



BRAD GRAVERSON/DAILY BREEZE

Eric Ostendorff never considered himself a racer, but the Torrance biker displayed his competitive spirit in the Furnace Creek 508.

Ostendorff's racing skills break through

LONG RIDE: Torrance biker just won the grueling Furnace Creek 508.

By Mike Mitchell
DAILY BREEZE

He's ridden his bike to places many South Bay residents only think about driving to.

Eric Ostendorff of Torrance has biked to or from San Diego, San Francisco and Portland, and he once made a 23-day trip to Charleston, South Carolina.

Yet, he's not a racer. When he entered the Furnace Creek 508 last year, which dates back to 1983 and stretches from Valencia through Death Valley to Twentynine Palms, he didn't expect to finish third in his first attempt.

But he set his sights on winning this year. And despite a rough start, cruised to a 30-minute victory in the 508-mile race Saturday.

"I didn't know if I should be a front runner or hang back," Ostendorff said. "But before I knew it, I was one of the leaders.

"For the first 40 miles, I was never more than 100 feet behind the leader."

Ostendorff battled an upset stomach the first 100 miles. But his stomach settled down and he finished in 31 hours, 41 minutes, 11 seconds.

That's 31 hours of no sleep and just enough rest to take pictures of sunrise and sunset.

The largest field in event history (55 riders)

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OSTENDORFF: Local biker coming off win in the Furnace Creek 508

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started, but a strong headwind for the first 200 miles sent nearly a third of the riders home early.

"I pushed it about as hard as I could. I came into stomach distress 100 miles into it. I threw up," Ostendorff said. "I said a prayer and I bent over the armrests of the bike. I took a few Tumbs along the way. The cramps slowly subsided."

In his first attempt, the 41-year-old who grew up in Virginia and moved here 10 years ago only trained enough to guarantee finishing, not winning.

This year, he rode 600-700 miles a week, mostly through Palos Verdes, to prepare.

The biggest question during the race became how big of a lead was enough.

The leader mostly has to guess as to who is in second and where he or she is.

"Some people were driving the course and they would tell me how far they thought (Andreas Boesch of Switzerland) was behind me," Ostendorff said. "On time, they said 40 minutes and later 30 minutes and at one point they thought he was just 20 minutes behind. I wondered if I could hold him off."

The strategy Ostendorff used was far different from last year when the goal was to finish and have fun.

"We were not keeping track of where we were," said Ostendorff, who raced with a crew that included Mark Mayer, Mark Tragesser and Keith Hippely. "I never thought for a minute about the top 10 or even the top half. But at various check-points, we found out there were not too many in front of us. When I saw a van pulled over at 2 a.m., I began to wonder where we were. I was planning on taking a sleep break, but when I was told I was in second, I told the guys, 'We're not stopping.'"



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Eric Ostendorff still enjoys riding for the fun of it more than he does racing, even after winning the demanding Furnace Creek 508.

One of the highlights of the race is the trek through Death Valley. It may be October, but Ostendorff was still riding on land that has the record for the highest recorded temperature.

But since the top riders don't reach Death Valley until 9 or 10 p.m., it's actually quite nice.

"It's cooler than normal (in Death Valley), but in the morning when we reach Baker," Ostendorff said. "It's warmer in Baker than in Death Valley. They say the race starts in Baker. Sometimes riders have hallucinations, they wonder, 'Is that a car or a biker catching up to me?'"

Later in the race, the head games really begin as the relay team riders begin to catch the solo riders.

No one really knows who is winning or even what place they are in, so when a rider passes, Ostendorff said he contemplates keeping up with someone he may not be racing against.

"You don't know if it's a relay rider or a solo rider who is really kicking your butt," Ostendorff said. "There are a lot of mental games."

Ostendorff, who is nicknamed "Ostrich", finished last year's race in 32

hours, 24 minutes, 29 seconds to finish second in the Solo Men's Division.

"On the final downhill, a girl (Catharina Berge of Visalia) passed me, which did not help my fragile male ego," Ostendorff said. "I thought more would pass me before the finish."

For this year's 508, Ostendorff had a new bike and better equipment. But he wondered how he would handle himself as a favorite.

"Having never really raced, saying I have to stay ahead will make it interesting," Ostendorff said prior to this year's race. "I definitely want to finish third or better."

That he did, but regardless of how he finished, Ostendorff said the thrill of riding is still better than the struggle of trying to win.

Ostendorff's 508 win qualified him for the Race Across America, which starts in San Diego and winds up in Atlantic City 10 days later. But he is unsure if he will accept the challenge.

"My phrase is I have to be careful because the butt I kick may be my own."



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After finishing a surprising third in the Furnace Creek 508 a year ago, Torrance's Eric Ostendorff's altered his training approach and it paid off with a victory this year.