

Team RANS in 2009

Glenn Druery

The Tour de France is undoubtedly one of the oldest and most prestigious bicycle races in the world, with a race distance that varies from year to year covering anywhere from 3000 to 4500km, and racers compete over three, gruelling weeks in daily stage races of varying lengths. Sounds tough, doesn't it? And it is.

The Race Across America or RAAM, is an altogether different epic. RAAM racers cycle over 5000km—in nine days for solo racers, and around seven days for teams. That would be like cycling from Melbourne to Sydney or Sydney to Brisbane five times in around a week. Impossible? Not for the several hundred cyclists from around the world who complete RAAM, arguably the toughest bicycle race in the world. Of course not all who start RAAM finish it. There's a very high attrition rate.

On the Tour, riders start and stop each day, with relaxing meals, massages and warm beds provided. But on RAAM the rider or team doesn't stop at the end of the day. If you want to finish the race you get on your bike at the beginning and you keep on cycling, day and night until it's over, 5000km later. In team RAAM, one member of the team is always cycling on a tightly regulated roster with the other team members.

So if it's so hard, why have so few Australians heard of it? It's hugely well known in America and very prestigious, but not many Australian cyclists compete in it and it doesn't enjoy media coverage like The Tour.

RAAM has been operating since 1982 and runs from the west coast to the east coast of the United States. In 2009 it started in Oceanside, California, north of San Diego and finished in Annapolis, Maryland and involved a little over 33,500 metres of climbing—the equivalent of almost four Mount Everests.

This year was my third RAAM. In 2005 I was the first Australian to compete and in 2007 I raced in the two-person division

which was tremendously hard, being a roster of one hour on, one hour off, nonstop for seven days. We came second that year and set a new race record in the division.

RAAM presents a unique opportunity to compete against some of the best ultra distance racers from all over the world. This year's race had a record entry with over 300 riders ready to depart Oceanside



Glenn before the start

on 20 June. I was in a four-person team this time and my team mates were Americans. With twelve RAAMs between us, we were very experienced. As the only Australian in the team I was proud enough, but this year I was the only Australian competing in RAAM. I wanted to do well. *Aussie, Aussie, Aussie!*

Our team divided into pairs, each pair cycling at time trial pace for 20 minutes on, 20 minutes off intervals for a period of four hours. Then we'd have a four hour break in the support vehicle and the other pair would do the same, and so on in rotation, for the duration of the race.

So how do you prepare for a race like that? I train in excess of 20,000 km a year and compete in regular racing events. This not only strengthens muscles but also hones my racing skills. In recent times I've added racing as I cycle to and from work. I'm just a naturally competitive person and I look for other cyclists to race against as I commute. I even race cars and trains if there aren't any cyclists around!

As a member of Audax Australia I have many friends who regularly participate in long rides of 200 km plus, and I join them when I can as a break from the harder and faster races that form my regular training. This of course takes a lot of time—time away from family and friends—but to be seriously competitive in RAAM it's essential.

RAAM isn't just about the cyclist/s in the race. A good support team is critical. This year we had a crew of 14 individuals, four vehicles including an RV where the racers ate and slept, as well as the follower car, which kept close behind us as we rode, protecting us from the traffic behind us and providing light for us at night.

During RAAM you can burn up to 10,000 calories a day so you need to eat—a lot! People ask me what I eat during the race. Apart from my weakness for gummi bears, I fuelled myself with a variety of mostly natural foods: grapes, yoghurt, nuts, berries, tomato/V8 juice, bread, sandwiches, pasta, protein drinks, choc milk, and masses of water—all prepared by the support crew. Even so, I lost around 3–4 kg during the race, and remember, that's in under a week!

You don't just participate in RAAM, you live RAAM. Like all endurance athletic events the test goes far beyond the physical. You learn about yourself: what motivates you, what your limits are, physically, mentally and emotionally. At times I felt tired down to my toenails. Through sheer physical exhaustion RAAM pushes your body to the absolute extreme. It'll grind you down one day and the next day give you a high like nothing else in the world.

It's confronting. It can be spiritual. It strips away your superficialities until you're faced with what you're really like. You face your demons! More and more as the race progresses life becomes a sleep-deprived RAAM blur. Sometimes it feels as though there is nothing else in life but RAAM, no way to escape.

You might well ask why someone would do such an event. I often wonder that myself. My answer is always the same, RAAM has become a part of me, and I love this madness!

After the 2005 RAAM I was quoted in the press as saying: "I wouldn't say I was hallucinating, but at one point I was talking to my dead grandmother. I logically knew that she wasn't there but it was nice talking to her so I kept chatting for awhile."

And also: "Somewhere in the middle of Indiana, I started looking for a small cliff to ride off. Nothing too big; I didn't want to get seriously hurt, but I thought breaking an arm or something would be worth it if I could just get some sleep."

This year the days were generally very hot, but it got very cold in the Rocky Mountains, especially above 10000ft. We had a temperature range of 46°C to -3°C over the race. Hot or cold, steep or flat, simple things would boost morale, like a superb sunrise or a motivational word from the crew.

The words of the great Don Bradman often ran around my head: "When you play test cricket, you don't give the Englishmen



Cameraderie and sportsmanship on the road

an inch. Play it tough, all the way. Grind them into the dust."

Did I mention climbing? We certainly did! From the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the Rockies of the West, with their enormous uphill slogs, to the short but brutally steep killers of the Ozarks and Appalachians of the East, we climbed. The rewards were exhilarating descents, incredibly fast but far too brief.

But there was more to the route than just climbing. We enjoyed the sparse scenery of the desert areas of the Southwest, and the boundless farm fields of Kansas and Oklahoma, refreshed by the varied terrain

and small towns of Illinois, Indiana and Ohio. RAAM's route traces the building of the United States in reverse. Someday I'd like to go back and visit all those places again, spend more time studying what I saw from my bike, but not this year. This year I was racing.

After all this talk about the race, where it went, what I saw, what I ate: how did we do? What was our result? Simply this: we won! Our team, Team RANS, finished in first place, ahead of all 18 of the four-person teams. We even succeeded in beating most of the eight-person teams, whose members were obviously more rested. We finished in a time of 6 days, 3 hours and 40 minutes, which is an average riding speed of around 33 km/h over 5000 km.

Apart from the primary goal of winning, the secondary goal of our team was to set a new four-person race record. We didn't quite achieve that goal this year, but we came close, awfully close. We were a little disappointed, but we realised what that meant: we'd be back.

The only Aussie in the race and now on the podium at the finish line in Annapolis, I was indescribably proud and happy and I remember crying. I felt ten feet tall, invincible. If I could do this, I could do anything. I looked at each of my teammates, smiling and accepting the accolades of the crowd, and I was already thinking: now we're the team to beat. We may as well be wearing giant targets on our backs. Next time we'll have to do even better.

Simple things would boost morale, like a superb sunrise

