

2005 Furnace Creek 508
October 8-10, 2005
Night Crawlers; Mike and Karen McGeough
Crewed by: Dennis and Nita Uyeno, Paul Greene, and Ray Low

Karen and I raced in the 2005 Furnace Creek 508, (FC508). It is a 514 mile, (normally 508 miles, but extended this year due to a detour), non-stop ride through the deserts of California. The ride starts in Santa Clarita, near Los Angeles, heads north over 5 mountain passes, drops into Death Valley, and climbs back out over 5 more mountain passes to end up in Twenty Nine Palms. I used past data from previous FC508 races and our latest double century races to predict our times for each of the 8 stages of the race. My estimates had us finishing in about 40 hours. The record for our category which is a 2 person mixed team, (male/female), average age 40-49 was 38:49:25, or just under 39 hours. Using our best riding times, I estimated that we could do as well as 36 hours and smash the old record. Karen wasn't concerned about winning or about records; she just wanted to have a good ride. We ended out finishing in 34:15:58. This was almost 6 hours faster than my estimate, almost 2 hours faster than the best time I could imagine we could do, and 4 ½ hours faster than the previous record. I averaged 16.2 mph over the 277 miles and 18,180 ft of climbing on my 4 stages. Karen averaged 13.6 mph over the 237 miles and 17,336 ft of climbing on her 4 stages. Our average speed for the entire race was 14.9 mph including all stops and lost time.



Team Night Crawlers on the podium.
From the left, Dennis and Nita Uyeno, Ray Low, Karen, Mike, and Paul Greene.

We had unusually good riding conditions with generally favorable winds and cool temperatures, so almost all of the records for the race were broken this year. And although we broke the record for our category, we ended out in 2nd place by 2 minutes and 32 seconds. Another team, Team Chinook, from Washington, won the category and set the record. They are a veteran team. The male on their team is in the FC508 Hall of Fame having raced it for the 7th time this year. They took 2nd place in 2004. We were rookies and had never ridden anything like this before. We did not see Chinook the entire ride and did not know they were even near us until we went to the podium and saw them

getting their medals for their win. Karen didn't notice Chinook pass her during last 10 miles of the last stage since she was just focused on finishing the race. Chinook spent most of the time about an hour behind us and knew where we were at all times by checking our times at the time stations. We had no idea where they were since we were ahead of them. They had a good kick and passed Karen up in the last few miles.

Preparation:

A couple of weeks before the race, we had a cookout at our place for the crew. We went over all our plans including techniques, food, sleeping arrangements, communications, etc. A few days later we practiced food and water handoffs since we did not plan to stop for water or food during the race.

As we were preparing for the race, I was nursing pain in my left knee. I thought I had overcome all the problems that were holding me back from riding well; atrial fibrillation, left knee pain, and muscle cramps. They all came back during this race, but that is later in the story.

The Saturday before the race, we rode a 140 mile route which included Fremont Peak. That is a climb that is the closest thing I could find to the hardest climbs of the race; Towne's Pass, on Stage 3 and Salsbury Pass on Stage 4. On the way home, my left knee was hurting so much, Karen had finish the ride without me and come pick me up in the car. I spent the rest of the week on Advil treatments which normally help relieve the pain. (I've been diagnosed with a plica, which is a fold in the tissue above the knee. A plica gets inflamed by repeated motions, but supposedly does not cause any damage to the knee. However, it is quite painful.) During the last week before the race, Karen shopped for enough supplies to feed 20 people. We only had 6 total, crew included. We filled both cars with supplies and decorated them with our totem, the Night Crawlers, and had our name on all 4 sides as required by the rules. We had everything we needed for several days away from any kind of store, which was good, since any services are very far and few between in the desert. Food, camp stove, toilet paper, energy bars, sodas, V-8, desserts, soups, chips, cookies, batteries, cameras, binoculars, cell phones, walkie talkies, spare everything for our bikes, clothes, and on and on...

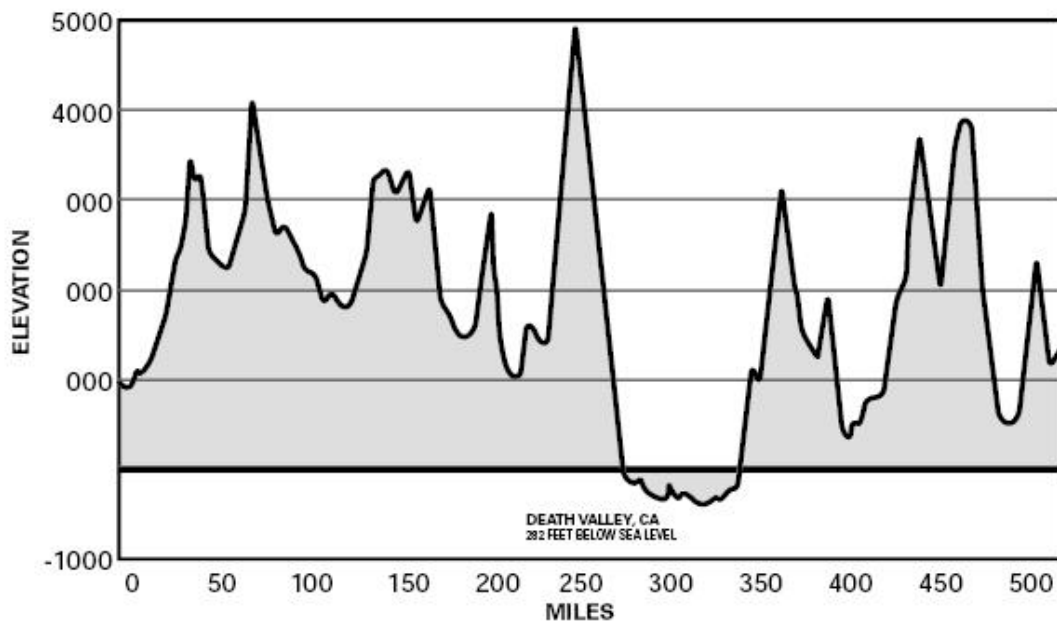


Cars decorated for the race.



Supplies-not including luggage!

Dennis and Nita Uyeno crewed for Karen in Karen's red Subaru, Ray Low and Paul Greene crewed for me.

