

## RAAM – The Toughest Event in Cycling?

Around here our focus is mostly on the core cycling events of road, mountain and track racing, though the sub-sector of gravel racing has certainly picked up in terms of popularity over the past few years. Besides these three main sectors, the UCI also manages and promotes several other cycling disciplines – including BMX, paracycling, cyclo-cross, trials and indoor cycling. But well outside and beyond this whole sphere lies the lesser-known, extreme and sometimes crazy world of ultra-cycling.

What is ultra-cycling? Even though the sport has its own [governing body](#), no one seems to know exactly what it is. One simple definition says that to qualify, your ride must be “long, uncomfortable, and eventually painful.” Another describes it as any event which forces the cyclist to go beyond what he or she considers achievable with maximum effort. A more specific definition of ultra-cycling is “any race or ride with stages of at least 300 km, AND with a total race distance exceeding 4500 km.”

One of the preeminent races – perhaps the “Queen” event of ultra-cycling – is the long-running Race Across America or RAAM. First run in 1982 from the Santa Monica Pier to the Empire State Building, RAAM has long been a well-known, signature event in the loosely-defined world of ultra-cycling, and it continues to be the standard by which serious ultra-distance cyclists and cycling teams are measured. Now owned by the Colorado-based father and son team of Fred and Rick Boethling, RAAM may fall a long way outside the world of mainstream cycling events – but by any definition, it boasts some of the most astonishing, indeed mind-bending accomplishments ever achieved on a bike.

Five-time Slovenian winner Jure Robic won in 2004 in just over eight days of riding, while reportedly only sleeping a total of eight hours during the entire race. Numerous wounded veterans and disabled athletes have completed the race. Several people over the age of 70 - and two people over 80 – have finished the race on relay teams, within the strictly controlled time limits. A team of four women over the age of 70 recently completed most of the event. Perhaps most remarkable is the achievement of Andre Kajlich, who after losing his legs in a teenage accident, powered a hand-crank bicycle across the entire country in twelve and a half days. The individual stories of perseverance, stamina and pure physical ambition around RAAM surely rank as some of the most incredible in all of endurance sports, let alone cycling.

The 38th edition of RAAM finished on June 24 — and I was fortunate enough to be on the banks of the Chesapeake Bay in Annapolis, MD to witness some of the action. The winner, Austrian Christoph Strasser covered the distance in a little over eight days – only a few hours shy of his record, set in 2014 – 7 days, 15 hours and 56 minutes at an average speed of 16.42mph – and that includes sleeping time. (Before Strasser’s 2013 victory, the legendary Pete Penseyres’s Bob Beamon-like 1986 record speed of 15.4 mph had stood for almost 30 years.) 60-year-old and six-time outright women’s solo winner Seana Hogan finished the race for a record eight times, winning again in her age category.

Christoph Strasser is an astonishing story all by himself. Now the winner of six RAAMs, he also holds all sorts of other ultra records, such as the fastest crossing of Australia (Perth to Sydney in 6 days, 11 hours) the 24-hour road record of 556.9 miles and the 24-hour track record of 584.7 miles. And he does this on effectively no sleep. When I asked him how much he sleeps during endurance race, he said that he used to believe that sleeping was a waste of time and a weakness, but after suffering some “cruel states of mind due to sleep deprivation, he changed his strategy. “Now I sleep for at least one hour for every 36 hours of riding!” During this year’s race, Strasser admitted that he also took a 15-minute power nap after 24 hours. “This year I took my first long sleep break, of one hour, after crossing the Rockies.” He summarizes, “All in all, I have a total sleep time of about 6 to 8 hours during the whole race.”

In all, this year 38 solo racers and 168 team racers from more than twenty different countries paid a hefty entry fee to participate, and nearly two-thirds of the solo entrants and 85% of the relay teams actually finished the race in within the specified time limits of nine to thirteen days, despite unusually rainy weather

through much of the Midwest. These 200 racers raised an estimated \$2 and \$3 million for a wide range of charitable causes, and the event itself contributed about \$3 million in economic value to the starting town of Oceanside, CA as well as \$1.5 million to Annapolis.

