

Race Across The West: A Personal Reflection

by Paul Carpenter

“So, are you doing solo RAAM in 2009?” This is the question I have been asked most since finishing the Race Across the West (RAW). Since learning about RAAM in the late 1980s, I have harbored a dream of taking part in the “world’s toughest bike race.” Having qualified for RAAM last summer, here I was 20 years later that much closer to my dream, but despite this I was reticent about taking the plunge. I reasoned that since the Tejas 500 was my longest ride to-date, I needed to test myself in longer events before committing all the time and money required to participate in RAAM. The addition of the Race Across the West to the 2008 RAAM options was a timely opportunity to compete in a long race under RAAM rules, on the RAAM course, and also experience the RAAM atmosphere. Here was a way of seeing if RAAM was feasible logistically, mentally, and physically. Could my dream become a reality? Am I now ready to make the commitment or am I still reticent? Did RAW provide me with the definitive answer to the question of competing in solo RAAM in 2009? The RAW experience provided me with many insights into RAAM. It was an amazing experience and an incredible adventure. The atmosphere was unique and the camaraderie among riders and crew uplifting. I feel I know much more about the logistics involved and the degree and type of planning needed to be successful. I learned a lot about my physical and mental capacities.

Logistically

My planning for RAW started back in October 2007 and I took on all the logistics. That was my first big mistake. If I am to compete in 2009, I need to find someone willing to take on the logistical role and organize all the needed materials, vehicles, and supplies and recruit and train the crew. My second big mistake was my lack of understanding about the race crew. Never having raced with a crew before, I wasn’t really sure what to do with them. I had read a lot about how important the crew is and the role they needed to play. However, I approached RAW with the mindset that the crew was largely there to comply with the rules rather than being a critical and essential element of a successful race. Knowing my crew had no ultra cycling experience and that we had little time to train ahead of the race (my crew comprised my parents and a cousin and his wife all of who were visiting the US from England for their summer vacations), I also took the position that I needed to keep the demands on them to a minimum and the required tasks simple. In spite of my mistakes, the crew did a fantastic job. They kept me fed and hydrated, kept me on course and attended to all my needs. We incurred no time penalties, a testament to their attention to the very detailed RAAM rules. As the race progressed, they took on more roles and tasks that I should have anticipated and organized with them before the race.

There were many such roles and tasks for which we should have practiced and been better prepared, most of it the mundane yet critical to success. We decided to forego using hand-offs since we hadn’t practiced them before the race. Likewise, we weren’t planning to use follow-mode except at night when it was absolutely required. It didn’t take long before the crew realized that having me stop to pick up bottles wasn’t an efficient use of time so they started to do moving hand-offs. The first few had some comical moments but after some discussion we got the hang of it. The crew also mastered moving hand-offs from the vehicle and got more comfortable in follow-mode. Having some training runs would have made all of this easier and given everyone more confidence.

Without having practiced anything at all, the crew was unfamiliar with the equipment and supplies and how they were stored. In Durango I needed to add some layers as I had gotten very cold on the descent into town. Although I had stored and organized supplies in separate clear plastic boxes, finding the clothes I needed became a challenge. First, the item I wanted was always the last thing the crew pulled out and when I needed a pair of something they invariably only found one of these items. Second, there is a different language that cyclists use which requires translation for non-riders. While I know what a neoprene bootie is and the difference between an arm warmer, leg warmer and a knee warmer, my crew did not. An arm warmer doesn't look that much different than a knee warmer which doesn't look much different than a leg warmer. When you're tired it's amazing how frustrating this can become!

While we had discussed my nutritional needs and had a schedule planned out, I didn't ask the crew to keep track of what I consumed. On the leg to Pagosa Springs, I felt I was working far harder than I should given the conditions. I realized that I hadn't been eating and drinking as much as I should and began to wonder if I was bonking. I think that in deciding to change from leap frog mode during the day to follow-mode all the time, we interrupted the way the crew had been refueling me. Because they weren't keeping track of my intake we didn't pick up on this change. I also didn't have them keep track on my time off the bike or my sleep breaks. Looking at my time splits between time stations (TS) and having a pretty good idea of how fast I was riding each leg, it is clear I spent a lot of time off the bike. While breaks were needed to cope with the heat, the amount of down time went well beyond what was needed. Had the crew been logging this time and letting me know I feel I would have been back on the bike quicker and just as refreshed.