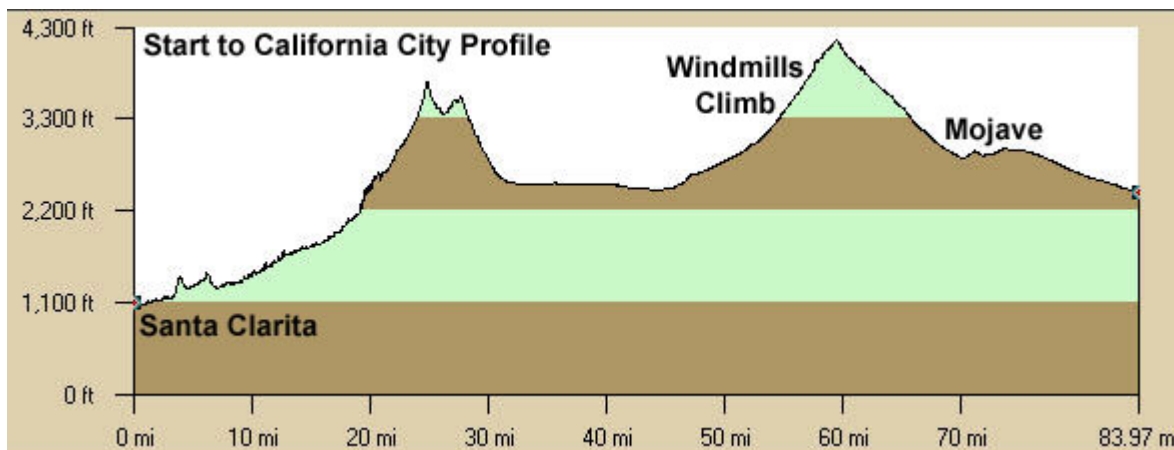


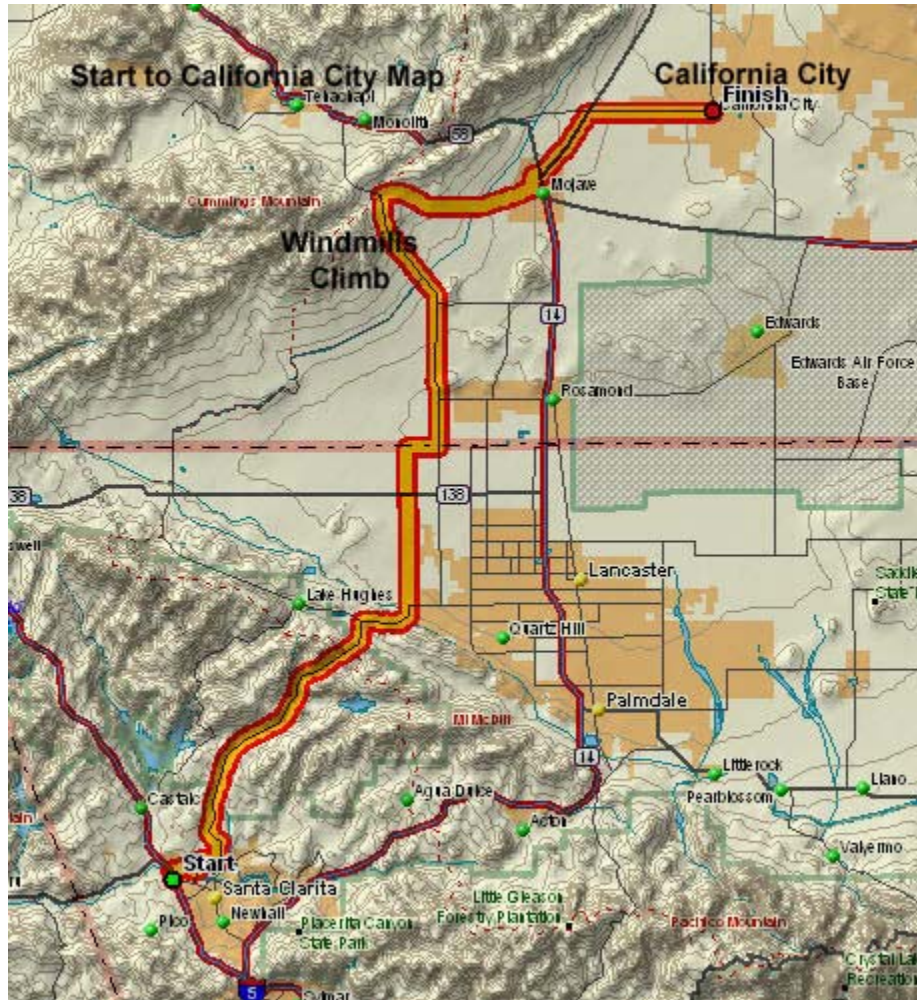
Elevation Chart for the Furnace Creek 508

The Race:

I rode the odd-numbered stages which were a bit longer, with a little more climbing, than the even numbered stages, and included the extra 5.8 mile detour caused by a washout on the normal route.

The solo riders started in the dark at 6:30 AM and were well on their way by the time the teams started at 9:00 AM. There were 23 teams in the race. We all rode together for about 8 miles under “yellow flag” conditions. After that, the race was on and riders were not allowed to ride together. No riding alongside a rider, no drafting, or you are disqualified. This meant that there was no one to talk to for the entire ride. Even the pace car had to stay far enough behind the rider to have no effect on his/her riding.





Stage 1. Santa Clarita to California City; 88.1 miles, (with detour), 6176 ft. climbing.
 Mike, Saturday, 9:00 AM to 1:58 PM; 4 hrs 58 min, 17.7 mph, (17.9 mph after “yellow flag” start).

