cool by evaporation next to the large arteries in your neck. I noticed a couple of riders behind me as I turned to tackle the moderate climb to Randsburg and Johannesburg. They eventually passed me on that climb, a moderate climb which got steeper towards the top. To my amazement a couple of relay team support vehicles passed me as I approached the top.

A couple of miles later as I turned towards Trona outside of Johannesburg the first relay rider passed me. Wow! It was the middle of the day and they'd already made up their two-and-a-half hour gap.

The terrain around this area was pretty barren and deserted. The twin villages (for that is all they are) of Randsburg and Johannesburg sit on either side of the 395 that runs north, eventually into Nevada. The 'Red Mountain' marked on the maps above Johannesburg is just that – a large lump of red rock jutting out of the ground just to the east. The villages themselves look very run down and dusty, combined with my English eyes and undoubtedly the effects of heat and exertion, made it all seem rather otherworldly. I think it was around this point that the 508 really made the transition from simple 'bike ride' to 'trip', in the psychological sense.

The next few miles (was it five or twenty five? distance is hard to recall) were fun. There were a series of rolling hills with mile-long climbs at the most. Riders began to get a little more bunched up and I was passed by a lot of support vehicles as they leapfrogged their riders. It all took on a fairly festive atmosphere as stopped support vehicles would invariably cheer me on as I rode past them. I passed Basenjie looking a little the worse for wear, and he warned me about headwinds in Death Valley. Up until now the wind had either been behind us or absent, making the ride relatively straightforward. I try not to think of the possibility of thermonuclear headwinds ripping through Death Valley in the middle of the night. My right hamstring is beginning to hurt, something it had been hinting during my two week taper. This is the first thought that conjures up the images of possible DNF – 'if this gets worse, will I have to quit?'. I hope not... a DNF is what I've feared most in the last few weeks, and it sure as hell isn't going to happen without a compelling reason. For the rest of the ride, my right leg's power input is dominated by my downstroke to ensure I don't injure it further.

After the rollers comes a fast downhill to the road to Trona, then a quick right turn and more descending. Just after I pass Golden Dragon – we'll end up leapfrogging each other for the rest of the ride – I catch a glimpse of the imposing Trona pinnacles over my shoulder. These are huge spires of mineral deposits sat in the middle of an old dried-up lake here in the Searles valley. I've never been out to them – you need to take a dirt track to get to them – but

they're impressive even from miles away on the paved road. The village of Trona prides itself on the pinacles and it's nine churches. I guess there's only so many times you can go out to look at the pinacles before you get bored if you live here, and going to church must be a lot less effort, especially in the desert.

A few more arduous flat miles and I'm at time station two in Trona. I don't know why, but my least favourite terrain is flat terrain. I just can't be bothered to propel myself across it – it's simply not as rewarding as propelling myself up a hill. Max later remarked that it was noticeable how I would actually speed up when I hit a hill after a long flat stretch.

Time station two is at mile 150. Any thoughts like, "one third of the way there" I instantly dispelled. I don't recall any feelings of fatigue. I'd been diligently consuming the calories, fluid and electrolytes that I needed thanks to the even more diligent record-keeping of the Matt, Megan and Max. Mental fatigue was out of the question – ever since the Death Valley Double back in March, completing the 508 had been a goal, and that goal had become a near certainty over the past four months. To yearn for the future while acting out such a long-term goal would have been ridiculous. I'd set out with no 'target' distance to complete – rather, I'd set out with the concept of riding indefinitely lodged in my mind. Easier said than done, for sure, but somehow it worked, and I didn't find myself reaching for that hotel bed, hot meal or shower right until those final, awful, twenty miles.

