



Paul Carpenter prepares to decide on Race Across America

The flashing red light in the distance should have appeared closer as Paul Carpenter pedaled nearer and nearer on his bicycle. But it did not. Or at least it seemed that way to the 49-year-old Carpenter, struggling through the final 30 miles of the 1,044-mile Race Across the West in the wee-hours darkness and frigid cold of the New Mexico desert. He had enjoyed a little more than three hours of sleep spread during three days, 11 hours and 27 minutes of battling the harsh elements and terrain. "I could've sworn someone kept moving the light further and further away. Psychological I guess," says Carpenter, chairman of Northern Illinois University's department of kinesiology and physical education. "It's completely desolate out there, and it becomes very hard when you've not had that much sleep to keep your concentration and not drift off. The shadows on the road can wreak havoc." Carpenter had expected the final leg of his long and grueling journey would prove the easiest. During the previous stage he had made two mountain passes, one of which took him 10,000 feet up. The climb itself spanned 15 miles. Other passages took him 200 feet below sea level. He already had endured daytime temperatures in California and Arizona that soared past 110 degrees and had shivered through overnight temperatures in the 20s. His left foot, which is slightly bigger than the right, had swollen even larger and required a change to a larger shoe. "I thought, 'If I get through this stage, that's it. I'm done. It's all downhill into Taos.'" But it was done at night - 60 miles of freezing cold on completely featureless terrain in the dark. It just seemed to drag by," Carpenter says. Yet when he finally - mercifully - reached the finish line in Taos, N.M., early Thursday, June 12, he was the first. His average speed of 12.51 mph was more than good enough to win. Eight hours and 33 minutes later, when the maximum completion time expired, Carpenter was the only competitor of an original field of eight to officially reach the destination. He had collapsed into bed long before then, of course, sleep coming as soon as his head hit the pillow. When he eventually awoke, the early-morning victory wasn't the stuff of his dreams. "I really hadn't gone there with the notion that winning was important. It was to learn more about the event. To have won was just a bonus," he says. "I knew by about mile 800 that, unless I stopped, I was going to win. I knew many of the other riders were dropping out, and I was surprised so many dropped out. I figured that most, based on their experience, would finish." Carpenter held that same confidence in himself. "I never doubted I would finish. I knew I could finish within the time frame unless there was a major catastrophe," he says. "And if there was a major catastrophe, finishing was the least of my worries." The purpose was to determine whether he has what it takes to attempt the Race Across America. "I've sort of harbored this dream." RAAM is held annually in the middle of June, this year sending its bicyclists from Oceanside, Calif., to Annapolis, Md. Riders must finish the 3,014 miles in 12 days; the winner typically arrives on Day 8. Carpenter and the seven other Race Across the West solo competitors - four men and three women - started pedaling with the RAAM racers and followed the same course. Several teams also had entered. The only difference was the stopping point; Carpenter was the 10th rider to reach Taos. "My goal here was to gain the experience of doing RAAM - to see whether doing the full race was remotely feasible. It was an opportunity to get some experience racing under RAAM conditions," he says. "At this point, I know I absolutely will do the race one day. I don't want to reach a point where I regret not having tried," he adds. "I've sort of harbored this dream - this fantasy - of taking part in RAAM for 20 years now, and until about three years ago, it was nothing more than wishful thinking. And then, last year, I qualified." Carpenter earned a three-year window of eligibility for RAAM late last September when he won the Tejas 500 near Cleburne, Texas, about 70 miles southwest of Dallas-Fort Worth. He completed his 25th lap around the 20-mile loop in 30 hours and 57 minutes.