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2009 Race Across America: Preview

By Andy McGrath

3,000 miles. 110,000 feet of climbing. Unquantifiable pain. From race legend Robic to eight-men teams, we take a look at the contenders for RAAM, the toughest race on two wheels.

The Race Across America is not only the hardest thing around on two wheels, but one of the most gruelling challenges known to man. Climbers who have scaled Everest and explorers who have traversed the Sahara have raced here and noted how RAAM is more gruelling. Even to call the 3,000-mile west-to-east route from Oceanside, California to Annapolis, MD a journey is an understatement – it is an epic, an odyssey, an enormous undertaking that is impossible to fully grasp mentally for riders, let alone fans. Riders can go whole days without sleep: dehydration, hallucination, heatstroke, exhaustion are all physical dangers they face. That is even excepting the inherent risks of a roadbound ten-day journey: ten-tonne juggernauts whiz inches past them on the freeways. As the race progresses, support teams, themselves running on little sleep, find themselves dealing with shellshocked, husks of the people they once knew. For most, it becomes more a race to keep going, for survival, than a regular competition. The riders pass through 14 states and 3,000 miles, over 110,000 feet of climbing and unquantifiable pain. Even Lance Armstrong can't hold a candle to this – the RAAM is one and a half Tours de France in distance done in a third of the time.

The Route

The solo race starts on June 18 in Oceanside, California. There is a total of 53 time stations across the 3,016-mile route, each one spread out between 40 and 90 miles in proximity to the next, noting down the rider's time as they pass. From the start, the first 600 miles are virtually all uphill, as the race heads into the barren desertland of Arizona. Racers have commented on how psychologically damning this early part of the race is, seeing a tiny road stretch into the horizon amid a dead, sandy world. Then, the climbing continues into Colorado and the Rocky Mountains. This is the toughest part of the race topographically, but at least the racers will be relatively "fresh".

Things get comparatively flatter for the race's middle part through Kansas, Missouri and Illinois. However, as the weather, sleeplessness, distance and mental effort take their toll, the racing is getting progressively harder. Into the closing 750 kilometres and the mountains in West Virginia, things are desperate. By now, most are running on sheer willpower. It is a physical and mental battle to keep going: hallucinations and exhaustion are par for the course. The greatest gains can sometimes be made in this final section, as challengers capitulate and even abandon when practically in the "home straight".

Men's Solo RAAM

Jure Robic

When anyone says "Race Across America" to me, Jure Robic is the first name that comes to mind. The four-time winner is effectively the modern "Mr. RAAM", a legend in ultra-cycling. Both respected and revered by rivals and fans alike, the former Slovenian slider is gunning for a record fifth title. The 44-year-old may still have one eye on smashing Pete Penseyres's 1985 fastest time of 8.09.47. However, the ever-improving standards he has set in recent years also force his rivals to push themselves ever harder – beating Robic is synonymous with winning RAAM itself. The Slovenian both cannot and will not be taking anything for granted; there are enough variables to slow him down. In previous years, he has set the markers to beat and will lead from the front.

Robic's RAAM Record 2008 – 1st (8.23.33)

2007 – 1st (8.19.33)

2006 – DNF (Medical)

2005 – 1st (9.08.48)

2004 – 1st (8.09.51)

2003 – 2nd

However, he may not have it all his way this year. Rookie **Christopher Strasser** is a young Austrian firebrand who has burst onto the ultra racing scene in recent years. He has been smashing records all over Europe: he's the youngest ultra marathon world champion; recently, he finished second to Robic, in the Race Around Slovenia, itself a RAAM qualifier. Strasser – the youngest solo competitor in this year's RAAM, at 27 years old – has not only the confidence, but more importantly, has logged the thousands of kilometres of training necessary to pose a serious threat to Robic, a man he cites as a hero. He has slogged his guts out putting in the graft in Eastern Europe. At very least, the Austrian is gunning for the title of Best Rookie in 2009. At most, he could prove a more than capable foil to Jure Robic.