The Tour de France is often called the toughest event in endurance sports, but – at the risk of alienating some of our core audience – let's examine that claim. First, it's about 2,000 miles long, versus RAAM's 3,000 mile distance. Most RAAM riders race 3,000 miles in less than ten days, whereas Tour riders race the 2,000 miles in about 23 days, held in stages spaced about 18 hours apart, with two full rest days. Tour athletes typically go to their hotels each day after racing, for massages, specially-prepared meals and a good night of sleep, while their mechanics tune and clean their bikes for the next morning. RAAM racers only stop for a few hours here and there to have a sandwich, grab a few winks of sleep in the back of their van, and then jump back on their bike. Many athletic endeavors hasten to describe themselves as the toughest event in sports, but RAAM can place a serious claim on actually BEING the toughest event in sports.

Many cyclists have heard of RAAM, but what are the rules of the event, and who are the people strong enough, and maybe crazy enough, to even consider trying to qualify for and compete in the event? One misconception is that RAAM is full of slightly-deranged individual solo racers, crossing the country in a psychotic and hallucinatory craze, and being stuffed back on their bikes by a militaristic crew long after their exhausted and sleep-deprived body have stopped working. While there may be some truth to that, the event also has 2, 4 and 8 person relay teams which has brought the event closer and more accessible to ordinary and "everyday" sorts of riders who only need to race 75 or 100 miles a day! But entering RAAM is not a simple decision, or one to be taken on a whim – the 60-page rule book and 39 page clearance to race form can attest to that.

Besides being prepared to ride one's bike across the United States in less than two weeks – whether by yourself or with a group of colleagues, you must also be prepared to deal with the extensive logistics of putting together a support crew of at least five or six people and a minimum of three support vehicles (most teams have ten to twelve support staff, and three or four support vehicles – which might include a van, bus or even an RV for racers to eat and sleep in.) Entry fees for solo racers are about \$3,000, while the largest relay teams pay over \$12,000. Add all that up and the total expenses for competing in RAAM can easily reach into the \$25,000 to \$50,000 range. A few teams have spent closer to \$100,000 to participate in the event.

One theme that comes through after talking with various participants – many of them repeat competitors – is that the support crews for this event probably end up working even harder than the racers. They constantly shuttle back and forth on the road, trying to balance the needs of a single or multiple racers who always need something – a water bottle, another energy bar, a bathroom break, three hours of silence so that they can sleep in the back of a van. And so on. And as one participant told me, "Just try getting in a car, with everyone yelling at you about something every minute of the day, and driving across the entire country at 14 miles an hour. I'd much rather get on that bike and just pedal than try to be part of the support crew."

Formal qualification for RAAM is only required for solo racers, and this can be achieved in a couple of different ways. There is an array of some 45 different ultra-races around the world which function as qualifying events. Other people petition the event directly, leaning on personal resumes including other extreme events, like mountain climbing or ultra-running. Boethling says, "we have quite a few people petition us directly for registration, based on having climbed all the highest mountains in the world, rowed solo across the Pacific, run the length of Africa, that sort of thing." Obviously, all RAAM solo racers are superbly conditioned athletes, but what sets these participants apart from most other events is a kind of proven mental strength or psychological endurance – the kind of steely constitution and unbending resolve that allows you to keep going long after your body has told you to stop.

Over the years, RAAM has seen a number of well-known pro road racers participate in the event. Jonathan “Jock” Boyer competed in and won the race one year. Other well-known participants have included Eric Heiden, Rahsaan Bahati, Dave Zabriskie, and Magnus Backstedt (who this year led an 8-man relay team). Fabian Cancellara has raced some of RAAM’s official qualifying events. Lance Armstrong has mentioned it on his podcast, and Bob Roll and Phil Liggett have also discussed the race on air. Tom Danielson is sending a full team to the organization time trial event in California this fall. So, there is some cross-over between the two disciplines, usually by road racers reaching the end of their careers. Boethling believes there would be more participation by pro road racers if the relay team option was more widely known.

After riding for eight to ten days and 3,000 miles, the individual racers or teams are typically not that close to each other when they approach the finish line, and admittedly, standing around the dock in Annapolis was a bit slow. Christoff had reached the finish line some 36 hours ahead of the second place rider. The morning I was there, just three riders (one solo and two relay teams) arrived at the finish line over the course of eight hours. As those teams were being announced and interviewed, there were typically more people on the podium stage than there were in the audience. But the pure emotion of finishing this race – for both the racers and their support crews – was palpable.