I head to the toilet, then grab some extra bottles and Matt urges me back on my bike. Too much hanging out, for sure, although I wasn't there for too long. The guys tell me I've been awarded a 40 minute time bonus on account of the wrong turn I took earlier. Nice, but no big deal. Then Megan tells me they fixed my wheel – someone had the tools to remove the cassette and replace the spoke. Sweet! I want to switch it although Max cautions that it may well break again with all the tensions off like this. I decide to risk it – a nice seven-speed wheel with a chrome hyperglide cassette versus an old-school six-speed wheel with the freewheel built into the cartridge and a broken axle?!

Hitting the road again I make progress towards the Trona bump. It's pretty insignificant, but a couple of riders pass me as I head for it. Just before the top we're forced to stop. It is 6pm and we need to switch

to night riding – I need front and rear lights and my support vehicle has to follow directly behind me. We crest the Trona bump just as another ride catches us so I allow him to pass – I'm not a good descender. The view from the Trona bump is awesome – the land opens up without warning to display an awe-inspiring view of panamint valley below. It's one of those views that gives you the impression that your field of vision has miraculously become broader, such is the scope of the vista. To the right is the panamint range with telescope peak in the middle at over 11,000 feet. I'd climbed it one day some three years ago and, driven back to San Diego with my friends Cam and Linda along this road that evening. We'd seen cyclists with vans driving behind them. I had no idea what they were doing, but it was a striking sight. If only I'd known I'd be one of those cyclists three years on. What strange things will I be doing three years from now, for that matter, that I have no comprehension of today?

The descent is fast. I feel two spokes give out on the way down but decide to ride it out. How dangerous can it be to ride on broken spokes?! The ground levels out and a long, flat section commences. I plug away at it but I'm not really enjoying it. It gets properly dark. I can see a few lights up ahead now – the telltale amber strobing of the warning lights of other support vehicles. A quick left turn and piss-break next to Golden Dragon's truck at the point where we took a wrong turn heading for the Death Valley Double back in March (and spooked ourselves as we hit a dead-end we'd not expected at all) and we're on the final leg to Towne's pass. At this point I'd covered about 200 miles (although due to my little detour at the start of the race, I was only about 185 miles into the 508 proper). I was stoked to see that I'd done it in just over 12 hours, my fastest double to date, and nowhere near ready to drop.

This stretch goes on and on. It wearies me a lot. I think it's about 17 miles in total and I can see support vehicles ahead and behind me but it's hard to judge distance – the only real noticeable observation is that the two amber flashing lights merge into one from a distance. This means I can tell I'm close when I can see both as distinct lights. After a while I can begin to make out flashing lights on the mountainside up to the right. Townes Pass.

While I'm riding along, Matt suddenly calls out, "Mile 187! Naked mile!". The concept of naked mile

originated on the Solvang Double when Matt declared mile 187 as naked mile in commemoration of all black panthers shot by police. On Solvang, we were lucky enough (at least, by my modest British standards) to be alone (Matt, MattPro, Max and I) on a quiet wooded hill at mile 187. Matt had stripped and ridden an entire mile with just shoes and socks on. So the prospect of a naked mile on the 508, surely the first one ever to have happened, was irresistible. I immediately got off the bike, stripped of shorts and jersey, handed them to the laughing crew and rode on. At one point a car passed in the opposite direction so I prudishly hid behind my support vehicle, but other than that, naked mile passed uneventfully. Not only amusing, but practical too – it dried off any residual sweat I still had about my body from the day.

After what seemed like an age I began to be able to make out the support vehicles turning up ahead to the right. Even from that point, it must have been another five miles across a plane of desert with nothing but the shadows of creosote bushes in my peripheral vision and a line of support vehicles ahead and lining up to the right. I could see that I wasn't far from a pack of cyclists, spaced out at intervals of, as far as I could make out, about 100 yards up the slope leading to Townes pass.