In RAAM, Strasser fears the humidity the most: "I think the heat in the deserts is going to be the hardest challenge. These high temperatures are something new for me, since the European climate is not as hot. I like cold and rainy weather and I love the mountains, especially mountains, which are not too steep. I think the Rockies could be a nice place for me."

Strasser's Ultra-Racing Record

2008 Race Around Austria – 1st

2008 Race Around Slovenia – 2nd

2007 Race Across the Alps – 2nd

2007 World Championships Ultra-Marathon – 1st

Slovenia appears to be a hotbed for ultra-cycling talent. Last year's third-place finisher and 24 and 12-hour world record-holder **Marko Baloh** also hails from the small European country. After riding to victory with Tomas Percic in the two-up team race last year, he will be looking to challenge Robic, and to go under ten hours. With plenty of RAAM starts under his belt, he knows what he must do to surpass previous efforts.

2008 – 1st in 2-man race with Tomas Percic

2006 – 2nd (10.09.28)

2005 – DNF (Medical: pneumonia)

2003 – DNF

Gerhard Gulewicz will also be gunning for a good finish, after crashing out in gruesome circumstances in the 2008 RAAM. Training has gone as planned for the Austrian, and he will be looking to repeat his strong start last year, where he trailed Robic by mere hundreds of metres for hundreds of miles. On that evidence, he could push the four-time winner all the way. After improving on his 06' time by 40 hours the year after, what can we expect from him this time round?

2008 - DNF

2007 – 3rd (9.01.04)

2006 – 7th (10.19.00)

Another hardened contender, who missed last year's event, is **Dani Wyss**. He is the only man apart from Robic who knows what it takes to win the RAAM, having taken victory in 2006. The Spaniard has experience of several RAAMs and will be hungry for success after missing out on ultra cycling's biggest accolade last year. However, if he is to challenge Robic, he may well have to go under the nine-day barrier for the first time.

2007 – 4th (9.04.29)

2006 – 1st (9.11.50)

Of last year's finishers, fourth-placed Austrian **Franz Preihs** is the best-placed returner, excepting Robic. Tattooed and shaven-headed, he is a take-no-shit kind of guy, and this transfers to his racing. His heroic ride was one of the great stories of the '08 race: Preihs crashed at the 1,320 mile-mark and broke his collarbone. Despite this considerable handicap, he pushed on and remarkably managed to finish within hours of the podium. Providing he stays in one piece, hard-as-nails Preihs will be looking to progress and dip under the 10-hour mark.

2008 – 4th (10.08.14)

There are some other soloists to watch out for too. Julian Sanz Garcia will be looking to improve on his eighth place in 2008, while newcomers Daniel Rudge and Ben Popp have also shown promise.

2008 Solo Results

1. Jure Robic (Slo) 8 days 23h 33 mins 13.98mph
 2. Mark Pattinson 9 17h 29m 12.91mph
 3. David Haase 9 23h 19m 12.60mph
 4. Franz Preihs 10d 08h 14m 12.14mph
 5. Martin Jakob 10d 19h 59m 11.59mph
 6. Scott McIntosh 10d 22h 53m 11.47mph
 7. Dr. Michael Nehls 10d 22h 56m 11.46mph
 8. Julian Sanz Garcia 10d 23h 37m 11.43mph
 9. Jim Rees 11d 08h 18m 11.07mph
 10. Julio Paterlini 11d 14h 25m 10.83mph
 11. Timothy Case 11d 18h 24m 10.67mph
 12. Ryan Correy 11d 21h 44m 10.55mph
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Women's Solo RAAM

Janet Christiansen has unfinished business with this race. She led throughout last year's race, before abandoning, exhausted, within sight of the proverbial home straight, "just" 271 miles from Annapolis. She will have to overcome the nagging tiredness and bloating that dogged her in 2008, but the American is undoubtedly a clear favourite.

Among her four fellow female soloists, Michele Santilhana stands out. RAAM seems like a natural progression for the South African-based nurse: she has also swum the English channel, done 100 mile runs and triple Ironmen. After qualifying as part of Team H4 Holy Rollers in 2008, she is fulfilling her dream by riding the solo RAAM.