For example, the winning relay team from Austria was live-streaming their finish-line event back to their followers at home; watching the four riders ceremonially parade across the finish line, to the sporadic cheers and support of just their families and support crews was definitely emotionally-charged. The support staff was just as exhausted – and as happy – as the racers themselves. As they came across the finish line, one of the racers, who I assumed to be their road captain, signaled to everyone on the team – some twenty people in total – to circle up around him. I assumed he was going to deliver a brief pep talk or lead the team in a few final cheers; instead, he dropped to one knee and proposed to one of his support crew members. The entire team seemed to collapse in joy, pure exhaustion and tears. It was hard not to be drawn in by the engulfing emotion of that moment – and what that group of people had achieved together.

Its not always slow at the finish line however. Sometimes, Boethling says, things can get close. In 2009, the top two solo racers were only 90 seconds apart with less than 50 miles to go. Both teams were bickering and complaining about each other, as the two riders were neck in neck towards the finish line. “The crews were accusing each other’s riders of not stopping at stop signs, and things like that,” says Boethling. “It was pretty exciting.” At this year’s event, the 8-man relay team of Magnus Backstedt came in just 15 minutes behind the winning Austrian group. One of the staff described to me a 45-minute delay the team had suffered a few days earlier, waiting for a closed road to be cleared of an accident. “Without that delay,” he lamented, “we might have won the relay race division....but, oh well, that’s bike racing.”

All kinds of things can hold up the race when you’re riding all the way across the United States. Racers can petition to have their time adjusted – for accidents, road closures, stopped trains, and so on. Different riders can experience wildly different weather – but the clock keeps on ticking. This year a number of riders encountered extensive rain conditions, and some even had to be transported around flooded areas. But that’s just the way the event works. The same kinds of things happen at the Tour de France – such as the freak hailstorm that derailed Stage 19 this year. The weather can be considerably different for the first and the last riders in a time trial, and aficionados will remember the controversy a few years ago when a handful of riders at the front of the peloton tried to duck under a barrier to race across the tracks in front of a speeding train.

And of course every year there are unanticipated logistical challenges, comical events, outpourings of support or unexpected mix-ups that make for good stories later. Boethling mentions various restaurants along the route that have simply opened their doors to all participants and support crews, offering them whatever free food and drink they needed. He mentions one unnamed racer who unwisely recruited both

his wife and his mistress to assist on the support team; that fact wasn't discovered until somewhere halfway across the country, with the sag team quickly disintegrating. Or the relay team that stopped for refueling and food at a gas station and unwittingly left one of their racers in the bathroom, not to be discovered until it was his time to take a turn on the bike fifty miles down the road. "One time there was a train stopped, blocking the road," remembers Boethling. "We were petitioned by one of the tandem teams, who asked if it was OK if they lifted their tandem bike across the coupling between two coal cars, so they could keep moving. It's always something."

Strasser adds a few anecdotes of his own, most of them having to do with extreme sleep deprivation. "Once, after getting up after a sleep break and back on my bike, I was so confused that I was asking my crew (via my headset) where my bike was. I thought I had lost my bike but in reality I was sitting on it. They told me, in a very calm voice, that I don't need to worry about my bike. Yes, I had forgotten it in the camper-van at the sleep break. But no worries, I should just ride on and the other guys from my crew will bring it to me. Everything was good for me and I rode on happily." He continues, "Here you can see that finding the right words is so important. If they tell me that I am completely nuts and that I was sitting on the bike and had not forgotten it, I would have realized that I am very confused, which would have made me even more confused. By just telling that little 'joke' to me, I got the feeling that everything was okay."

What about cheating and doping – those inevitable human tendencies that have plagued other aspects of cycling for decades? According to the event rules, riders on relay teams are required to overlap front and rear wheel hubs when trading off – sort of like relay runners transferring the baton. It is obviously impossible to monitor every team all the way across the country, and Boethling admits that there may be some corner-cutting here and there. But he points out that modern live-tracking GPS capabilities make it pretty difficult to cheat very much. There are also about twenty sets of officials, moving back and forth on the road to maintain law and order. And of course there is the natural tendency for teams to rigidly regulate each other; almost every team has a laptop in their vehicle, and they typically monitor other racers' positions and speed.

The organization does do selective and random drug testing, particularly for the top solo racers, but again Boethling admits that it is always going to be impossible to police the event one hundred percent; to his knowledge, though, there have never been any positive test results returned on any RAAM riders. Boethling also underscores how pointless trying to cheat in this event really is. "There is no prize money at stake here, you're riding on the honor system most of the time, and most riders are doing this event to prove to themselves and their friends that they can do it. Cheating here is sort of like cheating at solitaire .... I suppose some people do it, but they are really only cheating themselves." He says that over the years the race has only ever disqualified three or four racers, for more serious infractions.