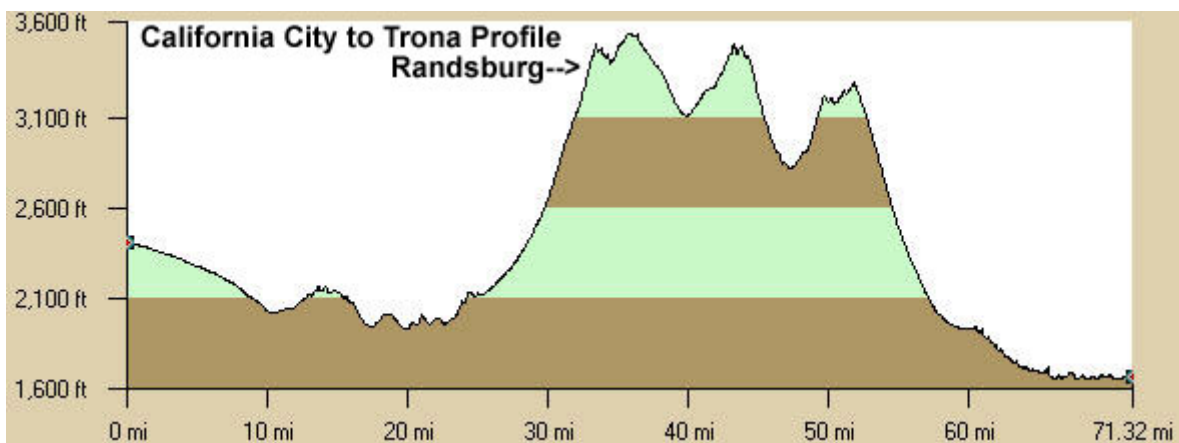


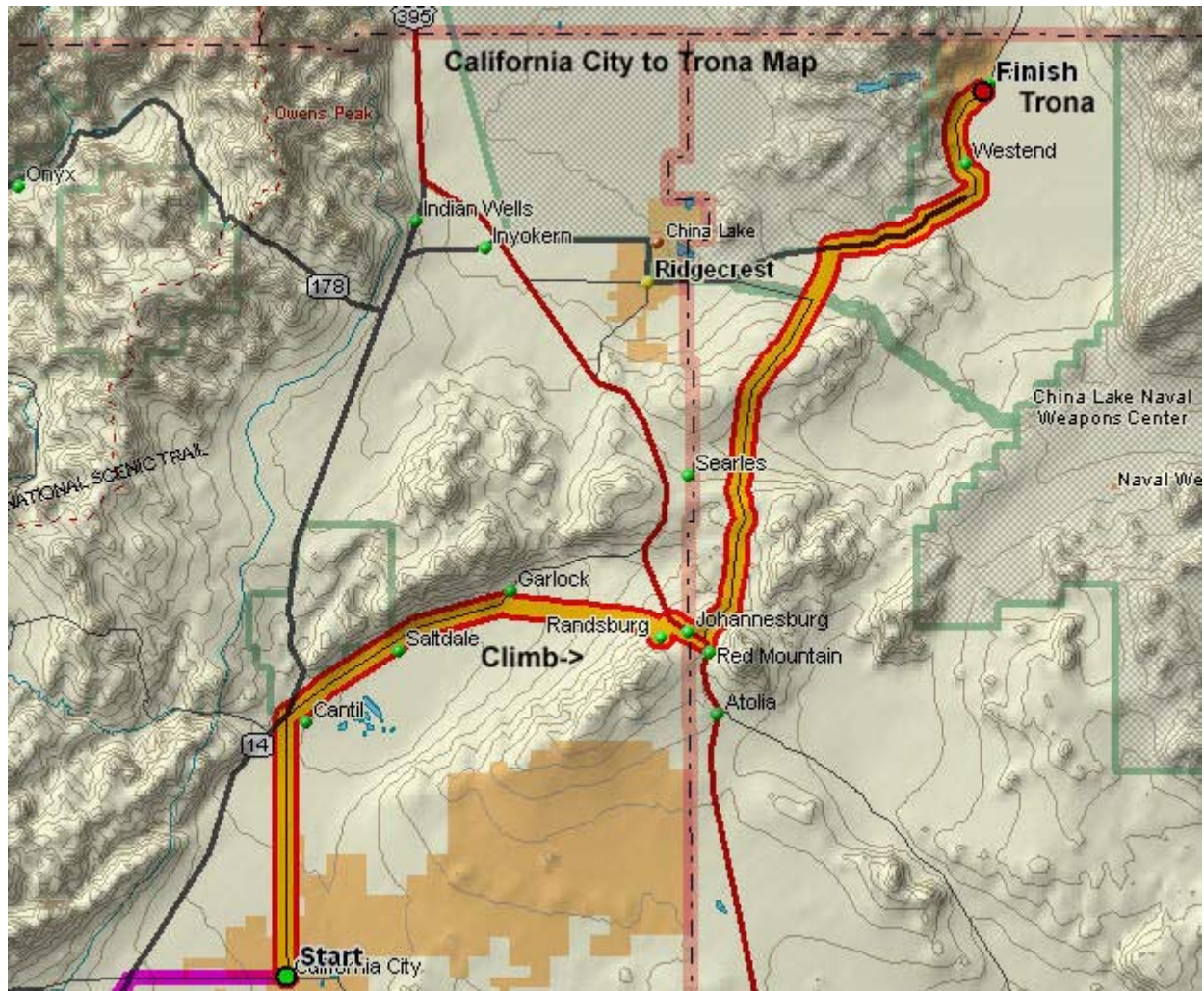
Mike at the starting line.



Mike riding the first stage.

At the end of the “yellow flag” conditions, when the officials told us the race had started, a member of the winning team, a 4-man team, the Hammerheads, hammered off the front and disappeared. The next time I heard anything about them was at the finishing line when I learned they finished in a record, 24 hours and 56 minutes, or more than 9 hours ahead of us. I stayed with several of the faster 4x teams through the first stage of 88 miles with 6176 ft of climbing averaging 17.9 mph. My left knee started bothering me after about 50 miles and I could no longer stand and pedal at the same time. I had to sit on my saddle and work hard with my right leg while relaxing my left leg. I took more Advil and complained to myself a lot. Even so, I had a great 1st stage and passed off to Karen who was waiting for me at the Time Station in California City.



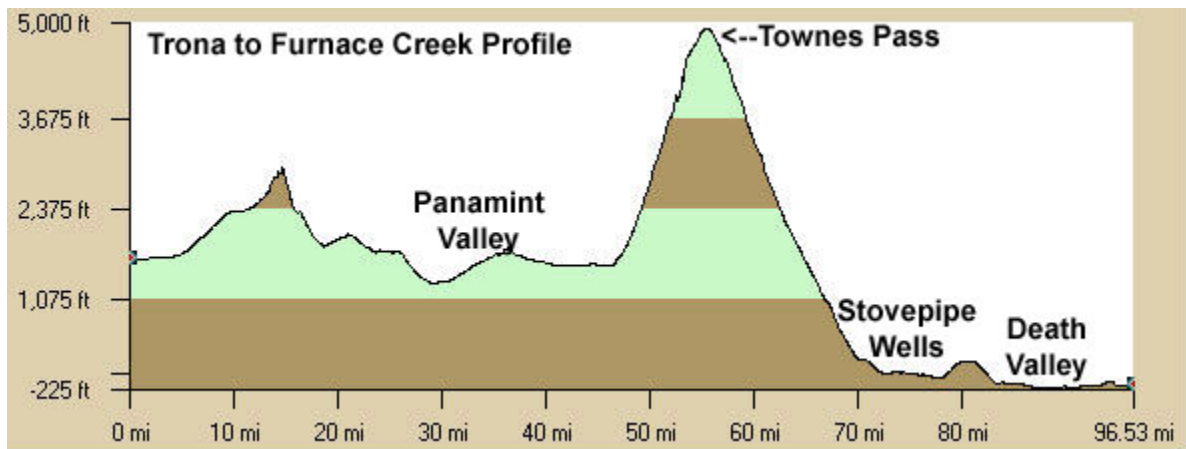


Stage 2. California City to Trona; 70.3 miles, 4212 ft. climbing.
Karen, Saturday, 1:58 PM to 5:58 PM; 4 hrs 0 minutes, 17.6 mph.

Karen took the baton and rode off on Stage 2. She hit a strong head/cross wind during the first 13 miles and had to fight to keep her bike in control. She also knew right away her legs were going to be uncooperative, cramping and sore, maybe for the entire race – ack! But, Karen was in great spirits and ready to finish the race, and nevertheless had a fast, uneventful stage to Trona which is in the middle of the desert. Dennis and Nita supported her using the required leap-frog technique. They appear to have been a perfect match of rider and crew. Karen rode her 70 mile, 4212 ft stage in 4 hours, 0 minutes, which was 41 minutes faster than I had predicted. After 2 stages, we were 1 hr and 9 minutes ahead of my planned schedule. That means that after 2 stages we had covered enough ground to finish in record time if we could just maintain our predicted times on the remaining 6 stages. I took the baton from Karen at about 6:00 PM, which was the cutoff for no lights. She didn't have to stop to put lights on, and I didn't have to install our "slow moving vehicle" triangle during the stage. Ray and Paul hopped to it and started following me. The support vehicles were required to do leap-frog support on Saturday until 6:00 PM. After that they were required to follow the rider at night, and could do either a leap-frog or following technique during daylight hours. While we were riding to Trona for the start of Stage 3, my heart started to fibrillate. I thought maybe my magnesium supplements were not the answer and I was going to have to quit. I took an Atenolol which helps regulate heart rhythm, and tried to relax. I also took another magnesium tablet which seems to help. I was worried that our race would be over after only 2 stages! My heart switched back to sinus rhythm about ½ hour later...we were not going to DNF yet (DNF=Did Not Finish).



Karen riding Stage 2 & handing off the baton to me for the infamous Towne's Pass Climb on Stage 3.





Stage 3. Trona to Furnace Creek; 99.2 miles, 7538 ft. climbing.
Mike, Saturday, 5:58 PM to Sunday, 12:55 AM; 6 hrs 57 minutes, 14.3 mph.

