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## Cycle of Discipline: Batavia resident and ultra cyclist Paul Carpenter rides his bike to work - and 200 miles through Death Valley

By Eric Sumberg - Staff Writer



**Paul Carpenter, the chair of Northern Illinois University's Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education, cycles approximately 30 miles to work from his home in Batavia each day beginning at about 5:30 a.m. Chronicle photo ERIC SUMBERG**

The genesis of a passion was the result of an accident. Paul Carpenter, the chair of the Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education at Northern Illinois University, was living in Los Angeles in the late 1980s while working toward his doctorate in kinesiology at the University of California, Los Angeles, when he got into a motorcycle accident. Without enough money to make the repairs, he settled on a lower-technology solution: a bicycle. "What's not to like about cycling in Southern California?" he asked. He rode his new bicycle to go back and forth to work on the bike trails and coastal roads of Southern California until he moved back to his native country to take a job at a university in southern England. After taking a new position in 2000 as the head of sport science at the University of East London, Carpenter was faced with a middle-age dilemma. Cycling to this point had been his means of transport, but not necessarily his passion. "I would always take a long way to work," said Carpenter, now 48. "It was an opportunity to get some time of my own." When his 40th birthday was approaching, Carpenter was asked by his wife, Melissa Hyams, if he wanted a birthday party to celebrate the milestone. "I want to go and ride the Death Valley Double," he said he told his wife. "The idea of riding a bike through (Death Valley in California) proved interesting." A 200-mile race through one of the most unforgiving expanses of terrain in the world was how he would usher in a new phase in life - that of an ultra cyclist. After finishing the race, Carpenter was hooked on the grueling discipline of riding a bike hundreds of miles

for little more than personal fulfillment and stature within a select group of endurance athletes. He has been back to Death Valley seven or eight times to do races of various lengths since that first ride. He has won some races - such as the title at the Tejas 500 that he recently captured by finishing 25 laps of a 20-mile loop in 30 hours and 57 minutes - that some people might have trouble finishing in a car. He is good enough to be fourth overall in the Ultra Marathon Cycling Association's John Marino Competition to determine the best ultra riders of the season. Locally, Carpenter can be seen on a Klein Quantum early in the morning and late in the afternoon most days on Perry Road or County Line Road. Carpenter does the approximately 30-mile commute from his home in Batavia through Kaneville to his office in Anderson Hall on the campus of Northern Illinois University in about 2 hours each way. "The terrain is pretty much the same no matter what route you take," said Carpenter while sitting in his spandex tights and black long-sleeve shirt on Tuesday morning in his office. "The different seasons bring a different look. It becomes pretty barren in the winter." He carries with him in a backpack the sundry items that a cyclist needs in case of emergency: a small tool kit, spare tubes, a patch kit, a pump, a wallet, a cell phone and, in the winter, multiple sets of lights. He also totes documents from work, though he marvels at the functional simplicity of flash drives after years of toting 5 1/4-inch floppy disks, 3 1/2-inch floppy disks and then CDs. He considers himself fortunate that he has always worked in buildings with locker rooms and gyms so he can change and shower while at work. The miles that Carpenter puts in on his way to work help to build his aerobic base for long-distance challenges while carving out roughly four hours for exercise each day. While his NIU colleagues from the Fox Valley are in the car for a total of 80 minutes as they commute - "dead time," says Carpenter - he is cycling his route on days cold or hot. "I know what I do isn't realistic for everyone," he said. "When the wind is howling, you're thinking: What am I doing here?" He has had some difficult days on the road, such as the time two years ago when a bolt of lightning took out a power line on Keslinger Road half a mile ahead of where he was riding. Co-workers have given him rides on days such as those when DeKalb County had tornado warnings in August of this year. But the regularity of his ride - he says he has had to miss his route only once since 2002 - has built for him a presence on the country roads of northern Illinois. "I typically see the same people on the road each day," he said. Carpenter even had a driver stop him while he was riding to tell him he wouldn't be waving to the cyclist any longer as he was changing jobs. His fame has increased over the years as various news organizations have featured him for his uncommon dedication to distance riding. Other cyclists come up to him at events and say, "Oh, you're the guy who commutes from NIU." He doesn't ride because of a general opposition to cars, but acknowledges that the environmental impact of his riding is a pleasant byproduct. "I believe in taking a more environmental approach to things," he said. Carpenter said that while his personal feats are impressive to some, he is just a man who enjoys riding and competing. "My wife can't quite figure out what's the fuss with watching someone drive around in circles for 24 hours," he said with a laugh. *Eric Sumberg can be reached at [esumberg@daily-chronicle.com](mailto:esumberg@daily-chronicle.com).*





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