Sleep deprivation among the crew nearly led to disaster. At the TS in Prescott I was told that no-one had gotten any sleep and no-one felt they could drive safely as the second night approached. The plan was to rotate drivers and have at least one person getting some sleep at any given moment. However, the continuous activity in the van made it impossible for anyone to get any meaningful sleep. This problem was compounded by the lack of space to get comfortable in a vehicle crammed with supplies. Sleep had to be taken sitting upright in the van seats. If the follow vehicle was off the road then I was off the road. I had planned to take my first 'real' sleep break toward midnight of the second night somewhere beyond Flagstaff. Instead, a few hours after dusk, in Sedona, we pulled off the road to sleep. If the van was cramped before, adding me made it worse. Somehow we all managed. I slept on the floor on top of the gear and the crew slept sitting up. None of us slept soundly, but it was enough to get us going again safely just over 3 hours later. This episode brought home how critical sleep management is for rider and crew and how important it is to ensure that conditions allow everyone to get some meaningful sleep.

Physically

The physical challenges of the race revolved around three intertwined factors: the climbs, the heat, and physical ailments. There were a lot of very hard and long climbs in the 1000 miles to Taos. None of the climbs in and of themselves caused me any real problems. I wasn't the fastest person up the climbs, but I was far from the slowest. I climbed steadily and strongly. The

climbs in the desert heat were the hardest and presented the greatest physical challenge but I never felt bad on any climb. I never felt like I needed yet another lower gear.

The heat accounted for a lot of down time at TS5, 6, and 9. I was probably off the bike for much longer necessary, but at the time it felt as though I needed the time to cool down and avoid heat exhaustion. The heat was intense and it felt like the sun was burning through my skin. Despite liberal applications of sunscreen I became very concerned about sunburn. Fortunately I had brought a long sleeved jersey designed to offer maximum sun protection. Between TS9 and TS10 the heat seemed to intensify as the wind strengthened. The combination of the heat and blowing sand made conditions very uncomfortable.

Despite these extreme conditions I never experienced any cramping or any stomach problems. The combination of the climbs and the distance didn't seem to lead to any significant muscle soreness. While my neck was a little sore after the first night which I spent largely on the aero-bars, this passed quickly and never returned. The physical ailments that started to develop were some discomfort in my left foot and some saddle soreness. My left foot is slightly larger than my right and has a bunion on the outer edge of my little toe which gets squeezed the longer I ride and the more my foot swells. By the second day the toe had gotten quite painful and no matter how loose I had the straps it didn't feel better. Eventually I removed the shoe and wore another, one size larger. This eased the pain and the rest of the ride I encountered no problems. The first indications of being uncomfortable in the saddle started between TS4 and TS5. From this point on I was very careful about hygiene and the reapplication of balm. I knew some sores were developing but the process of cleaning and reapplying the balm seemed to prevent things getting worse. I also changed shorts and at TS11 in Mexican Hat I changed saddles. The saddle on my spare bike had a little more padding and a slightly different shape. I was hoping this change would alter the pressure points and improve my level of comfort. The combination of balm and saddle change seemed to keep the saddle sores in check. I didn't feel uncomfortable in the saddle until the final stretch into Taos. I did develop some sores and it is difficult to say whether these and/or my foot problem would have worsened had I two thousand more miles to ride.

While the hills and the heat were challenging, I never felt that these physical challenges were going to stop me from finishing. I only recall one point in the race where I questioned whether I had the physical strength to finish. As I described earlier, I felt I came close to bonking on the leg into Pagosa Springs. As I left for the leg to Chama which contained several tough climbs, I was still feeling weak. As I approached the first climb my legs felt very heavy and I found it hard to find the strength to turn the pedals. I also couldn't keep my eyes open and felt myself falling asleep. I told my crew I was struggling to stay awake and needed a 30 minute nap before continuing. Truth be told, I was more concerned that I just had nothing more left in my legs for the climbs to come in this section let alone the two long climbs in the next leg that would take us to 10,000 feet, the highest point on the route. As I settled down on the van's back seats I began to question my ability to finish.

I was roused 30 minutes later and felt for the first time I had actually gotten some quality sleep. I knew I had to get up and get going if I was to finish. Although, I felt better I still struggled up the next climb. The wind was picking up and everything seemed to be working against me. At some point I was joined by Michael Nehls and we briefly chatted as we had done earlier in the

race. As he pulled away up the road he wished me well. With this, I put my head down and started to find a rhythm and things started to pick-up. The remaining miles of the leg went well despite some horrendous cross-winds and I made it into Chama and TS16 feeling much stronger. I had now ridden 934 miles in 3 days 3 hours and 19 minutes. I had just over 100 miles to go and nearly 17 hours to do it in to be an official finisher. I knew then I would make it.