Finally we made it to the intersection. Apparently some people make it here before daylight. Maybe next year? Eric Ostendorff was there, much to our delight. He took my totem and got a photo. I dismounted, took a quick piss and scarfed down a pasta burrito of death. Surely this was enough to tackle the infamous Townes pass? Matt had kept asking me if I was psyched for Townes pass. I think this came from my comment at the end of the Central Coast Double that if Townes pass had been then, I'd be psyched for it. Unfortunately, this time around, I wasn't psyched. I wasn't in the depths of blackest depression, but neither was I psyched. I think it was a combination of a long boring flat lead-up section with the fact that I wasn't passing anyone. Eric Ostendorff saw that I was stalling. "Go on. The lead guys are only four hours ahead. If you sprint up that hill, you can still win this race!" Thanks Eric. "There'll be no-holds barred wrestling at the end, too, right?" I ask. "Sure!" he replies. "You're gonna show that hill who's boss, right?" he banters. "Yeah, with two broken spokes, I'll show it who's boss". Eric inspects the wheel. "OpenPro right? Bombproof wheel. But don't descend on it, that's a long descent.". I assure him I'll

switch to my broken axle wheel after Townes Pass but I really want that 28 tooth rear cog for this section. And there's nothing more I can do to delay, so back on the bike I get and pedal off, support crew tagging along patiently behind.

It wasn't too bad. At least two other sections were worse (Shoshone to Baker was pretty bad, and the last twenty miles were agonizing), but I still wasn't psyched about it. I was just in a bit of a bad mood. The crew did a fine job playing some tunes... Slayer's *Rain in Blood*, Demigod's *Slumber of Sullen Eyes* album (awesome!), The Crown's *Deathrace Kind* (in particular, *Total Satan*, arguably the quintessential death metal song of the last eight years), *Tragedy's Vengeance* (which took me five songs to identify, not owning it myself), *Neurosis' The Eye of Every Storm* and finally as I reached the top, the *Beastie Boy's No sleep 'til Brooklyn*. Very funny guys. The climb wasn't horrific, but it was steep. Thankfully, by definition, steep hills mean that you gain altitude faster than less steep hills, so the 3000-foot marker came reasonably rapidly after the 2000-foot marker, the 4000-foot marker not too shortly after that, and the top a minimally painful period of time after that. I couldn't see much, and a lot of the time the road seemed raised up above the side of the hill, with drops on either side. I freaked out a little as I rode past a snake in the middle of the road that twitched unexpectedly and started moving as I passed by, clearly happily alive and probably hungry for cyclist. Yeuch. We passed Sabertooth Salmon as we ascended, the second fixed-gear rider. Yeah! I think I may have passed someone else. I don't recall. At the top it was really cold. Not as rapidly as we should have done, I switched jerseys then donned many additional layers of warm clothes courtesy of Marcin from back in LA. I even put on gloves for the only part of the ride. Matt exclaims, "Look! It's the ultracycling god looking down on us!". There's a cloud in the sky to the west that looks like a moustache. To add to the silliness, Max tried to get his helmet light working, but it had stopped working. As Max put it, it was "no more". That prompted Monty Python jokes... "It is an ex-helmet light", "It is deceased", "It has ceased to be", "Maybe it's pining for the fjords?". The last one was totally irrelevant and silly, so we switched wheels (for the last time) and moved on to the descent. Dropping from 5000 to -200 feet is a long descent, and I began to feel really tired for the first time on the ride. In fact, I seem to recall going under a bridge while I'm fairly sure there are no bridges over the road on the way

down to Stovepipe wells. By the time we hit the bottom I'd become really sleepy and a little concerned. I almost stopped by the side of the road on the way down but thankfully the bottom came. I stopped again and pissed, then downed my first Redbull, one of four presented as gifts from friends Chris and Trista back. I stripped off all my warm clothes and was back on the road.

