

Riding through Death Valley

“100 Miles (Okay, 72 Miles) Closer to a Cure”



Day 1; Thursday, May 4th

7:00PM: Following a two-hour drive from the airport in Las Vegas, we arrive at Furnace Creek Ranch in Death Valley. The first thing we see is a large white tent that will serve as our “base camp” for the entire weekend. But, we saw very few bicycles. As it turns out, the bikes were put into the medical tent so that they didn’t get wet during a very rare rain storm! Luckily I was able to find my bike and bring it up to my room.

Day 2; Friday, May 5th (Cinco de Mayo)

8:30 AM: After gathering for breakfast in the restaurant, we attend a safety lecture about what to expect when riding through the valley. At this point, I have been planning on riding 100 km (about 62 miles), but I am trying to keep my options open and will make a decision, based on how I feel, at the 2nd checkpoint. In order to even consider going beyond 100km, I would have to maintain an average speed of 11 mph, significantly slower than the speeds I was doing during training.

Not surprisingly, we are also told that our biggest concern should be staying hydrated, especially since tomorrow’s temperature is expected to exceed 100! We are instructed to watch three things in particular: our heart rate (it’s a good thing I brought my monitor), our leg strength and our ability to maintain mental alertness. At the time, I had no idea just how relevant this advice would be...

9:30 AM: Following the lecture it was time for our first ride of the trip. We are told that the warm-up ride is a short 5-mile ride up to Zabriskie Point. The ride organizers tell us that it is a good warm up because we will be climbing to the point. And then, we’re off. The “climb” proves more challenging than anyone anticipated. We climbed from 100 feet below sea level to 350 feet above sea level in just five miles! And, very disappointingly, my speed averaged just 8.7 mph all the way up the hill. I kept thinking, “What did you get yourself into?” But, then I got to the top of the hill and the view was simply



brehtaking! All of the riders stayed up there for some time and got to know each other a little better. I met a school teacher from Virginia, who was riding for her diabetic son. I later learned that she had also convinced her son's doctor to ride along with her. I met the four guys from Indiana who were riding because one of them also has a son with diabetes. I met a man from California whose three-year-old daughter had just been diagnosed. And, I met many, many people who were riding with their own diabetes. Suddenly, all of the struggles up the hill seemed pretty insignificant.

11:00 AM: Then, it was time to come back down the hill. And, what a ride that was! This time we dropped 450 feet in just five miles! My top speed on the way down exceeded 31 mph (far faster than I had ever gone on a bike before)! Needless to say, the ride now seemed like the best idea I had ever had.

Day 3; Saturday May 6th (Ride Day)

4:00 AM: I got up at 4 am in order to eat a good breakfast (we were told that this was very important), warm up, stretch and get to the starting line by 6:00. The organizers moved the start time forward an hour when they learned that the high temperature was expected to reach 104! But, we couldn't leave without taking a few pictures first.



It also allowed me a minute to pull out a picture of Alyssa, our youth advocate, whom I had met a few weeks earlier. She sent me a picture that would travel through Death Valley with me as a constant reminder of the courage and positive attitude that she exudes. Once I pulled her picture out of my bag, everyone around me asked me about her – and then shared a story very similar to hers. Whether it was a friend, a child of their own, a grandchild, or the child of a friend, it seemed that everyone was there riding for someone. I am glad that I could now make the same claim.



6:00 AM: And, then we were off! Again, we began with a climb out of the ranch, but this time we knew what to expect. And, we knew that it would get better; our first checkpoint was at Badwater, the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere. So, it was only a matter of time before we began to go downhill! But, as we continued, it seemed like every long downhill stretch was accompanied by a climb! I remember asking myself, “How could we be climbing into one of the lowest places on earth?” But, the closer we got to Badwater, the more we dropped. Eighteen miles later we reached the checkpoint!

7:15 AM: Badwater is a salt flat that is 282 feet below sea level. The landscape is truly “otherworldly.” It is white as far as you can see, and almost completely devoid of plant life. But, I was on a mission. So, I refilled my water and Gatorade bottles, ate a banana, reapplied my sun screen and set off to the next checkpoint – Mormon Point.



7:30 – 9:00 AM: Not far from the checkpoint, I met some of my friends that I had met the previous day. They were members of the Northern Virginia chapter that had sent 34 riders to the event. They made me an honorary Virginian and I rode with them all the way to Mormon Point, some 20 miles down the road. Luckily, this stretch was much flatter and the company was great. As a result, I reached Mormon Point feeling great. At this point, even if I turned around and headed home I would have met the distance goal I set before the event.



