

Two Strong Arms and a Whole Lot of Heart

USU Eastern Magazine

04/01/2015

Two Strong Arms and a Whole Lot of Heart - USU Alum Muscles to New Cycling Record



One of Sanford's hardest days, Shareve Brewer comforts him as the long, tedious hours played havoc on his body.

After 35 days on the road, Kris Sanford, a 24-year-old Utah State University Eastern graduate, set a world hand-cycle record on Oct. 31, 2014 by peddling 1,040 miles from Idaho Falls, Idaho, to Huntington Beach, Calif.

The 24-year-old shattered an old record of 776 miles, according to the World Record Academy and, in the process, raised \$25,000 for Neuroworx, a spinal cord rehabilitation facility in Salt Lake City.

Sanford's feat would make most people shudder at the mere physical exertion of this daunting ride. But what most people do not know about this USU Eastern alum

is he accomplished this record on a hand cycle made for quadriplegics.

The accident: 2009

Sanford was in his first semester at USU Eastern. He was involved in student government and spent his week-long spring break in Southeastern Utah with the "Serving Utah Network Center," building a corral for a Native American family to store their hay and horses. He had talked to the baseball coach about coming back in the fall of '09 to play catcher on the team. He was living his dream.

Then on the night of April 25, the weekend before finals, he and his best friend, Jordan Cunningham, helped move an enclosed trailer full of taxidermied animals from Eden, Utah, to Salt Lake City.

It was a rainy night, and the truck Sanford was riding in hydroplaned on the freeway, rolling seven or eight times, ejecting him from the rear driver's-side window. His spinal cord was broken between the fourth- and fifth-cervical vertebrae, limiting the functionality of all four limbs and core. He spent three months in the hospital and a year at Neuroworx.

It was in rehab that he decided to finish college and use his disability as an ability. He convinced Cunningham, who had received minor cuts and bruises in the accident, to be his roommate and the two returned to USU Eastern.

Both Sanford and Cunningham were Clearfield High School graduates and had another Clearfield alumni in Price who played on the Eagle basketball team: Cameron Evans. They also talked another Falcon alumni to be part of their college experience, Trevor Evans, to be their roommate.

In fall semester 2010, Sanford resumed his education at USU Eastern and continued as a high honor student. He joined the newspaper staff and wrote sports articles for The Eagle newspaper staff and while interviewing men's head basketball coach Brad Barton, became instant friends.

"We talked every day," Sanford said. "Brad had diabetes and we felt a common ground with both of us having physical challenges. We talked about overcoming crazy stuff in our lives all the time.

"We often spoke about never taking anything for granted. It was a different understanding between us, to have two people know each other for overcoming challenges in

life.' (Barton died of diabetes complications in October 2011 at 31.)

An idea became reality

With a 3.9 GPA and an associate of science degree in his hand, Sanford continued his education at Weber State University, but kept thinking about a small plaque he saw on the wall while doing rehab. It was of Chad Hymas, a previous record holder, 513 miles.

After committing to setting the new record, Sanford found Ryan Nichols, a quadriplegic since 1993, had already broken the record. Nichols propelled his vehicle using a hand crank a total of 776 miles from Salt Lake City to Huntington Beach in 2009. He did this by using his shoulders and biceps, which were at full strength, with partial triceps. Nichols pushed with his shoulders and partially innervated triceps and pulled with his biceps.

Sanford was inspired. He was also getting bored because he was used to being able to compete as an athlete. In the back of his mind, he wanted to challenge Nichols' record. Never having ridden a hand cycle before, he decided to try biking, and was strapped into a hand cycle at Liberty Park in Salt Lake City. After two hours, he cycled three miles and was totally worn out.

"I wanted to find a way to give back to Neuroworx for what they did for me during therapy," he said. "I cannot thank them enough. Every time I go, I leave feeling lucky ... I see people in situations much worse than mine and it really puts things into perspective. For me, more importantly than setting a record, I wanted to raise money to help those who need therapy and cannot afford it."

He talked about Justin Miller, a friend he met from Salt Lake City whose only movement he could control were his eyes. He used the movement of his eyes to control a Photoshop program on his computer to create colorful paintings that he sold. Sanford displayed a 12-month calendar created by Miller, calling it incredible and beautiful.

Two years in the planning

With determination and a goal to set a world record, Sanford spent the next 24 months cycling on the road and on a modified bike set up in his mom's front room that he used to exercise five times a week for up to eight hours. He devoted much time, as well, to planning and arranging for fundraising.

He researched the best bike he could find that was lightweight, aerodynamic, that had elbow shifters, and a power meter that would track speed, heart rate and power executed. He found the website "bike-on.com" that builds custom handcycles to create his cycle. In all, it set him back a cool \$9 grand.

He found Coach Stacey Seay in Chicago who is the head coach for "Dare21ii" and "Dare- 2Tri Paratriathlon Club," serving youth, adults and injured military service members with physical and visual disabilities.

Her expertise is training athletes in achieving fitness and race goals. She spent the entire two years helping me with both my indoor and outdoor training," Sanford said. "She flew out and was in Brigham City when I went through the town, and again, met me when I rode through West Layton. She donated all her time to help me; she kept me mentally and physically strong.

"I had to train mentally for the bad days. I knew there were going to be days that I would feel sick or lack motivation during the ride, so every time one of those things happened, I took it as an opportunity to improve my mental strength by still training.