My relief at finding no headwinds was enormous. We'd have a good run through the valley. I'd previously been concerned about the 25-mile stretch from Stovepipe Wells to Furnace Creek on account of it being the last 25 miles of the Death Valley Double back in march, my first ever double. I'd had some serious difficulty on that stretch back then, and wondered if those dark moments would return to haunt me now. I guess my mental strength may have bulked up as much as my quads have, as I found it amusing playing at chasing other support vehicles ahead. The real challenge came – a cyclist passed by at a solid pace. "It's team Chupacabra!" yelled Matt. "Go get them!". This was one cyclist I couldn't let go as easy as that, so I sped up, surprising myself at how much faster I could push. Overtaking was easy. As I passed, I saw it was Karen. "This goat won't get bitten so easy!" I yell at her as I pass. "Hi Morgan!", she replies. I was seriously out of breath for the first time on the race. I had to slow a little and chug some hammer gel. Soon enough, Matt was yelling at me - "She's coming to get you!". "She can have it" I yell back. But Matt's not letting me get away with that. "You've got to get to Furnace Creek before she does!". Damnit. Alright... here we go. I accelerate. It's actually kinda fun. In fact, this isn't as hard as I thought it would be. I keep moving, supping on perpetuem and gatorade all the way. Before I know it we're coming up to Furnace Creek. I push that little be extra, past the campsite we camped at back in March for the Death Valley Double. And we're at time station 3! "Goat!", I yell at the staff. We stop for a while, while I make best use of the toilet facilities and wash my face. That push had been intense, and fun. Maybe that's how I should be riding the whole race? Crazy. Could I push for 28 hours, if I made sure I ate and drank enough? It's an interesting question. Stuff to be answered in training next year...

The next fifty miles are kinda hazy to me. We arrived at Furnace Creek around 1am, and travelled as far as Ashford Mill at the foot of Jubilee pass before

sleeping at around 4:30am. Megan took over the task of driving and things went pretty fast; the dreaded headwind was nowhere to be seen. Rather, it felt as if we had a tailwind. I chased after support vehicles ahead but never quite caught any. We stopped a couple of times, first at Badwater. There I drank another Redbull but the effects seemed to be minimal. We zoomed by many scorpions crossing the road and I believe I inadvertently ran over one (no flat tire, thankfully). We also saw a lot of dead snakes and were lucky enough to see a desert fox up close, before it dashed off into the night. But the combination of no sleep and many hours of exertion built up and I ended up slowing down considerably as we approached Asford Mill. Things were also getting pretty hazy and I was beginning to see things out of the corner of my eye as I rode. My original plan had been to sleep in between Jubilee and Salisbury passes but I simply couldn't face climbing another hill, so when we saw the lights of support vehicles plodding their way up Jubilee pass, we pulled over. I recall mumbling, "The 508 is really epic...". It was really striking me how far we'd travelled in the past twenty-two hours – from the suburbs of LA through endless tracts of desert, over hills, down into the Panamint Valley then up over into Death Valley and back south. Incredible. It felt so epic. I rolled my sleeping bag out in the back of the van and slept. It was 4:30am.

The alarm went off and I was out of the van, feeling less dazed than I thought I would do, although a little nauseous. Daylight was just beginning to show behind the Jubilee/Salisbury pass duo. As we were emerging from the van Basenjie rolled up, looking strained. He laid down and his crew began to massage him. "Only one more real climb after this one", he said. Huh? I thought there were three major climbs? "Sheephole", he said. Matt confirmed. I have no idea what those guys were talking about. I chewed through a few chocolate-coated espresso beans, ate a bagel and was on the bike again, feeling the stiffness of my muscles and hoping it didn't spell trouble for me. I could feel strips of tendon running diagonally across kneecaps pushing into me, but a little stretching didn't seem to help. I figured the best thing to do was to ride it out. Treat it like a recovery ride. It was beautiful at this time of the morning and as I was fresh from my little nap, the length of the second of the forthcoming climbs, Salisbury, wasn't too intimidating. I pushed up to Jubilee pass doing a pretty consistent 9mph before the sun rose, powering

past one guy on the way up. Salisbury slowed me a little, but the end wasn't too far off. The crew made me apply sunblock halfway up, which I was a little grumpy about, but compliant. I reached the summit of Jubilee two hours after leaving our nap spot. It was funny to think that the lead guys still hadn't finished.