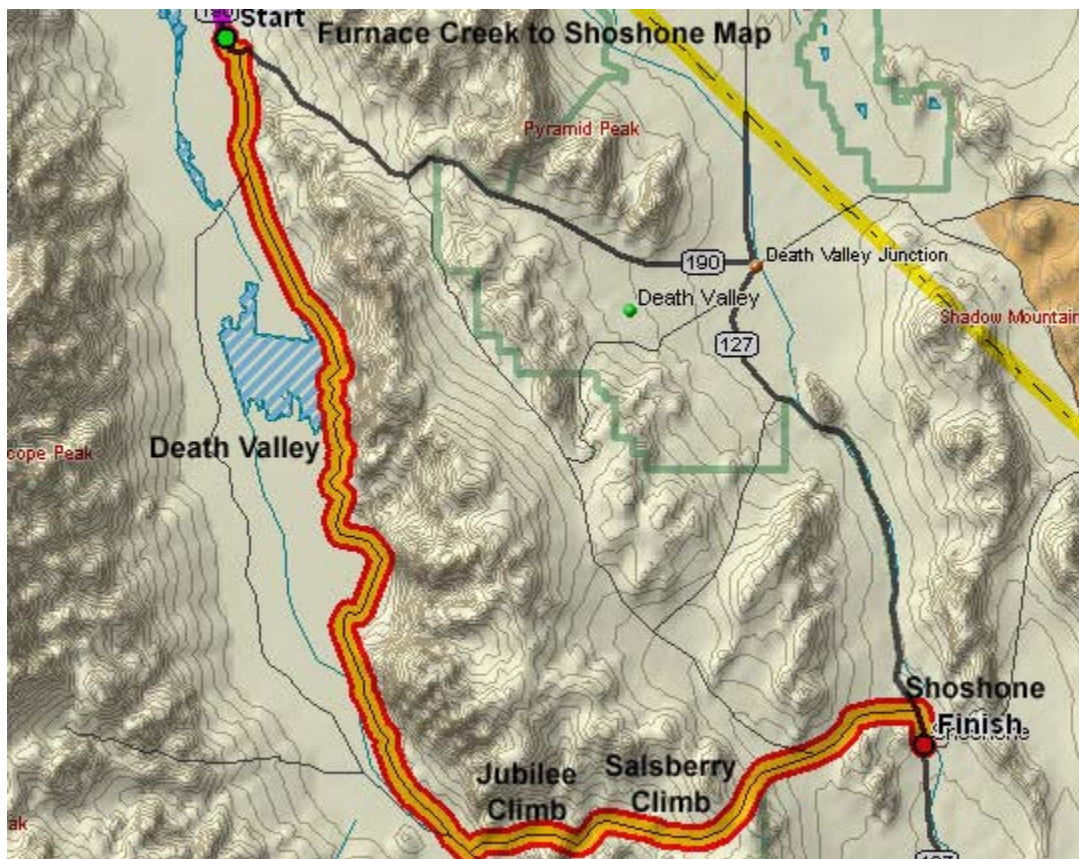
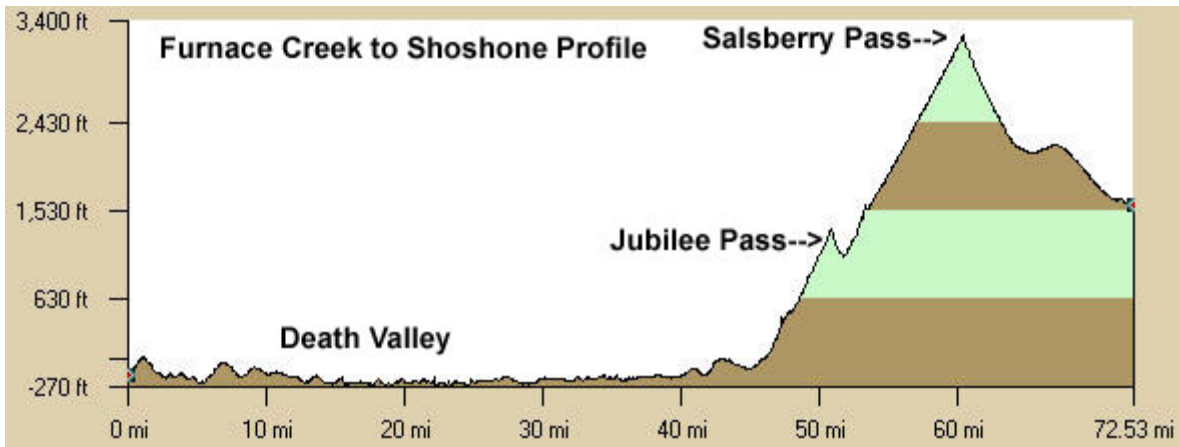
My knee was doing better after a couple of hours off of my bike, so I thought the ibuprofen was doing its job and I hammered into the 3rd stage. I maintained a 22 mph average over the first 45 miles of the stage. Then I took the right turn to Towne's Pass. This was the 13 mile, 3500 ft climb against a howling headwind. I had been training for this and was excited about passing up dozens of riders on this climb. As I approached the turn, I saw many riders stopped for breaks, putting on warm clothes, etc. I just turned the corner, stood up on my pedals and started climbing. I passed a couple more riders and my left knee started flaring up again. I could see the ribbon of bikes and lit-up support vehicles in the night for miles ahead of me, and miles behind me snaking up and down the mountain. All I could hear was the music from my MP3 player and the howling wind whistling through my helmet.

I was disappointed at my knee problems, so decided to just sit on my saddle and spin it out. I counted my 69 revolutions per 0.1 miles at my lowest gear and checked my odometer. I counted another 69 revolutions and made sure I went another 0.1 miles. Then I tried to count to 690 to cover a whole mile, but hoped that I was in the wrong gear and that I had ridden more than a mile...no such luck. I kept this up for about 7 miles while passing a couple of other solo riders. There was even a guy walking! The solo riders had been riding straight through for over 200 miles. I was fresher since I had taken a break while Karen was riding Stage 2. I was doing fine I thought. My knee hurt, but I could concentrate on my right leg and take it easy on my left and hold a 4.5 mph pace against the wind. A gap was being created between me and all the riders behind me that I had passed. I thought that even with my knee problems I could still gain a lot on this big climb. I could see other riders up the mountain and concentrated on catching them. Then about 7 miles into the climb, I started to cramp up. My adductor, (inside thigh muscle), locked up on me. I got off my bike, stretched it out, cussed a little and tried to walk it off. It went away. I hopped back onto my bike. It came back. I

repeated this over and over again. At one point I couldn't get rid of the cramp and I couldn't even walk for awhile. It was cold, and I had nothing but shorts and a jersey on. Everyone else was in jackets. I didn't feel cold, since I have a large thermal mass, but my skin temperature was cold. Now my calves were both cramped too. I decided that I should stay off my bike the rest of the way to the summit. I was feeling strong and walked quickly-not like I was defeated, but like I was on a mission. I wasn't tired, just limping on a bad left knee, and limping on a cramped right adductor. I watched my bike computer. I was walking at only 3.7 mph. I was sure everyone was going to pass me and laugh at me. But, the further I walked, the further ahead I got. I realized that the other riders, like me, were only riding/walking about 3 mph against that 40+ mph wind. I was doing better on foot at 3.7 mph with my head down and my hands in my aerobars than I could on my bike even if I could eliminate my cramps.

