

Fire in the Belly

by Paul Skilbeck

RAAM PR guy Paul Skilbeck lost his ultra-cycling virginity at the Furnace Creek 508, and yes, it was memorable.

I'll be honest. My main motivation for competing in the 508 was to establish myself in the ultra-cycling community as something more than a middle-aged PR guy who didn't have any ultra-cycling experience. Although I'd not raced a bike in 15 years, my passion for the cycle sport is undying. I'm not sure if Johnny Boswell knew that when he invited me to race with him in the two-person category.

In the early weeks of my training I was thinking a top-three place overall in the two-person category would be a great result. But my training had gone so well that on race day I woke up feeling like a bike racer again, and there was a gnawing desire in my belly for the outright win. Not wanting to put pressure on Johnny, I kept this to myself until about halfway through the race. Both of us were 508 rookies and Johnny entered thinking he was just riding for a respectable finish.

"On race day I woke up feeling like a bike racer again."

Johnny is an experienced double-century rider and started the 508 at a very steady pace. But for me, waiting for Johnny to arrive at California City after the first 80 miles, it was knuckle-chewing frustration. When I got rolling, I had to discipline myself to keep my heart rate under 80%. The Batula team had gone through over an hour ahead, and the Lizard-Scorpion team of Steve Winfrey and Charlie Liskey were 56 minutes up on us. Having previously won their category of two-person RAAM, they were the team to beat, but on leaving California City I was more or less resigned to fighting for a place in the top three.

A favorable wind helped me bring back the Lizard-Scorpions to 29 minutes, and at this point I started to believe we could win it if things went well. But waiting for Johnny at Jack and Hannah Bochsler's Furnace Creek time station, I began to feel that desperate tension again. The Lizard-Scorpions were 1:21 ahead when he came in

looking a little tired, but pretty good for having just climbed and descended Towne Pass. I knew he would stay strong to the finish.

Charging down Death Valley, I forgot the pre-race advice of Steve Born at Hammer Nutrition, and overloaded on Sustained Energy. This is a great product which I use a lot, but as I discovered, ya gotta follow the instructions! Especially at 2.30 a.m. when my stomach is not accustomed to digesting anything. I rode up the 13-mile Jubilee/Salsberry climbs with a big knot in my gut and a feeling of nausea that would stay with me for the remainder of the race. Somehow I managed to make good time on this stage and handed over to Johnny at Shoshone with only a 21-minute deficit to the Lizard-Scorpion team. I crawled under a blanket in my car as we drove on to Baker. I was feeling too unwell to even reach down and remove my cycling shoes. I definitely couldn't eat. I was shivering from a 50 mph descent of Salsberry Pass, I just wanted to start feeling normal again.

"Steve Winfrey showed me what true sportsmanship is."

At Baker I was still pretty rough as the day broke. I felt hollow, and my body salt was all on the outside. Steve Winfrey showed me what true sportsmanship is. He knew I was gaining dangerous amounts of time on him and Charlie, but when I told him of my stomach issue he took me under his wing and gave me something he thought would help. To me, this summed up the spirit of ultra-distance cycling, it is what makes the sport special. The gesture alone made me feel a great deal better—but my desire to beat the Lizard-Scorpions remained as fierce as ever, as Steve well knew.

Spurred on by the early morning sun, I flew over the 21-mile climb on the way to Kelso and handed over to Johnny just 14 minutes after the Lizard-Scorpions had passed through. I was searching for small advantages everywhere throughout the entire race. One thing that the CompuTrainer training really helped with was going fast on the descents. That and staying in the aero position gained me several minutes on my rivals over the course of the race. Although I was still feeling nauseous, I found I was able to keep taking Hammer Endurolytes and little, infrequent, sips of Hammer Gel. My energy was gradually waning,

but my legs felt great throughout the race, much credit for which I believe should go to the Endurolytes. I won't race again without them.

Johnny had stayed strong like a diesel, and he'd worked hard on the climb to limit his time loss to Steve Winfrey. He handed over to me at Almost Amboy for the final leg with a 38-minute deficit. I had ingested less than 1,000 calories since Death Valley 12 hours earlier. There were 58 miles to Twenty Nine Palms, including the 1,500 foot Sheephole Pass to climb. I felt optimistic, urgent... and empty.

"I felt optimistic, urgent... and empty."

As the road bent right to approach the pencil-straight climb to Sheephole Pass, the wind came around nicely from the rear. I told my support car to play leapfrog so they didn't block this tailwind. Going over the summit Johnny shouted out that I was 18 minutes behind the Lizard. I maintained an uncomfortably low aero tuck for the 5-mile descent and kept my speed up around 45 mph.

The final 25 miles were a peculiar kind of unexcruciating brutality. Not screaming pain like a mountain bike race, but more a deep, desperate discomfort. Coming off the Sheephole descent I turned right into a merciless headwind on a curveless road that stretched out 20 miles ahead. After about three miles, I hit the wall. My heart rate wouldn't go above 55%. I had spent too much energy on the Sheephole climb and now was struggling and demoralized. I didn't know where the Lizard was and couldn't find the focus to catch him. I began testing myself with the idea of settling for the age-group win. That didn't feel too bad, and my stomach was feeling very queasy again. But things were about to turn around for us. Sitting beside the road was the Lizard-Scorpion team car. They had come back to get a time check on me. I began to feel lucky again.

The tactic of the Lizard-Scorpion van told me the Lizard was suffering just as much as I, if not more.

As they drove back up the road, I was able to track their vehicle until it reached my man, about two miles ahead. I knew where he was, and I knew I could catch him. The only problem was, I couldn't raise my heart rate. My crew offered me Hammer Gel, but that sounded way too solid for my tender stomach. But I knew I had to try something or we'd fall short. I thought about the caffeine in a Coke and asked for that, hoping it would give my heart a kick. This seemed to work, at least temporarily, and my crew diluted some Hammer Gel in water, which added a noticeable extra punch to my pedal stroke. I felt like a science project.

There was still about an hour of racing left, and I was feeling too unwell to maintain a constant pace. So I progressed in five minute spurts, with three minute breaks in between. Slowly I moved in fits and starts toward my rival. As we turned off that unforgiving road, out of the howling headwind, I got within 100 yards of the Lizard.

About five miles remained to the finish, and I suddenly felt as if I had stepped onto a cloud. Yet mindful of the power of Charlie Liskey, I decided on the gambit of a big blast past him at high speed, making me look stronger than I really was. I didn't even look at him as I went past, but my crew told me he was too far gone to mount a significant counter. If he had countered, I know I could not have hung on to that pace for long.

The honeymoon quickly ended, and rolling into the finish I was feeling too hollow and messed up to experience anything else. The only thing I felt capable of on crossing the line was to lie down and grimace. I got up briefly to greet Charlie and Steve as they came in, then went back down. When I got up 15 minutes later and walked gingerly to my motel room, I noticed Charlie a few yards away lying face down in the grass. We'd both wanted the win enough for it to turn into a hellish struggle. Now that my racing fire has been rekindled, I'm sure it won't be our last.

Moving? Let us know — the post office doesn't forward *UltraCycling*.

Name _____ Phone _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Postal Code _____

E-mail to: UMCAHQ@aol.com Mail to: UMCA, PO Box 18028, Boulder, CO 80308-1028