Fellow female riders are Daniela Genovesi (Bra), who has a background in MTB endurance racing in South American, and Ann Wooldridge (Gbr), a stalwart of long-distance time-trial riding in the United Kingdom. She also won the Iowa UMCA 24-hour in 2005.

2-Person Team

E-HUB TEAM are the undeniable favourites for this competition. It comprises Slovenian duo Erik Rosenstein and "defending champion" Tomaz Percic, a RAAM veteran, who won last year with Marko Baloh as Team ORCA, clocking 7.02.51. They will be looking to repeat last year's triumph - and with an even quicker time, if possible.

However, the main challenge for glory could come from Patrick Blair and Adam Driscoll, who are racing together as Adventure for the Cure. They openly have stated that they are aiming at smashing the 2006 two-up record of 19.53mph. They know what this epic is about too, having both been members of a four-man team which came fourth last year - however, they were the only team to use fixed-gear bikes. Moreover, they are attempting to raise \$50,000 in name of finding a cure for diabetes.

Team Reaching Heights is raising money for a public schools foundation in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. Team members Charlie Combs and Richard Waugh worked as crew members for 2008 runner-up and rookie of the year Mark Pattinson. Bitten by the RAAM bug, they have saddled up for the two-man challenge this year. Age is another hurdle to overcome, as they are the only competitors in the 50-59 category. Nevertheless, having crewed last year and covered the first thousand miles in training a few weeks ago, they are under no illusions as to the challenge facing them.

Of the four pairs attempting RAAM, SpinVox Adventures – Christina Domecq and Ian Rolls – are the only mixed entrants.

RAAM: 4-Person Team

It bears remembering that many of the teams are motivated not so much by winning the race but by more important human and charitable drives; Team Sami is raising money to find a preventative therapy for neurofibromatosis (NF) and tumour growth, buoyed by little Sami DeBenedet as a figurehead.

Meanwhile, All Wheels 4 Fibromyalgia is self-explanatory in its goals.

Brits Team Human Science, riding in aid of leukaemia research, have ridden the British version of RAAM - JOGLE (from John O'Groats, the Kingdom's most northerly point, to Land's End, the most southerly) in training.

Undoubtedly, the most celebrity-packed outfit is Team Surfing USA. Former pro surfer Laird Hamilton joins Rage Against The Machine bassist Tim Commerford, Ironman participant Jason Winn and 76 year-old Don Wildman. It will be intriguing to see how they fare over the 3,000 mile-route.

As for fastest teams, the Austrian Triathlon Team will be up there. 2007 third-place finishers Team Strong Heart also return this year, and are aiming at beating their time from two years ago.

RAAM: 8-Person Team

Team Type 1, an octet composing entirely of diabetes sufferers, finished second to BMC last year, and they should be contenders again this time round. They have a fine pedigree in RAAM, having won the corporate challenge in 2007. With the same backing as the Continental pro team by the same name, they are looking to improve their average speed of 22.55mph, so they can regain their crown and record, having lost by just under four hours in 2008. Team Type 2, debuting in the RAAM this June, should also perform well.

On the back of third place last year, Team ViaSat will be in the thick of things, hunting down their wheels. They are one of the most experienced entrants this year – this will be their fourth eight-person RAAM.

Team Donate Life have two squads representing them this year – Liverators and Give Hope. Under the banner of organ donating, this is their staple fundraising event. For several years, they have brought great numbers and enthusiasm to the event. One of their teams could challenge Team Type 1 again - in 2007, their eight-man Grace Valley team finished runner-up to the diabetes sufferers.

Race Across the West - starts 15 June

Amid several abandons due to everything ranging from exhaustion to epiphany, only one man finished the Race Across the West – Paul Carpenter. Though he is absent this year, there are 11 soloists, 4 pairs and two quartets lining up to take on the opening 1000 miles of the RAAM course, which finishes in Taos, New Mexico.

The race is a handy means of qualifying for future RAAM; this is exactly what two-time Ironman world champ Leslie Holton is aiming to do with completion this year.

Though it is difficult to judge favourites, Joe Mann could fare well; the Iowan is no stranger to the distance, having finished the 2007 Brest-Paris-Brest in just over 69 hours.