I finally gave in to the cold and stopped to put on arm warmers and my vest. I also took an opportunity for a nature brake which was my first stop in 145 miles of riding. Maybe if I had put on warm clothes earlier, I could have avoided the cramps. I don't know. As I got closer to the summit, 3 people finally passed me. I knew 2 of them. One was my friend, Paul Vlasveld, who was riding the race solo. I must have passed him at the turn where everyone was taking a break. He yelled over at me, "Hey Mike, why are you walking?" I turned around and realized who it was. Paul just keeps on going like the Energizer Bunny. He was going only slightly faster than me, but he was a hero-he was pedaling, not walking like me, the Sissy. I was the wimp walking up the mountain. Ray Low guesstimates that I walked 7 miles up that mountain. I finally crested the mountain, hopped on my bike and flew down the other side for a 25-mile non-stop 5000 ft. descent to Stove-Pipe Wells at about 40 mph. I passed the 3 people that had passed me earlier. 2 had stopped to take a break and the other wasn't a descender like I am, (I'm sure I am about 100 lbs heavier too). I had hit 56 mph earlier in the day, and hit 54 mph a couple of times on this descent in the dark. I spent the coasting time stretching my legs and relaxing so I could finish the stage to Furnace Creek. I still had 25 miles of pedaling to go after I found myself in Death Valley. It was warmer in the valley and with the stretching and 40 minute descent, my cramps were gone. I loosened my knee by pedaling very slowly, and then started hammering to Furnace Creek, where Karen and her crew were waiting.

I had told Karen and her crew to expect me between midnight and 2:00 AM-depending on the wind. I arrived at 12:55 AM. They had taken a much needed nap and were getting ready when my crew finally got a hold of them on the Walkie Talkie with about 1 mile left to go. Communications are bad in the area; there are no cells, so cell phones don't work. Walkie Talkies are only good for 1-2 miles, and we didn't have CB or satellite phones. So when I arrived, Karen was still putting her lights on her bike and getting dressed. We lost 11-15 minutes here, but at least she was rested and ready for her next stage. I packed up my bike, heated some water for soup and noodles, ate a few sandwiches and drove off. While we were eating, Paul Vlasveld showed up. He must have spent about ½ hour at the summit of Towne's Pass. How else could he have gotten ½ hour behind me after harassing me for walking my bike. Now he was heading into his van for a 2 hour nap. We wouldn't see him again until Monday morning at breakfast. At least he would not be able to tease me about walking any more! Paul is amazing. What we were doing as a relay team was nothing compared to Paul's accomplishment in this race as a soloist!

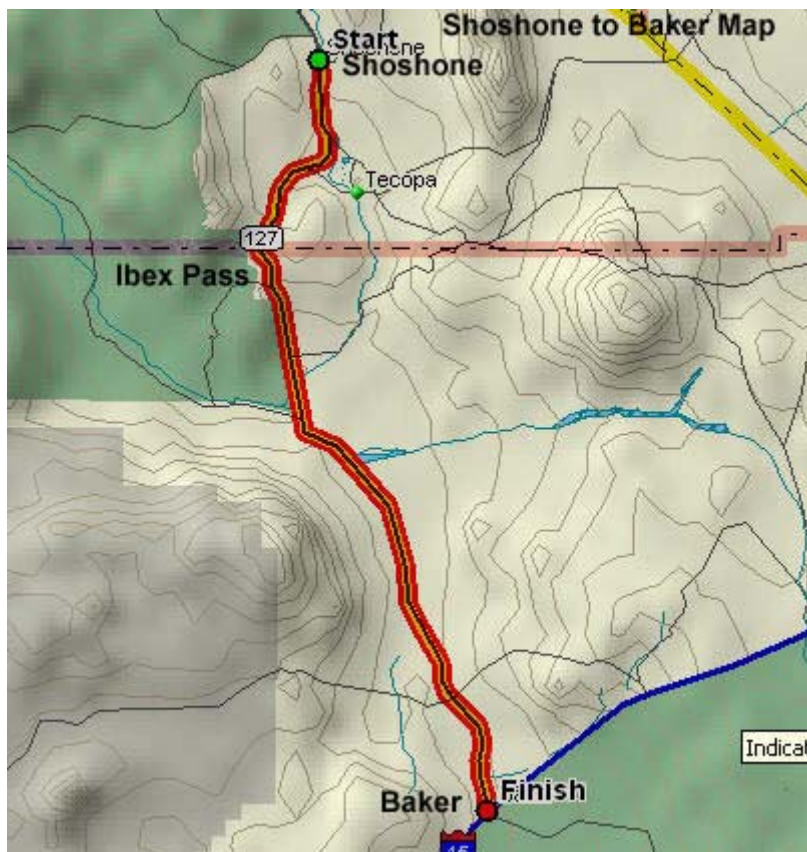
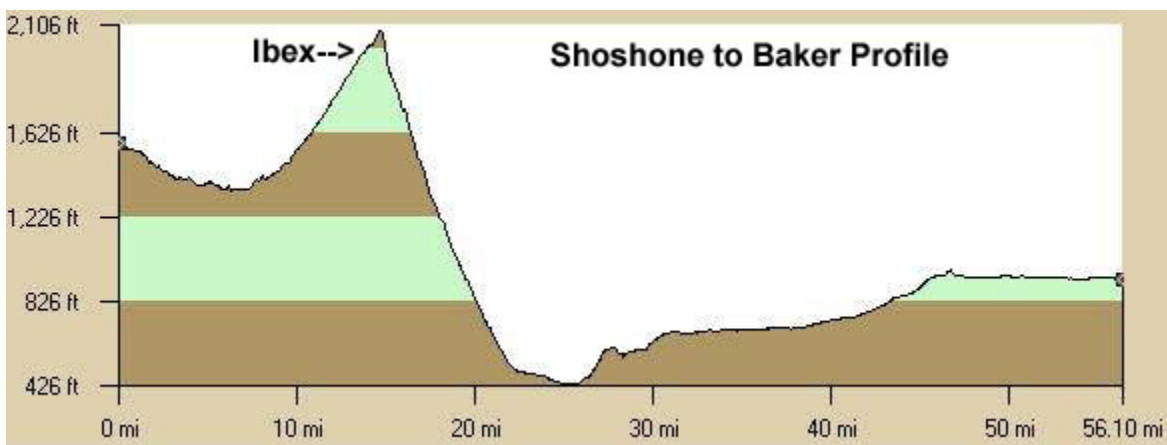


Stage 4. Furnace Creek to Shoshone; 73.6 miles, 7644 ft. climbing.
Karen, Sunday, 1:08 AM to 7:00 AM; 5 hrs 52 minutes, 12.6 mph.

Karen started Stage 4 in Furnace Creek at 1:08 in the morning, in the pitch black darkness of a moonless desert night. She had the 2nd hardest mountain climb of the race ahead of her—in complete darkness. Her legs were burning and she had only napped a few minutes since we had started at 9:00 AM the day before. My crew and I packed up our car and headed out to Shoshone. We cheered Karen on as we went by her near Badwater, the lowest point in North America. Karen knows this stretch since she has ridden it twice while competing in two Death Valley Double races. I felt confident she would get to Shoshone by 9:00 AM.