The descent was worse than the climb. We had a headwind and there seemed to be more flat than downhill. I think it took me 45 minutes to reach time station 4 in Shoshone from the summit of Salisbury, and I was far from happy. My butt hurt, and flats kill me. I dusted myself off with talcum powder and stalled a lot eating tofurkey and vegenaïse sandwiches with chips. The route guide said that the Ibex pass was minimal, followed by a mainly downhill or flat section to Baker. Looking back, I can see my error on this section, one of two bad sections (the other being the final twenty miles). At almost sixty miles, it's still a considerable chunk of road, but I went into it thinking I'd have to do only minimal work. Instead, there was a lot of pedalling time on the flat, in the heat of the desert. I presumed I'd be able to coast right on into Baker from the peak of the Ibex pass. Oh no! My crew were helpful but I was in a dark, dark mood. Max brought out the ice helmet and applied a wet bandana sausage to me but the ice helmet dripped over my eyes and rinsed rancid sweat from my bandana into my mouth. It tasted like vinegar and I worried about getting sick from it. The rancid sweat also got all over my glasses so I couldn't see very well. I was in a really bad mood. On top of that, my ankle started to hurt, getting progressively worse as I approached Baker. It got to the point that I became worried that it might be a potential DNF cause if it continued to deteriorate over the next few hours. The route description had said that I should watch for Baker's giant thermometer in the distance. I kept thinking pylons and telegraph poles could be the thermometer. They weren't. I managed to convince myself that I was only a few miles from Baker when I passed a signpost: another 17 miles to go. I was in a pretty fowl mood and to add to that, large RVs and unnecessarily large pick-up trucks were zooming past me, more often than not towing trailers wider than themselves. The only respite from this blackness was the punctuation of the desert with welcome stops with my crew were Matt sprayed me with the spray bottles we found in WalMart and Eric Ostendorff stopping on the side of the road to take photos of the ice helmet Max made. "Looks like an ice helmet to me!" he shouted at me. "Ostrich inspired!" I confirmed as I

rode past. I think he appreciated it.

It's interesting to me that the two sections that were awful to me were the two sections that I tried to wish away. The approach I had for most of the ride – that is, the assumption that I was riding 'indefinitely' – worked nicely. But the moment I started to define a destination for myself, thinking 'only 20 miles' or 'only 60 miles', was the moment at which the riding became a chore and I became demoralized. Self evident in retrospect, I suppose. A watch pot never boils.

Finally Baker came into sight. I could see it from ten miles away, but the sight itself cheered me up. The road swooped left to circumvent a dry lake bed and I had a little tailwind. Those ten miles passed quickly. Megan passed me a welcome burrito from the mexican restaurant on the corner of the intersection. The Bike Or Die burritos I painstakingly made on friday are a little the worse for wear, having been sat out in a hot car for 48 hours. I complain a lot about my ankle. Matt gives me a couple of ibuprofen pills and I sit making half-hearted attempts to stretch my calves. Eric Ostendorff is hanging around and asks me if I was going to do it. That gets me going. Of course I'm going to do it! As if there were any question. Matt gives me a summary of the course: two sections of about 35 miles then a 60 mile stretch home. I'm almost there. I'm also looking forward to the next stretch, an isolated stretch of road I'd driven with my parents some two years previously. I get back on the bike and set off. No more turns for over 100 miles! Just as I pull away, Medicine Horse's personal support vehicle pulls into the parking lot. I cheer at them and pedal off. I discover later that she was in the car and had DNF'd. Too bad.

