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A longer, more grinding road

Ultra-athlete George Hood never takes a journey alone

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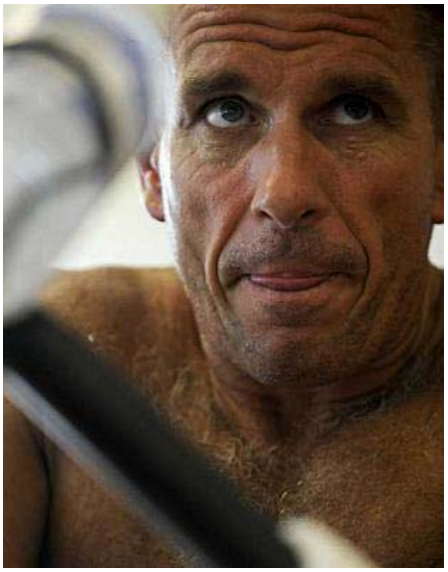
From Sunday: George Hood began his third try for the Guinness Book of World Records longest spin cycling marathon. He now approaches the road of trials.

Do you think you have 200 hours in you?



George Hood rides into Day 5 of his attempt to break the world record for longest stationary bike ride.
(Kate Szrom/Staff photographer)

FOR THE RECORD

That's not the sort of question George Hood needed to hear at 3:40 p.m. Friday, May 9, nearly six full days after he first jumped aboard his Lemond RevMaster spin cycle at the Fry Family YMCA.

"What?" Hood asked, trying to figure out why his personal trainer, Preston Bokos, was asking a question like that. Hood was within 24 hours of breaking the record of 132 hours. And Bokos was asking if he can hit 200? Why now?

That's when Kathy Lewandowski - the woman Hood dubbed his Chief Administrative Officer - broke the news. The record was actually 175 hours, 50 minutes. It was set by a man in North Carolina in September, but hadn't been verified by Guinness until earlier that day.

Bokos needed to know if Hood was prepared to go almost a full day longer than planned.
He quickly got his answer.

"I just want to close this out and get in the book," Hood said. "Whatever it takes to make that happen, I'll do."

It was just one of several obstacles Hood and his network of supporters faced during the attempt. Some were as trivial as finding out at the beginning that the two clocks couldn't keep a running total for the entire event; they both reset after each 24-hour period.

Other obstacles were basic concerns involving his supporters, whom Hood referred to as the Ride George Ride team. The group made sure Hood kept the 12 mph pace required by Guinness. They helped him get on and off the bike for his sanctioned breaks.

They stood in front of him with towels while he urinated into a bottle so he could avoid wasting break time to use the bathroom. They helped him with even more personal matters, too.

"Yes, I've buttered his (butt)," Bokos announced early one morning to the handful of people in the room, referring to putting cream on Hood to help ease the blistering caused by the bike's seat.

A more serious obstacle came later the same day Hood learned about the updated record. Hood, drifting in and out of reality as Friday melted into Saturday, was put through a series of sprint workouts by someone not familiar with Bokos' game plan designed for endurance. In his weakened mental state, Hood was vulnerable to almost any suggestion.

"It was really a lack of knowledge from others trying to help him along," Bokos said. "His legs were pretty cashed after that. I didn't know how we were going to recover from that night."

After getting Hood off the bike for a break, Bakos knew he might not get back on it. But Hood soon emerged from the bathroom outside the studio and, with help, returned to the pursuit. Ride George Ride was still in business.

The loyal companions

Throughout the event, Hood repeated how it was a team effort, that this group of unpaid supporters by his side was invaluable.

"I get a family when we do these things - we come together as one and that's very satisfying," Hood said. "I can't make it work with my own mother and father, so I make it work with others that I bring together."

Some had been with him since the first attempt. Others, such as Marcia Williams, witnessed the first attempt and returned for the subsequent events in an increased capacity.

"When I first heard what he wanted to do, I thought he was nuts," Williams said. "The more I got to know him, the more I came to truly believe in him."

Williams seldom left his side during the May event. She rubbed his back to soothe him. She sprayed water in his face to cool him. And she watched in anguish when it looked like Hood would fail following the misguided workout early Saturday morning.

"I thought he was going to quit," Williams said, voice cracking several hours later as she recounted the moment. "I thought it was done."

Most were part of Ride George Ride for the first time. Alena Edwards, a teaching assistant at Waubonsie Valley, hadn't planned to be involved much. She met Hood working out at Xsport Fitness a couple of months earlier and promised she would stop by occasionally at the event to support him.

Her trips to the Y became more frequent. She stayed longer each time. Soon she was responsible for calling out the numbers from the computer on the bike recording Hood's hourly statistics.

"I kind of got sucked in," Edwards said. "I felt like because he was on that bike doing so much for people, it was the least I could do. It was so amazing to see the sacrifices this man put himself through. I almost felt like I owed it to him because he was giving so much. I felt compelled in a way."

Edwards and Williams were among several people on the stage when Hood was lost in a hallucination on the morning of May 12. Bokos was in his normal spot, too, crouched in front of the bike looking up at Hood.

Hood had been on the bike for eight days, but he was still several hours from the record. In his mind he was inside a van parked in some sort of chop shop. The music playing from the boom box perked him up at times, but he'd quickly slip back into a trance.

At 2:07 a.m. he leaned over and quietly asked Bakos, "Are we still at the Y?"

Bokos laughed and assured him he hadn't left the building in more than eight days.

But everybody involved knew if Hood became too lost in his dreams, his legs could stop pumping. And the record pursuit would be over.

Coming Tuesday: Hood's final journey and a return to the ordinary world