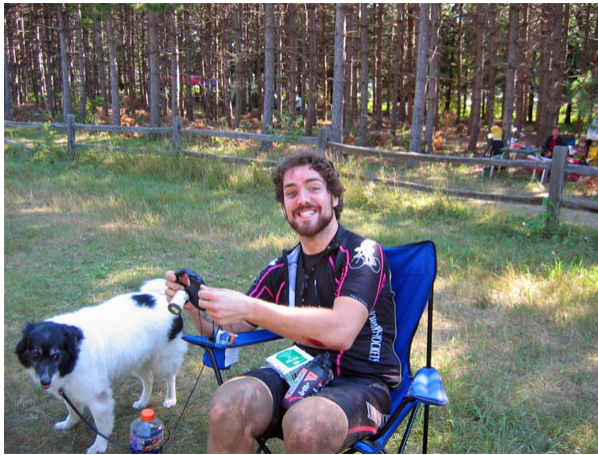


[24 Hour Mountain Bike Nationals](#)

Posted: August 5th, 2008 by Karl Rosengarth

The cast iron skillet was the last item to be placed into the red 1998 Ford Windstar with the crumpled left-front fender. I would say “crammed into” if it were not for the fact that there was a small patch of daylight that provided, via the rear-view mirror, a clear view of the four bikes on the rear-hitch rack. Maurice, Carol Clemens and I assumed positions in the mini-van’s remaining free space and prepared for a 740-mile tag-team drive to the [24 Hours of 9 Mile](#) in Wausau, WI—home of the 2008 USA Cycling 24-Hour Mountain Bike National Championships. Carol was headed to [America’s Dairyland](#) to race, with Maurice and yours truly serving as pit crew and roving journalists. I’ll spare you the gory details of the drive, but suffice it to say that 14 hours behind the wheel makes one [roadworn and weary](#).

After hitting the soft beds at Wausau’s Fairfield Inn for what seemed like a short nap, we were up and at ‘em on Friday morning, in search of groceries that would be crammed into the the remaining unoccupied mini-van space. So much for the rear view. The unchecked items on our checklist required a visit to the local bike shop. Thanks to the friendly folks at [Rib Mountain Cycles](#) for giving Carol the hook up, and for treating the Dirt Rag crew like celebrities. Then, off to the races...



Set-up at the race venue was a bit confusing for first-timers with no prior knowledge of the layout, but once we got situated the rest of the weekend ran smooth like butter. Speaking of set-up, we were fortunate to have the crew from [Johnny Sprockets](#) bike shop of Chi-town as our next-pit neighbors. It was great to meet them and hang out for the duration. Congratulations to their racer Sean Reeder (pictured left), who ended up taking the victory in the solo singlespeed 24-hour race.

Late Friday afternoon we had time for a pre-race recon lap of the 14-mile long course—a delightful mix of tight singletrack sections and wide open fireroads (and no major climbs). An ample dose of rocks and roots, combined with all the twisty turns, added up to a course that would demand the racers’ attention and favor a smooth, efficient and mistake-free riding style. Stay off the brakes, my brain kept telling my fingers.

Back at the venue in time for race packet pick-up, we discovered that we had the good fortune of setting up camp within earshot of the PA system, through which GripShift Ed kept participants informed and entertained for the entire event. Granny Gears’ Laird Knight was on hand with his nifty [RealTime Scoring](#), which provided instant standings via on-site computer terminals. Friends at home, or anybody with an internet connection, could follow the race live online. Add to the equation hot showers, food vendors, neutral charging and the super-friendly and helpful event staff—and and it all adds up to a top-notch event, worthy of National Championship status. Kudos to race promoter Kevin Eccles for running tight ship that rocked like a party boat.

Speaking of party boat, the guys who set up the “Big Sexy” encampment, located midway through the course, pushed the festive atmosphere right over the top. During the race, Maurice and I were treated to a midnight VIP ride to the encampment, while “relaxing” in folding camp chairs in the back of a trailer pulled by a quad. Big Sexy himself had been alerted by radio of our approach, and upon our arrival the big and sexy chef handed us hot-off-the-grill cheeseburgers. My first burger in 8 years was as good as guilty pleasures get, while fully clothed. Big Sexy had a campfire, a rocking stereo, Gatorade and Hammer Gel for the racers, a gazillion christmas lights, and a festive atmosphere. The guys camped there had even built a sweet dirt jump as an “optional line” for the braver racers. Hats off to those riders who hit the jump during our nocturnal visit. Aaaaah, but I digress...



The National Championship status is a big deal in my book. While various 24-hour races claim to be some sort of “Championship” or other, the USA Cycling Championship is the only 24-hour race that is sanctioned by a major governing body. In addition to the championship classes, the 24-Hours of Nine Mile also offered a mind-boggling number of 12- and 24-hour non-championship race categories—everything from singlespeed to clydesdale to age groups. Tally up the riders in all of those classes, and you’ve got an impressive turnout. In case you hadn’t noticed, the endurance racing scene is alive and well. There’s a lesson in there somewhere.



Speaking of National Championships, Pua Sawicki (Ellsworth) rode away from the women’s solo field on the first lap and never looked back, on route to winning her second consecutive National Solo 24-Hour Championship in impressive fashion. She cranked out 18 total laps, and lapped her nearest competitors twice, over the course of 24 hours. I caught up with Pua after the race and asked her to share some of the secrets that she’s learned along the way at 24 hour races: “It’s such a huge mental game, I would say that almost matters more than your fitness. Because once you crack mentally, then you’re done. There are times out there and I’m just hurting, right? Then I’m like: ‘OK, Pua everyone else out here is hurting. No excuse. This is what you came here to do. You’re gonna hurt. That’s part of it.’ So you have to put that in the back of your head. There were a couple times where I kinda of cracked, but you just have to start taking it lap by lap and not over-thinking and just keep pedaling.”

I also asked Pua what motivates her to compete in such a grueling sport. “I’m definitely a competitive person. I love challenge. Anything that someone says is hard or I can’t do, I want to do it (laughs). I always tell people it’s a love-hate thing. When you’re out there sometimes you’re hating it, and you’re just like: ‘Get me off this bike. What am I doing. Why am I doing it?’ But when you cross the finish line it’s like the greatest feeling in the world. To think of what you’ve accomplished, it’s such a great feeling.”

Words and Sean Reeder photo: Karl Rosengarth. All other photos: Maurice Tierney