I cross Interstate 15 leading from San Bernardino up to Las Vegas and set off up the approach to the Kelbaker climb. I start off with the residue of my bad mood but as the shallow climb commenced, I cheered up. I really enjoyed the climb, though as I muttered to my crew later, it was really a quite endearing hill, it's just that it didn't seem to appreciate when it'd outstayed it's welcome. The broad view was great, the day was wearing on enough for it to have cooled down somewhat and it was a clear blue sky. Lumps of basalt lay on the side of the road and off to the left were a row of cinder cones, clear sources of the basalt. The road was incredibly wide for such an isolated area, giving a sense of spaciousness that

extended into the surrounding vista. I really cheer up. At points there's a strong tailwind to me. The next time I see my crew, I mention that I never used to believe in any sort of omnipotent deities but tailwinds up hills are strong evidence for ultracycling gods. After seeing the moustache above Townes pass, I'm totally convinced.

The hill goes on and on, gradually shifting from pleasant to slightly annoying. The road surface deteriorates too. I mentally calculate that it may be possible for me to complete the next climb over the Granites before 6pm, the official start of night and the time at which it's necessary for me to fit lights and my support vehicle to follow directly behind me. The road quality really deteriorates towards the top, too. The summitless summit finally comes.

The downhill would have been marvellous if it weren't for the consistently awful surface. It's genuinely concerning... some of the potholes would throw me off my bike if I were to hit them at the wrong angle. I think about the lead guys – they probably bombed down here at 40mph. I do about 30mph due to liberal use of my brakes. The vista is incredible. The mountains on the other side of the dry, creosote bush-covered valley are huge, jagged monoliths of volcanic rock. I realise the next climb, over 'The Granites' must be over those things. They really are spectacular. Through the trough of the valley runs a railway line and I can make out the one-building village of Kelso with its large old abandoned railway station and clump of palm trees. As I fly further down into the valley the huge Kelso dunes also come into sight – a gigantic, isolated heap of sand dunes just south of the village. Like the Trona pinnacles, the dunes are an imposing, mystical destination that I'll never get close to on this ride. My attention keeps being brought back to the road surface though. It's unnerving.

I arrive at Kelso timestation while Golden Dragon and Monarch Butterfly are still there. The train station that was abandoned when I went through here two years ago has been renovated but with what purpose in mind, I have no idea. My crew and I discuss the rest of the route. It's less than 100 miles and we're really on the home run. Matt wants me to push, but I'm pretty set on my current pace. After a little convincing though, it seems to make sense for me to push to make it to the top of the ten mile climb up the granites by 6pm. We have two cans of Redbull left. I decide on one now, then one at the summit of Sheephole to

keep me awake for that last push into Twentynine palms that I'm already wary of. I chug down the Redbull, consume a tofurkey and vegemite sandwich and I'm back on the bike. The guys tell me they'll see me soon.

I hammer up much of the granites. In retrospect, they must have been moderately shallow, although they're definitely steeper than the previous Kelbaker climb. The creosote bushes are taller here and road wide, but the view is still amazing, since the sun is getting low in the sky and casts dramatic light and shadow on the granites to my left. The pass ahead is summitless again. I catch glimpses of Monarch Butterfly ahead of me at points. The climb begins to wear. Eventually, a couple of miles from the top, my crew catches up with me. It's about 5:50pm so we decide to get kitted out with lights and start following now. I make the error of putting on a windbreaker, thinking the summit is closer than it seems, and get quite sweaty. I hand it back to my crew and try to dry out in the last mile.

This is where things began to get a little weird. There's a summit, then a little dip followed for a couple of miles followed by another small summit. After that, it's a raging downhill for some twenty miles. The two mile flat section at the top was where I really started to go strange. The sun had just set and the view that opened up was incredible – I could see San Jacinto, the huge mound of rock that towers above Palm Springs in the distance, along with San Geronimo. I became aware that I could make out some mountains that must be a part of Joshua Tree national park, beyond my final destination. That really made it clear I was on the way home. But the sunset took on a distinctly hallucinatory edge – it was very crisp and sharp, begging me to stare at it. The final rocks of the granites that I was passing took on an unreal sharpness and I felt my perception of reality twist a little. I was definitely in a different world by the time the descent started. In retrospect, it amazes me how rapidly this state of exhaustion and sleep deprivation came on. I think now it must have been triggered by the sun setting and my body crying out for sleep.