I feel that the mind is our most powerful asset, especially being in a chair. To me there is nothing more powerful than a dear vision and an unshakable belief. "

Because of how high on the spinal cord Sanford's break is, his tricep muscles' use is limited.

"It is tough because my triceps spasm and fight against me every time I pedal," he said. "I only have my biceps, shoulders and upper back that function 100 percent."

Sanford enlisted his father Dave, sister, Shareve Brewer, plus friends, Cunningham and Trenton Brown, to accompany his trek. Having his sister with him proved invaluable. She got married a week before his trek and opted to join the "crew" during her first month of marriage, while her husband moved to North Carolina.

"She was incredible help and I have to give her the MVP of the trip," he said.

Brown was at his side every second recording and photographing the 35-day ride.

Two bikes were purchased for his team to ride alongside him, while the others followed in a car and motor home that was donated for the trip. He had the car wrapped with the names of the largest donors.

The ride

He began his ride in Idaho Falls, Idaho, on SepL 26, hoping for mild fall weather temperatures. "My first day was perfect, then the next five were cycled in a torrential downpour," he grimaced. "I held onto the handlebars with a spike sticking out at my palm of my gloves. The spike would slide into the side of the handlebars and that is how I held on."

He said the best way he found to keep his hands warm during the ride, was by using kitchen-cooking mittens to put over his gloves. A hole was cut out of the palm of the mitten and he would slip the spike through it.

"Sounds goofy, but it worked," he said. "In the constant drizzle, we would cover the mittens with grocery bags to keep dry. They kept me warm on those long, cold days." Quadriplegics have a harder time controlling their body temperature, Sanford explained.

"We become overheated easily; he said. "On the back of my bike, a mister was created from a plastic-spraying container that I could control with my elbows to keep me cool on hot days:'

His body constantly spasms, he explains, so he has to take prescription pills to keep the spasms under control. When he ran out of the prescription, he enlisted his friend Trevor Evans to pick up the pills from his home pharmacy in Clinton, Utah, and drive them to Fillmore where they met.

Meals, while he was peddling, consisted of protein bars, carbohydrate packages and supplements. His father would buy groceries and store them in the motor home when they were close to towns to feed the crew.

"I broke a rim and paid \$500 for a new rim to be overnighted to me on the road," he said.

In another setback, someone left a leather bag with his phone, GPS, speakers, cables, bike lights and battery on the back of a car.

"We had driven 70 miles back to our hotel before we realized it was missing," he said. "It had been run over several times when Trent drove back to look for it."

Sanford averaged 30 miles most days, with his hardest day peddling uphill nine miles shortly after entering California.

Every day presented new challenges, which forced him to set daily goals and focus on the small victories.

"I had some crazy obstacles to overcome throughout this ordeal; he said. "It was easier to picture each day's successes rather than look ahead at the big picture. I took it one day at a time."

A car would take 14 hours to drive what Sanford spent 35 days cycling. He was not allowed to cycle on 1-15 until he arrived in Las Vegas where he officially broke the record.

"I was peddling down Las Vegas Boulevard at 12:30 p.m., just chilling with cars surrounding me," he said. "It was downhill so I was coasting about 25 mph and people were cheering me on. People reached out and high-fived me along the way. It was a blast."

He gave out 3,500 Spinal Ride wrist bands along the way as he met people at each location. He also collected a lot of cash to donate to his cause.

The only time he was pulled over by law enforcement was in Las Vegas where an officer told him he and his bike was taking up too much space, at which Sanford smiled, waited for the cop to leave and kept peddling.

The heat while cycling across Nevada and California took a toll on Sanford as the extreme temperatures from the asphalt pavement would radiate through the low-riding cycle. He had buckets of ice water poured over him to keep his body cool.

Ten days later, at 4 a.m. on Halloween, Sanford arrived at Huntington Beach, 1,040 miles from where he began. He had just experienced 100-degree temperatures cycling across the desert during the day and freezing temperatures at night.

"It was really painful and really hard at times, but I made it," he said. "Completing Spinal Ride helped give me the understanding that I can achieve anything I decide. You have a choice in any situation: to be happy or sad. I have chosen to not be sad."

Sanford's future

His next item on his bucket list: to graduate from Weber State University where he has two semesters left towards his degree in public relations and advertising.

"I'm on the verge of doing something really cool with my life," he said. "I want to be a motivational speaker and travel journalist documenting the accessibility of places

where I travel to speak. I have a lot of years ahead and great plans. With solid execution, I can make a difference."

As he proved to himself in his journey, carefully laid out plans bring purpose and with it, meaningful results.

"Way more things seem possible with a purpose," he said. "You have to keep moving forward in life."

Sanford lives with his mom Rhonda, and cannot thank her enough for being there for him. Through the doubts and unknown future, her support has meant the world to him. She did not go on the ride with him, but kept up with his journey through phone calls.

"I think it's best I did not see all the pain he was in or watch him suffer," she said.

With tears in her eyes, she immediately got up, wrapped her arms around her son and called him her silver-tooth devil.

"Since he was a child, Kris had a way of getting what he wanted," she said. "He could talk anyone into anything."

Note: Sanford is still fundraising for his cause. Check out his webpage: www.spinalride.com.

~ Susan Polster