Psychologically

As a sport psychologist, you would hope that I'd have some insights into the mental components of racing. Knowing the theory doesn't always translate into practice. Psychologically I knew I would need to deal with three broad issues. First, there was the question of confidence in my ability to ride twice as far as I had ever ridden. Anxieties, doubts, and fears can creep in when you are facing something beyond what you have done before. Second, there was the issue of sleep deprivation and keeping alert and focused when riding at night. Third, there was the question of how I would deal with adversity. In any ultra cycling race there are both good and bad moments. How you deal with the bad times often determines how you perform.

I was confident that I would successfully complete the race within the official time limit and this was my primary goal. I knew I had trained well and was in great physical condition. I also felt I was prepared to cope with any minor physical ailments that might arise such as swollen feet or saddle sores. At the start I was a little anxious about what lay ahead, but this was largely being generated by how much had to be done before the start. I wanted to get going and didn't want to have to deal with all the stuff around being officially cleared to race (another reason to have someone deal with the logistics rather than the rider). Based on past experiences I felt I was mentally tough enough to cope with the race. The heat, however, was a psychological challenge, as well as a physical one and I spent a lot of time at TS's cooling down during the desert portions of the race. I'd let my fears about the heat get the better of me. These breaks were too long and suggest to me that I need to be more disciplined about time spent off the bike. I was not actually anxious about the distance. I'd made a plan to focus on TS to TS rather than think of the total distance. Dealing with the distance between TSs made the total distance manageable and avoided letting the magnitude of how far I had to ride from sapping my confidence.

Although I hadn't set winning as my goal, my primary goal was to finish, as the race progressed I became aware of my race position. From the start I was focused on my race much more than where I was placed. I tried not to get caught up in a battle for the lead or worry about how much I was behind or ahead of other riders. My crew didn't tell me how I was placed or give the time differences among racers although they knew this through communication with my wife who was following the race on the web. I knew this was a long tough race and that my final race position would take care of itself. The only time I recall feeling the competitive urge was on arriving at TS12 (Montezuma Creek) and learning that I had passed Ronin Keene. This spurred me into action and I pressed on up to Cortez. After Cortez, I slipped back into being focused on finishing rather than winning. I had no idea on arriving in Pagosa Springs I had a 5 hour advantage on Ronin and as long as I kept pedaling I'd be first to finish. Apart from knowing that Chris Malloy had dropped out, I wasn't aware that every other solo RAW rider had either dropped out or wouldn't make the finish within the official time limit.

On reflection, I don't feel the concerns about sleep deprivation and staying alert were realized. Sleep deprivation was more an issue for my crew, than it was for me. Staying alert was only an issue on two occasions. The first, on the leg to Chama, was less a problem of alertness and more of confidence as I described above. The second occasion was on the last leg into Taos which consisted of two, 30 mile stretches of straight, featureless road. Part of the problem was that having reached TS17 I had decided that all the hard riding was behind me and the race was over. I took the last leg into Taos too lightly and lost my focus.

Psychologically there were three moments where I had to make a decision about continuing and as such overcoming the adversities I was facing. The first was at TS5 in Congress where the heat had started to make riding very hard and the Yarnell Grade lay ahead. At this TS they had a wading pool so riders could cool down. It was so tempting to dwell longer. I knew that unless I waited here several more hours, it wasn't going to get any cooler. While I stayed longer than I needed, I got myself going and headed up the Yarnell Grade. The second moment occurred at the TS in Kayenta. Again the heat was the challenge, but it was combined with a strengthening wind. In addition, my left foot was causing me some pain, I was concerned about sunburn, and the first real concerns about saddle sores had begun. It would have been much easier to stay in the van rather than venture out into the oven-like desert heat. However, with a larger shoe on my left foot, wearing a long sleeved sun protection jersey, and enough balm for three people on my butt, I pressed on. The third moment was on the leg to Chama which I have already described. This was the only moment I questioned whether I could finish. Taking the 30 minute break allowed me to rethink and recover. It would have been easier to have just stayed in the van again, but I didn't. I was determined to "keep chipping away."

So, are you doing solo RAAM in 2009?

I hoped RAW would give me the definitive answer to the question of whether or not I will do RAAM. I hoped the race would clearly show either RAAM was doable or beyond me. RAW has taught be a number of things, but I can't say it has left be with the unequivocal feeling that I can do RAAM! I know I potentially have the physical and mental strengths to complete the race. I know I can work on improving these over the course of the next year. I also know there are many things I can do better with respect to the crew and logisitics. I am certain that I need someone to take on the race logistics. If, in the next few months, I find someone willing to take this role on work with me on preparing for the race, I can seriously consider committing to RAAM in 2009. So the answer is yes, maybe.