In terms of the event's economics, Boethling declines to provide specific financial details, but he says the race "hovers around profitability" every year, even with minimal sponsorship. In 2007, the Boethlings decided to exit their house-painting and trucking businesses, and bought RAAM from its previous owner (Fred had raced the event previously, and at one time held the individual record for racers over 60 years old). The RAAM "franchise" now includes the Race Across the West (the first 845 miles of RAAM, from Oceanside to Durango, CO) as well as the 6, 12, and 24 hour World Time Trial Championships, held each fall in Borrego Springs, 100 miles northeast of San Diego, and several other events.

Today, the organization's core staff consists of three full-time people and one part-time person in the main office in Boulder, Colorado – supplemented by six part-time people covering media, officiating, race headquarters management, marketing and website operation, and route design and management. During the actual event, the volunteer base grows to around a couple hundred people – including race officials, start and finish volunteers and time-station volunteers. It takes this whole group of people – working together virtually around the clock for nearly two weeks to make RAAM happen.

The major costs for RAAM are obviously a bit different than other more localized events, with the main items being hotels, officials, insurance, finish area banquets, coordination with local governments, racer supplies/awards and overall planning. Boethling would dearly love to get a major non-endemic sponsor behind the event – someone like one of the big telecom or healthcare companies, but he's never quite had the bandwidth or finances to chase major non-endemic sponsors, and says the race can survive on registration fees alone if necessary.

"We do our best to utilize social media to market the event consistently year-round," says Boethling. "We also do a newsletter roughly 25 times a year, and we are in the process of getting all of our qualifying races to work together in a more unified manner to promote the sport as a whole. During the actual race we have three media teams covering the race on the road. We also allow participants to have their own media teams – this year we had more than 20 independent media teams on the road – and this helps to 'spread the word' to a lot of places we could never get to by ourselves." Interestingly, the race seems more popular and better-known in central Europe than it is in the States, largely because the last 16 years the winner has been from the four contiguous countries of Slovenia, Austria, Switzerland or Germany.

Some observers have questioned the whole premise of RAAM, suggesting that the event encourages people to over-extend, that it drives irrational competition, that it can lead to downright dangerous behavior. The 2009 movie "[Bicycle Dreams](#)" about the race drew criticism when it described the death of one rider, and wild stories of other sleep-deprived riders who had been on their bikes non-stop for 30 or 40 hours, hallucinating, freaking out that roadside mailboxes were monsters about to attack them, and so on. Says Boethling, "Listen, I understand that different people are going to feel differently, but in general I would just say 'to each his own.'" Personally, I think it's kind of crazy to sit around on your couch and watch football all weekend .... you can pick your analogy. Our racers are not crazy, they're just normal people who happen to be very focused and driven. Racing our event is no more crazy than climbing Mt. Everest, running Iditarod, or any number of other difficult physical endeavors. RAAM is an adventure, and adventure often has some element of danger – but so does your regular morning bike ride. In fact, if done properly, RAAM is really not that dangerous; racers actually have support vehicles driving behind them that provide a layer of protection you wouldn't normally have out on the road."

As to their longer-term goals for the race, the Boethlings say, "We would like to see RAAM, and some of our other races, be counted among the great bike races in the world, and we'd like to see ultra-cycling grow and become a more respected part of the overall cycling community. If we could eventually get to around 400 racers in RAAM, that would be plenty to sustain the race as a profitable endeavor going forward, and any sponsorship would sort of be gravy on top of that. More generally, we'd like to see a more formal oversight and organizing body for the sport, not necessarily one that plays overlord, but one that promotes a reasonable set of standards and works to raise the quality of races around the world. And mostly, we'd just like to see more people trying and experiencing the fun and adventure of RAAM." Underlining this are the comments of Tim Skipper, who has completed RAAM a remarkable 18 times, "I would recommend RAAM to any serious cyclist. Most people think of RAAM as unattainable, but with an 8-person team and some training, you'll find it to be one of the most outstanding and memorable events of your life. One week's worth of RAAM is equal to one year of life experience!"

Christoph Strasser deserves the final word. "Finishing a race like RAAM will be a life-lasting experience and you will know that, even if you are completely done, even if you are tired and everything hurts, that you can still go on – and things will get better again. These are lessons which can help you in many other situations in life. And the most important lesson for me? Without a great team you will achieve nothing; everywhere else in sports and life, it is so important to have people you can trust."

*By Steve Maxwell, September 18th, 2019.*