Upon arriving in Shoshone, Ray and Paul hunkered down in the car to get some shut-eye. I prepared my bike, got dressed, and rolled out my sleeping bag on a mat on the sidewalk in front of the post office. I stayed near the officials so Karen could find me if she found me asleep. I was fully dressed,

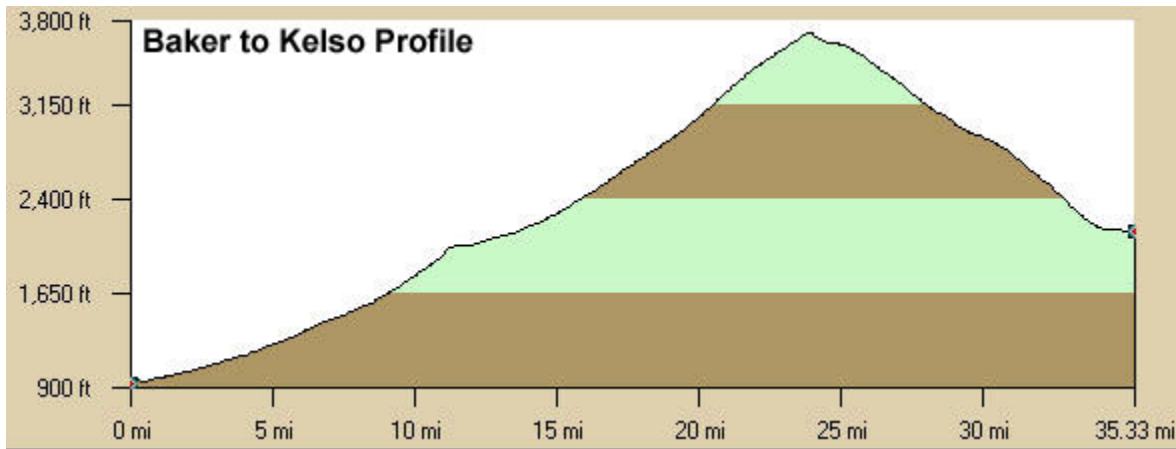
shoes and all trying to get some sleep. I just needed a moment to put on my helmet and ride away. While I was trying to sleep, I kept hearing the riders come in and post their split times, there was Saluki, Desert Duck and others I didn't recognize. I rolled over and tried to sleep, worrying about scorpions and black widow spiders crawling into my sleeping bag. Then I heard rider HumuHumuNukuNukuApua'a arrive. They were wide awake and noisy-I really wanted to sleep but couldn't. About an hour later, I heard rider Chupacabra arrive and thought, hey, they weren't too far ahead of Karen. I opened my eyes and it was still dark. Then Gray Wolf rolled in. Hmmm, Karen might not be that far away. Then E. Coli arrived, and I knew it was time to get up. I packed my sleeping bag, pillow and mat away; put on my helmet and gloves; then went back and sat down in a comfortable spot. Then at 7:00 AM, 2 hours ahead of schedule, (in spite of still sore, cramping legs), Karen pulled up at the time station. People directed her over to me, saying, "He's over here!" I grabbed the baton and told my crew I was heading out on Stage 5.

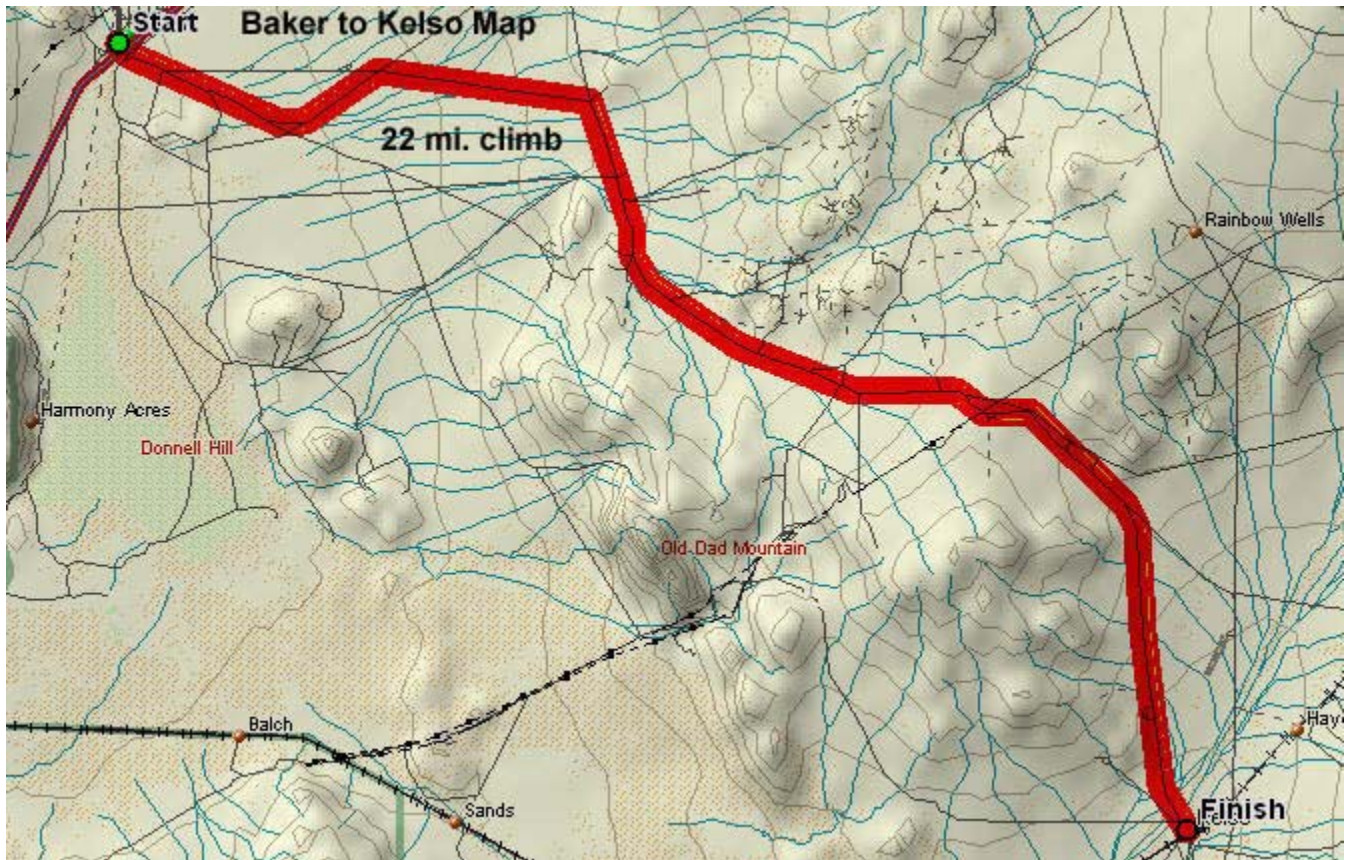


Stage 5. Shoshone to Baker; 56.3 miles, 2186 ft. climbing.

Mike, Sunday, 7:02 AM to 10:16 AM; 3 hrs 14 minutes, 17.4 mph.

Stage 5 had the least climbing of any stage, and I had a tail wind about 60 percent of the time. My knee was hurting and now I was getting saddle sores in the bargain. I normally stand to climb and alternate sitting/standing in the flats so I can keep circulation in my crotch. But with my knee pain, I could not pedal while standing. So I sat and watched my odometer again. I crouched in my aerobars and counted my revolutions. I only needed 35 revolutions per 0.1 miles in the gear I was riding, so I counted 35, watched the 0.1 mile counter increment, got up out of my seat and coasted for a moment to relieve the pain in my raw saddle sores. I then sat down and eased into pedaling again so my knee would loosen up and not hurt so bad. Then I repeated the cycle again and again...hundreds of times. While I was completing the first mile, I sent my crew back to tell Karen and her crew that I could get to Baker as early as 10:00 AM with this wind. I was making great time for 25 miles and thought I would get to the time station too early and surprise her again. But, the wind changed directions and I had to fight against a strong headwind the last 20 miles. I thought I was losing an hour but kept a good pace and arrived at 10:15 AM and passed the baton to Karen's waiting hand.