The descent was long and strange. At twenty miles, it takes a long time even when approaching 40mph in places. The dramatic sunset over the distant mountains became eclipsed by nearby hills as we descended down into the valley. By the time we

passed under the I-40 at 25mph, blasting over a pair of cattlegrids, it was effectively dark. The descent to the final timestation became progressively weirder. The grade wasn't that steep, meaning I was only going about 25mph, and lights ahead of me were beginning to play tricks on my eyes. As we pulled into the final timestation, I was truly divorced from reality.

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So here I am setting off from the final timestation. Feeling pretty weird. That caffeine pill had better do some good.

I can see someone ahead from the flashing amber lights of their support vehicle. I know it's six miles to the next turn, and just as I set off from the time station I see the rider ahead turn left. Wow – he must be six miles ahead. Sure doesn't look that far. Matt had been encouraging me to push ahead fast but I'm not in the best of moods, as I know I've got a lengthy flat section ahead of me. It's also dark, so all I'll have to see is the road that's illuminated by my crew's support vehicle headlights. It's a shame, as the plane around Amboy is pretty interesting, particularly the 'Amboy Crater', a cinder cone sticking straight out of an otherwise completely flat plane. The area is known for it's chloride extraction and there are many areas next to the road where mineral deposits are left out to dry. None of this we'll see in this section though.

The six miles doesn't seem to take too long. The world is still pretty weird. I'm fully aware that I'm hallucinating, the most vivid of which happens as I cross the intermittent bridges along the road. As I pass over them, the railings on the side seem to glow with purple and blue, as if there are neon signs lining them. I don't bother looking directly at them. It's clear they're distortions of my over-tired mind. Other distortions aren't so clear to me – I become fixated by floating lights, seemingly twitching and jerking around just above the ground. As I come closer my mind comes up with a plausible explanation: they must be flashlights being held by people walking. But why are people walking in such an isolated area? It resolved itself in the end – they're just car headlights in the far distance coming towards us. The flickering and twisting motions must have been fabricated from a combination of my own movements as a cyclist and signposts and fences blocking my line of sight temporarily.

The turn comes soon enough. I can see the hills ahead, a darker black against the black of the night. I rapidly begin to make out a support vehicle moving up the hill. I can't make out the perspective at all but I can see the vehicle is making slow progress. It's an eight mile climb – at this stage a hill of that length could easily take an hour for a cyclist. I try not to think about it and keep pedalling. Meanwhile, my ankles and knees are hurting a lot. I'm descending into a grumpy, defeatist attitude. I know I'll finish, I just don't want to have to push. Why should I? I stop more often than I need to. Matt's pushing me to keep on with my perpetuum intake. Leave me alone! I'll finish! I think. But I do as he says.

The flat section goes on forever, and I'm not happy. The hill certainly isn't getting any closer. I stop again. My team warns me that I've got another rider coming up behind me – it's Monarch Butterfly. She passes quickly, and Matt's counselling me – I can easily outpace her up the hill, and I shouldn't get caught behind her all the way. I should overtake now, before the hill. Damnit. Ok – here we go. I'm back on the bike and pushing to overtake. I'm actually going at a fair pace and ignoring the pain in my ankles. Hey – this isn't too bad. The hill starts slowly, and I can see that the guy who was six miles ahead of me isn't so far ahead now. Maybe I can catch him? I'm going pretty hard still. How long can this last? Sheephole summit, this last climb, is supposed to start moderately and get steeper towards the top.