9:30 – 9:45 AM: I quickly reviewed my vital stats. My heart rate was great (at the rate that I usually have during a very mild workout), my legs felt strong, and I was still thinking straight. So, I decided to just ride a few miles beyond the checkpoint and then turn around and head back to the ranch. As it turned out, that decision was a very good one. Just a few miles outside of Mormon Point the winds picked up and presented quite a few problems. It was at that point that I decided I had gone far enough and turned around to head home.

9:45 – 10:45 AM: Luckily, I was not the only one to make that decision. I met a man from Massachusetts and rode with him all the way back through Mormon Point and to Badwater. As we reached the Badwater check point, my legs didn't seem to have quite the strength that they did earlier in the day, and I noticed that my breathing was getting heavier. A quick check of my heart rate meter showed that I was now in the range that I showed when I was in a good workout.

11:00 AM – 12:15 PM: But, some water and a few more bananas at Badwater (not to mention 10 minutes of sitting in the shade under a tent) and I was back to my good ol' self (or so I thought). Again, I set off with my new friend for the final stretch back toward the ranch.

Shortly after leaving the checkpoint, I had a unique Death Valley moment. As I continued to ride, I noticed a tiny lizard on the road. As I approached, it got scared and began to run. We had a good race going for a few feet, but then I began to peddle harder and I left him in my dust! I guess my legs were still working just fine.

But, as the course progressed, I noticed that the climbs were getting harder and harder. Finally, I told my friend to "go on without me" because I could no longer match his pace. I was now on my own for the remainder of the ride. But, "no worries", I had my iPod with me. I plugged in and continued to ride.

A few miles later, I faced a huge climb. As I began the climb, my legs felt heavy, but I continued to peddle as best as I could. Then, I began to feel fatigued, and I noticed the heat for the first time. I checked my bike computer and noticed that my speed was a mere 5 mph – my legs were beginning to give out (remember the safety lecture). No sooner did I notice my significant drop in speed, and my heart monitor began to chirp – I had exceeded my maximum allowable heart rate (danger sign #2 from the safety lecture). At that point in time, I did the only safe thing; I got off my bike and started walking it to the summit of the hill. Luckily, my heart rate dropped and my legs started to feel better. Now, facing a nice downhill slope, I decided to get back on my bike and ride to the bottom.

About halfway down the slope I decided that it was a good time to drench myself with some water to help with the heat. I reached down, grabbed my water bottle, and poured it over my head. Imagine the surprise when I realized that I had grabbed the wrong bottle and poured 90 degree Gatorade on my head (remember danger sign #3 – loss of mental faculties?).

Anyway, the cycle of walking up hills and riding down continued until I crested the final hill and rode into the entrance to Furnace Creek Ranch right around 12:15. What I had expected to be a five hour ride took 6 hours and 15 minutes to complete. One volunteer told me that it was so nice to see me come across the finish line with a huge smile on my face. My response was that I had never been so glad to be anywhere as I was to be back at the ranch.



7:30 PM: That night, as I sat at the awards dinner with my fellow riders, I learned that I was one of only 24 people who reached their distance goal on the day. I also learned that I was not alone in my experience. Everyone experienced the same leg fatigue and heart rate spikes. And, believe it or not, two other people also confessed to hot Gatorade showers when they too grabbed the wrong bottle! Another highlight of our final night in Death Valley was our special guest at dinner. While all of us “Midwesterners” thought it was really cool to have a coyote walk right up to our cooks (who were barbequing), they just said, “Yeah, he’s around every time we fire up the grill.”

Final Impressions

All in all, the ride was truly an experience that will be with me for the rest of my life. While I am not sure that I would repeat the experience, I am so glad that I had a chance to have it. While the physical challenge will not be quickly forgotten, the emotional ties will last far longer. The unbelievable stories of perseverance, courage, and dedication are so incredibly moving that I will never forget them. The T-shirts that we were given said that we had “the experience of a lifetime.” And, in this case, they did not overstate the truth!

Thank you to each and every one of you for contributing to our fundraising efforts and making this experience possible. I hope that by reading this newsletter, you will see that your donations have a huge impact on many, many people’s lives. Thank you so much for your support! This one ride raised over a \$250,000!