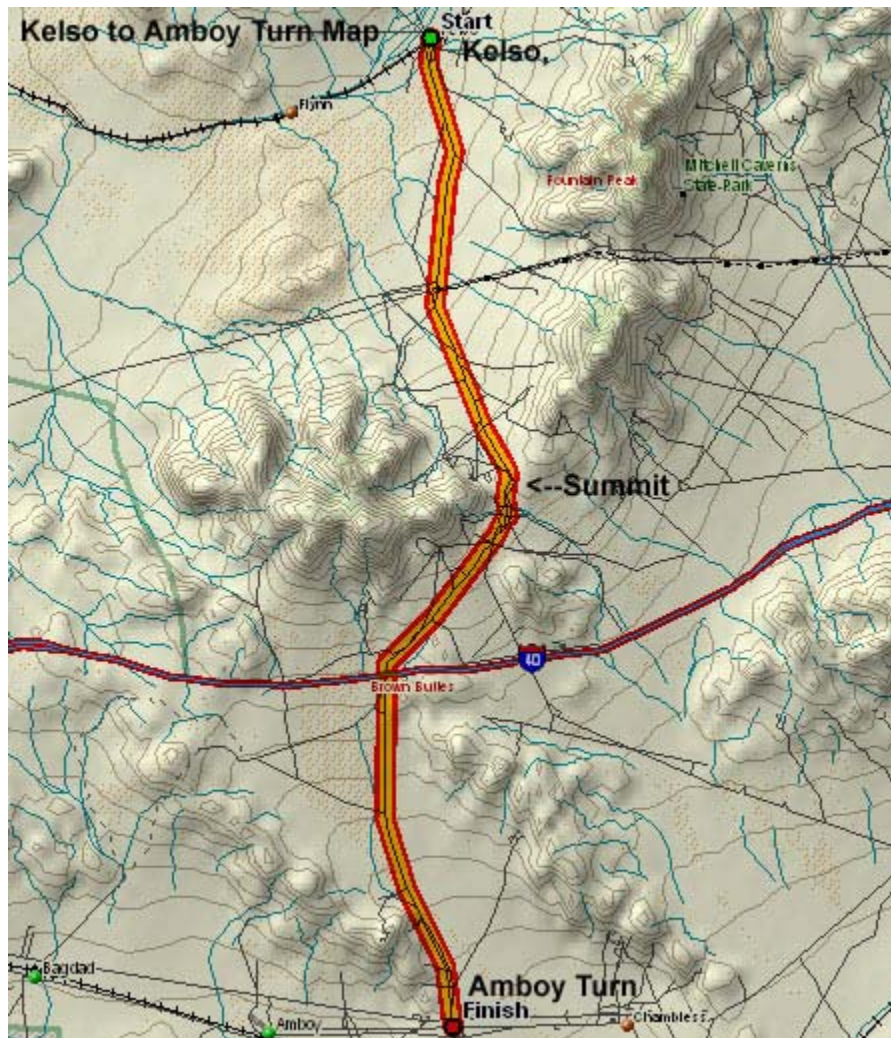
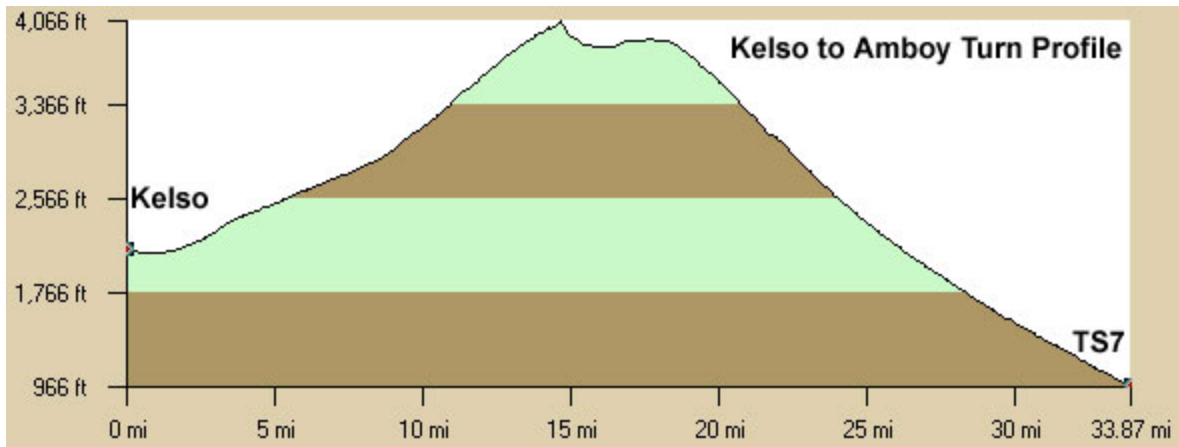


Stage 6. Baker to Kelso; 34.9 miles, 2980 ft. climbing.
Karen, Sunday, 10:16 AM to 1:06 PM; 2 hrs 50 minutes, 12.3 mph.

Karen had a long steady climb on Stage 6, and anticipated it with some concern, given the state of her legs. However, the wind was a crosswind for the most part (not great, but better than headwind!), and her spirits were still high, so she was able to cover the short 35 mile distance right at the time I had predicted before the race. Given the state of the roads (many riders thought these were the worst road conditions they'd EVER seen – she couldn't disagree), Karen was tempted to go back and look for all the dental fillings and bike parts that had gotten rattled off her, but decided against it in the interest of time. We beat my predictions on all 7 of the other stages, but this one was right on. That meant that I was ready early and waited about a ½ hour for Karen to come in and pass the baton. She arrived in Kelso at 1:06 PM shaken apart. We were still 4 hours ahead of my planned schedule and 2 hrs 45 minutes ahead of the record pace.



Karen passing off the baton at Kelso ending Stage 6.



Stage 7. Kelso to Amboy; 33.8 miles, 2280 ft. climbing.
 Mike, Sunday, 1:06 PM to 3:04 PM; 1 hrs 58 minutes, 17.2 mph.