Without a doubt, I wouldn't have been able to maintain the pace for long if it weren't for a stroke of genius from my crew. Darkthrone's Panzerfaust comes blaring out of the on-roof speakers that Max has got hooked up. En Vind av Sorg, the first song, has got to be one of the most brutally honest, powerful, soulful and intense pieces of music ever written, an exemplary case of a band transcending their genre. The effect it has on me is astounding. I'm caught up in a sleep-deprived haze of grim intensity, ego and awareness. I'm not entirely certain I'm happy being in this state of mind but it's intensity is fascinating to me even as I'm in it. I don't fight it. I shift into a hypnotic rhythm as I power up the hill. I have no idea now, but it felt at the time as if I wouldn't have been able to give gone any faster if I'd had 20 miles on my legs instead of the 470 that I actually did have.

The music cuts in and out occasionally for the Celtic

Frost-esque Triumphant Gleam and The Hordes of Nebulah but I'm so deep into this crazy mindset that it doesn't phase me. By the time track four, Hans Siste Vinter comes on, I can make out the two individual amber warning lights on the support vehicle ahead, indicating I'm getting closer. I realise I'm in a curious situation – I want to catch the guy ahead so badly before the summit that I'm wishing that the summit isn't coming up soon. The road begins to get steeper but that just gets me going harder. I'm out of breath, but so full of energy that I know I can keep going without burning out. Before I know it, I'm passing the guy I've been chasing. An additional ego boost comes as he asks, "Relay team?". "No." I reply. Half a mile on and we're at the summit. I'm simultaneously entranced and a little embarrassed at the power I felt going up Sheephole.

I chug a last Redbull to keep me awake on the downhill and give me a boost to cover the last twenty miles to the finish line. I put on a windbreaker and push off down the hill. Almost there!

Of course, the last twenty miles were the worst of the entire ride. The descent was quick, then a right turn. Immediately I feel myself slow. It's a slight uphill all the way into Twentynine palms but so gradual that you can't see it, especially not in the dark. I think we may have had a small headwind, but can't be sure. I descend into a dark mood with hints of paranoia. I occasionally muster up some good humour, dropping back to say to the my crew, "Hmm, looks mighty comfortable in there..." or similar, but by and large I'm trudging along just trying to ignore my surroundings, my situation and the pain in my ankles that has multiplied itself many times over due to my burst up Sheephole and my disposition. The grim defeatism of pre-Sheephole is back but much worse. The road bears sufficient signs of humanity to be depressing but is removed enough from the town to exhibit few waymarkers of my progress. Lights pass by, smallholdings on the side of the road. Flickers in the shadows indicate the caffeine pill's unnoticed benefit may be wearing off. I don't know how fast I was going or how long it took, but this was the never-ending horror that no amount of reading about 508 veteran's stories could have prepared me for. I try to catch people ahead of me. I fail. My mood deteriorates in harmony with my ankles. The guy I passed on Sheephole blasts past me.

Finally, Twentynine palms comes. We turn left, then

right. There are a couple of short, steep climbs that play havok with my ankles. The support van ahead of me turns left. We're there. Somewhat surprisingly, I'm not particularly elated. I turn into the parking lot. Breaking the toilet-paper finishing line, I attempt to grab it with my teeth (I'm a goat, after all. We eat everything...) but miss it. I get a medal. My crew pass me my cut-off shorts and a hooded top. Matt continues his sterling job as coach/crew by giving me a bottle of sustained energy and instructions to drink it. I'd rather drink my own piss, thank you. I surreptitiously place it on the table behind me and take to eating pizza on another table instead. We have some photos taken with Chris Kostman. He tells us to act sensibly for once, which we fail to manage. I eat some more pizza and forget about stretching.

So that's it. We're done. I get in the van while Max takes my bike and we head to the hotel. Checking in is easy, the receptionist knows all about the 508. "Good thing it wasn't like last year. Those winds really broke people". Yeah, you're telling me. We go to our room where the digestive impact of 40 hours on a bike results in my flooding the bathroom. Max goes to the reception and we get moved to another room. "We move on like a swarm of locusts, leaving a swathe of destruction behind us", remarks Max. Too right.





