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Justin Rossi

When Justin Rossi saw the results after the opening-day time trial at the Redlands Bicycle Classic, he was surprised to discover he had finished within 10 seconds of veteran Spanish pro Francisco Mancebo. Rossi, who rides for the Marc Pro-Strava amateur squad, doesn't race full time, and has never held a UCI license. Instead, he divides his time between his real job as a firefighter near Lake Tahoe and his passion for bike racing.

"I set out three goals this year, and one of them was to be top 20 [overall] at Redlands or Cascade Classic," Rossi said. "I thought that was a pipedream."

Rossi, 33, has worked as a firefighter and paramedic for the past eight years near the alpine California lake. He turned to the profession after working in management at a hotel. He was restless with the pedestrian pace of that job, and was drawn to his current line of work by the prospect of a more rewarding professional life.

In a typical workweek, Rossi may beat down a structure fire, care for car accident victims, respond to assorted medical emergencies such as heart attacks, or respond to a boating accident on Lake Tahoe. "Kind of a jack of all trades kind of thing," Rossi said. He works a 48-hour shift, then has 96 hours off — plenty of time for long training rides.

"The fire side of it is just fun. It's a blast, when you get to do that kind of thing," Rossi said. "The medical side is really rewarding. When someone is

in a life-threatening situation and really struggling, you can help them."

Rossi tries to synchronize his training with his workdays. His hardest training comes when he is off work, and he schedules his rest days for the 48 hours he is on call. Sometimes, overtime or meetings rearrange his schedule, so Rossi has a bike on a trainer at the firehouse. He wakes up early to get his intervals done, to the bemusement of his colleagues.

"I'm a crazy bike racer," he said. "I'm always getting made fun of for being so skinny, and jumping on the trainer at 5:30 in the morning and just being aggro about training. They're always shaking their heads like, 'There's Rossi, doing his thing.'"

At Redlands, all those trainer intervals paid off. He won the jersey for best amateur with his TT performance, and held the jersey all the way to the finish three days later. "I got the jersey on the first day, and I suffered through the rest of the race trying to hold on to it," he said. He finished 12th overall.

After the race, Rossi got in his car and drove home to Reno, arriving at 3 a.m. Though he often has to work on the Monday after races, this time he

took a vacation day to recover. "It happens quite a bit where I race Sunday and I drive home, hug the wife, play with the dogs, and then it's off to work the next morning," he said. On the Tuesday after Redlands, he was back at the fire station.

It's not an easy schedule to maintain. "I try not to be a bad employee where I show up to work and I can't do anything," he said. "I try to put on a good face, but it's hard sometimes."

All the same, Rossi has definitely had his share of training days ruined by the sleepless nights caused by emergency calls. It's a challenge that drives him. He loves the demands his profession and his passion for cycling make on him. He has no plans to race professionally; racing his bike is a "full-time hobby." Balancing his schedule as a firefighter with the demands of training for stage races such as Redlands requires sacrifices, but Rossi is happy with the bargain he has struck.

"It's a way of life, and I love it," he said of cycling. "It's everything. I put everything into it that I have. And, I'll continue to do that as long as I can. I'm pretty spoiled. I definitely have my cake and I'm eating it, too." — JEN SEE