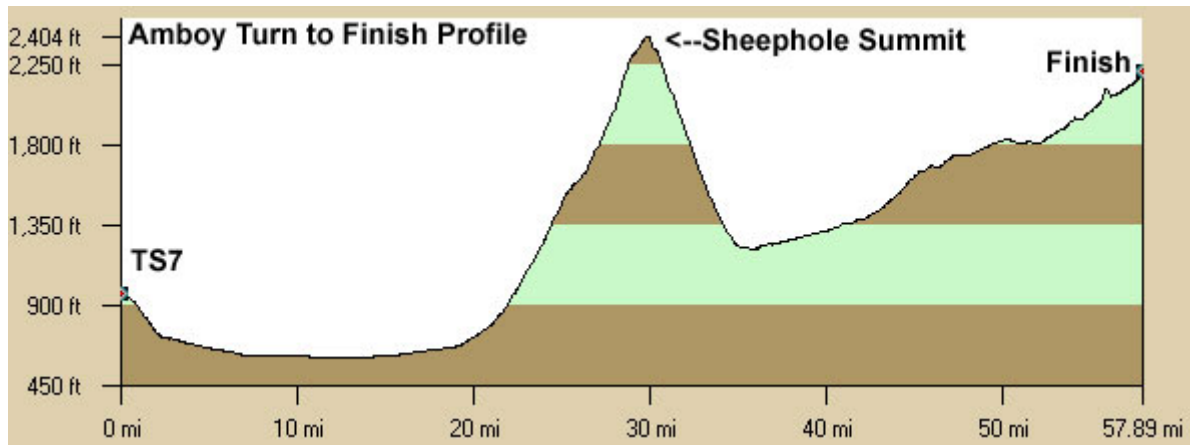
I took the baton in Kelso, the start of Stage 7, and gritted my teeth. My knee was very painful, but I didn't dare take any more Advil's. My butt was so sore, I could hardly sit. Yet I had my last stage to ride. The summit was only 14.5 miles away. After that, my part of the race would pretty much be over, since the rest of the 33.8 mile-stage was a long, fast descent. I started out with a tailwind again, climbing to Granite Pass. Again I counted my pedal revolutions and stood up to relieve pain every 1/10 of a mile. Ray and Paul kept creeping up on me with the car since I was riding so slowly. I could feel the wind die down as they approached. I waved them back and could feel the wind at my

back. I sat high and used my body as a big sail. A couple of riders passed me...both were in 4x relay teams so they were fresh compared to us. I just kept going, thinking "Only a couple more miles, I can do this!" Finally, I hit the summit, shifted up, locked myself into a tight aerodynamic tuck, grasped my aerobars and started the longest descent of my life: 17 miles at 30-36 mph.



Stage 7. Mike's descent from Granite Pass.

It was truly all downhill. The slope extended as far as I could see. When I finally came to a generous bend in the smooth road, it led to yet another descent for as far as I could see in that direction. It was wonderful. I had told Karen and her crew I might be able to do this stage in about 2 hours if I could keep a 17mph pace with the climb. I arrived at 3:04 PM with a 1 hr, 58 minute stage. Karen was still getting ready (Nita was still stuffing ice in her neck bandanna – a godsend given the heat of the next stage). Karen tied the ice 'pack' around her neck as I rushed her along and got her on her way. I was done!



Stage 8. Amboy to Twenty Nine Palms; 58.2 miles, 2500 ft. climbing.
 Karen, Sunday, 3:06 PM to 7:45 PM; 4 hrs 39 minutes, 12.5 mph.

Karen had a very tough final stage to the finish line. There was a gentle, sloping 12 mile climb up Sheep's Hole summit (at first there was; but it got steeper the closer she got to the top and the heat would have brought her down if not for that ice!), then a short descent with a final 28 mile gradual climb and cross-wind to the finish line and the ribbon! Ray, Paul and I rode leap frog in our green Subaru for awhile cheering Karen along while Dennis and Nita followed her in our red Subaru. Karen was all smiles. She was a champion and doing great, finally able to dig out and use those reserves to push the team home. Paul, Ray, and I drove off to check into the hotel at Twenty Nine Palms and shower up for Karen's reception at the finish line. I put on my ACTC jersey so we could cross the line looking like a team. I guessed she would arrive at the finish line between 8:00 and 9:00 PM. But looking at the speed of the other teams, I suggested to Ray and Paul that we head out about 6:30 to see her progress.

We rode out to meet Karen and cheered her on for several miles. Then we went back to the hotel so I could hop on my bike and join her as she crossed the finish line. Dennis and Nita had to stay behind her at all times, so they could not join us at the finish, but were right there to see it all from behind. While I was waiting for her, I watched the other riders go past that had been riding along side us for the past 2 days. There was Manta Ray from Tahiti, Lone Wolf, and Tarpon. Then there was a van I hadn't seen before with 2 riders in front. I was surprised to see a new team, but just discounted it, since Chinook, our competition in our category was so far behind. Then in rolled Karen, flashing a big smile. She was so proud of our accomplishment. I joined her with about 100 yards to go and cheered her on. I almost knocked her over 5 feet from the line as we climbed the steep driveway to the tape. Then she straightened out her bike, and I grabbed her hand. We held hands as we crossed the finish line. There were lots of people on the other side of the tape, so as soon as we crossed the line, we had to hit the brakes and stop. The photographers missed our romantic finish, but caught us with the tape still flying. There was no one behind us for quite awhile, so we got to hug and kiss on the finish line. Then we got together with our crew to receive our medals.



We crossed the finish line hand in hand and had to brake quickly to a stop so we didn't run anyone over. Dennis and Nita Uyeno are in the pace car right behind us.



We did it!

We then hopped up on the podium with our crew and received our medals, (see photo at the top of the story).

There are a lot of things that have to work well for cyclists to complete this race. The most important thing is having a good crew. Our crews were supportive, patient and there when we needed them, sometimes before we realized we did! Patience is driving a car up a mountain around midnight for 7 miles at 3-4 mph following a struggling rider walking his bike, then following the other up another mountain pass until 4 AM. Ray, Paul, Dennis, and Nita made ideal crew members. Many, many thanks to them for making our race a complete success. We hope to work with them again sometime soon, if they'll have us!



Celebrating in the hotel after the race; from the left, Mike's legs, Karen, Dennis, Nita and Ray.

Paul bought a couple of bottles of Champagne for us to celebrate. The crews joined us in our room where we ate some of the good food Karen had packed in the cars, drank Champagne, and started to fall asleep. My knee was sore, and my bottom was so sore, I could hardly sit on the bed. But we had completed the Furnace Creek 508 almost 6 hours faster than expected. We broke the record for our category. And we took 2nd place by only a couple of minutes. It was more successful than any of us could have imagined!

Summary

Stage	Rider	Miles	Climbing in feet	Speed mph	Ride Time	Start Time	End Time	Route
1	Mike	88.05	6176	17.73	4:58	10/8/05 9:00 AM	10/8/05 1:58 PM	Santa Clarita to California City
2	Karen	70.25	4212	17.56	4:00	10/8/05 1:58 PM	10/8/05 5:58 PM	California City to Trona
3	Mike	99.2	7538	14.27	6:57	10/8/05 5:58 PM	10/9/05 12:55 AM	Trona to Furnace Creek
4	Karen	73.6	7644	12.55	5:52	10/9/05 1:08 AM	10/9/05 7:00 AM	Furnace Creek to Shoshone
5	Mike	56.3	2186	17.41	3:14	10/9/05 7:02 AM	10/9/05 10:16 AM	Shoshone to Baker
6	Karen	34.9	2980	12.32	2:50	10/9/05 10:16 AM	10/9/05 1:06 PM	Baker to Kelso
7	Mike	33.8	2280	17.19	1:58	10/9/05 1:06 PM	10/9/05 3:04 PM	Kelso to Almost Amboy
8	Karen	58.2	2500	12.47	4:39	10/9/05 3:06 PM	10/9/05 7:45 PM	Almost Amboy to Twenty Nine Palms

Total 514.3 35516

Totals	Miles	Climbing in feet	Ride Time	Speed
Mike	277.4	18180	17.12	16.20
Karen	237.0	17336	17.37	13.64
	514.3	35516	34.48	14.91

Total Time 34.77
 Lost Time 17.00 Minutes
 Detour Correction 0.50 Hours
 FC508 Time 34:15:58