

## For the record 'Taking a toll'

### Ultra-athlete George Hood tries to pedal from his past

By PAUL LATOUR [platour@scn1.com](mailto:platour@scn1.com)

The rider feels caged.

Inside a hollowed-out van, people surround him. They monitor his vital signs, tell him to keep going, try to force strange liquids down his throat. He's not sure why it's happening, but he keeps his legs pumping on a stationary bike.

Pump. Pump. Pump.



**George Hood, left, attempts to break the Guinness World Record for the longest time spent riding a stationary spin bicycle in May at the Fry YMCA in Naperville. Hood is supported by volunteers Marcia Williams, Kathy Lewandowski and Naperville Chief of Police David Dial.**



**Hood, an Aurora resident who has two of three sons who live in Naperville, is soothed by friends and volunteers, from left, Kathy Weitmann and Marcia Williams during a rest period.**

*Photos by Kate Szrom / Staff photographer*

#### FOR THE RECORD

Sun staff writer Paul LaTour takes a look at what makes endurance exercise-bike rider George Hood push himself to extremes in a three-part series.

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The van, with one side torn away allowing him to see out, rests in a dark chop shop somewhere in the murky maze of his mind, an image constructed out of his days as a special agent with the Drug Enforcement Administration.

He drops his head, lost in a reality only he sees through eyes half-opened.

George Hood is not in a chop shop. He is at the Fry Family YMCA on 95th Street at 1:03 a.m. Monday, May 12, the same place he'd been since the previous Sunday at 9 p.m. For more than 169 hours he's been riding his yellow Lemond RevMaster spin bike, pumping along in pursuit of another Guinness World Record.

A boom box to his right begins to play the Rocky theme, the first notes penetrating his fog.

His head snaps to attention. His eyes open wide. A smile spreads. He stands on the pedals, picking up the pace. The Rocky theme ends. "Eye of the Tiger" follows as the rider begins to talk.

"It's about George's will to survive!" he says, referring to himself. "He learned the hard way. In ninth grade, this guy was Charlie Brown. Now look at him. He's at the top of the world, brother! He has got a story unlike any other."

But George Hood's story has been told for centuries. It's the story of the hero's journey, a tale older than "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey," and as familiar as "Star Wars."

It's the story of the quest for validation.

It's the story of a flawed man who feels anything but heroic.

"They've called me a hero, but I thought a hero was somebody that saved lives," Hood says weeks later. "I'm just an ordinary guy trying to do the right thing."

### **Call to adventure**

A lot can be learned about Hood by looking at a wall past the front foyer in his Aurora townhouse. It's filled with photos of his three teenage sons, Christopher, Brandon and Andrew.

Next to those hangs a framed certificate awarded to Hood in July 2007 marking his Guinness World Record for longest static cycling marathon of 111 hours, 11 minutes and 11 seconds. A little further to the right Hood displays an article from his hometown paper in Indiana, Pa., written in 1986 after Hood earned his first Guinness record by skipping rope for 13 hours, 12 minutes and 11 seconds.

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In January 2007 Hood eclipsed the record for the first time, riding for 92 hours. But the attempt was negated by a bookkeeping error.

Hood made his third assault on the record in May, a voyage he'd come to refer to as his trilogy, giving it an aura of finality that may not be true. He says he does it to raise money for charity. He says it's about setting an example for his three sons. He says it's about seeing his name published in the Guinness Book of World Records.

But even his inner circle of friends isn't sure exactly why Hood does it.

"There is something there that drives that man to the extreme," said Preston Bakos, Hood's personal trainer. "There's something he has to prove to somebody or something, whether it's to his children or to himself. It's an untold story. We all have untold stories that drive us toward success."

### **Crossing the threshold**

The first two times Hood went after the spin record, his father showed up to watch. He didn't return in May. Their already shaky relationship has further deteriorated over a house they have co-owned in Pennsylvania for two years.

It brought to the surface issues of inferiority Hood has felt most of his life.

"Nothing I did was ever good enough," he said. "God forbid if I wasn't on the honor roll. It was that constant push. I'd go back the next semester and work harder, try to achieve."

"Some kids have a relationship with their parents and others don't. I just happen to be one who doesn't have a relationship with his parents. That's OK."

Hood's own sons were with him at various times during his eight days at the Y. Brandon and Andrew, who live with their mother on Naperville's east side, came in the evenings after school at Naperville Central.

Christopher didn't start coming around until later in the week, after he arrived from Pennsylvania, where he was living in the house that was causing the turmoil between his father and grandfather.

Christopher, at 19 the oldest of Hood's sons, has seen how hard his father pushes himself in pursuit of the record.

"I'm hoping he gets it," he said. "It is taking a toll on him."

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Many of the pictures that hung in Hood's house are now propped on a long table in the studio facing the stage on which Hood rides his spin bike.

Pump. Pump. Pump.

It's 3:39 p.m. Friday, May 9, and the sun lights up the room. The daytime is the easiest - if anything can be considered easy about attempting to spin for as long as Hood plans to. The record is 132 hours, but Hood says he's prepared to push it beyond 150.

The room is quiet. On other days people mingled with Hood, laughed with each other. But not now. Bakos enters the studio. It's odd to see him there because he owns a store in Westmont for ultra-athletes, Urban TriGear. He usually stays there during the daytime and then shows up at the Y for the overnight stretch with Hood.

Bakos approaches the stage. The rider knows something is wrong.  
Coming Monday: Part 2 of 3.