

## POWER, PEDALS & PONYTAILS: Kacie Darden and Dani Grabol

By Vic Armijo

While Kacie Darden (age 29) and Dani Grabol (age 32) of the 2-rider team dubbed “Power Pedals and Ponytails” are well acquainted with endurance sports, their Ultracycling experience is limited compared to some past teams. Recognizing this Darden has stated “Our first goal is to get to the start line healthy—anything can happen between now and June. The second goal is finishing in Annapolis within the time limit. There aren’t many women who have done this, so our third goal is to do well compared to those other women who have done it.”



**A MATCHED DUO: Dani Grabol (left) and Kacie Darden (right) are very close in athletic ability and in their altruistic ways. Dani works in an independent retirement facility with older adults, while Kacie is a middle-school teacher.**

But perhaps she’s understating their chances. These are two very highly driven women. Both are triathletes who have done Double Ironman event, having first met on course at one of these brutal races, “We were within minutes of each other the entire race, Darden explained, “She ended up beating me—which was alright. Really, it’s okay. She suffered a lot more than me. When we finished we realized that we were very similar athletes. Our splits were very very close.” The two then became good friends and training partners.

Grabol wasn't always so athletic—in fact, quite the opposite until during a routine physical her doctor told her, "If you don't do something about your weight, you will be dead by the time you are 40." She heeded that, lost 70 pounds and competed in her first triathlon in 2006. Then on November 1st, 2006 while on a training ride in Florida, Dani was struck by a drunk driver, crushing her left tibia and fibula. Doctors doubted she'd ever run or be able to compete again, but following months of intensive therapy Dani returned, completing her first Ironman in 2008. In December 2011 Dani became the first woman to ride solo across the state of Florida, setting a record for 422 miles in 27 hours and 58 minutes. She was also the overall winner of the Tejas 12 Hour, beating all the men as well as the women.



**RACE FACE: Dani Grabol powers through the cycling leg of a Double Ironman.**

Darden described her own athletic prowess, "I consider myself a Triathlete and Ultra-Triathlete first. I've done some long-distance swimming and I've done a few ultra-marathons." But as with many runners, Darden had injuries force her onto wheels, "I stress-fractured both of my legs last year—too much running on hard surfaces," she said, "The doctor said that I could ride my bike as much as I want. 'Great! I'll try UltraCycling.'" This led to her 2012 invitation to the 8-rider RAAM effort, Team Shepard. "I had just come off of doing a double Ironman. And there's only so many in our world, even in a big city. So I hopped on and brought on two of my friend who crew for me. I enjoyed it, but felt that an 8-person team wasn't enough riding for me. It's a big

effort—RAAM is a lot of work. And I just wanted to ride my bike more. When I got home I called Dani, ‘We have to do this together. I think that you would love it.’”

The cost of a RAAM effort is always a challenge, “We have a variety of fund-raisers,” Darden reports, “We’re sponsored by the Triathlon store, UltraSports, here in Atlanta. They had Craig Alexander the 3-time world champion here and they made that a fund raiser. We had a big silent auction and we were signing things that were auctioned off. We have a fund-raising goal that’s about three times over our projected costs because we didn’t want to do RAAM just for ourselves. I’m a middle-school teacher and Dani works in geriatrics and a non-profit nursing home facility. So doing something this big without some sort of external benefit didn’t seem right to us.” All surplus funds will be donated to Camp Twin Lakes, “It’s a camp for kids with special needs,” Darden explains, “Few camps have the wheelchair access or medical facilities that kids with special needs require. They have a tree house that you can get into with a wheelchair. They host camps for children with all kinds of needs; whether they’re physically handicapped, abused, all different illnesses. Dani volunteered there when she was a teenager. And one of my closest friends and major sponsors is on the board there. They’re very excited to have us.”



**LEADING BY EXAMPLE:** Middle-school teacher Kacie Darden also coaches her school’s cross-country team. “I have a 1/3 of the school on my team,” she say. “The parents are as interested in what my next race is as they are about what we’re there to teach the kids. I have a lot of support from my community—which not everyone does.  
So it’s fantastic.

After funding comes the organizing of a crew, “Our crew chief was on Team Shepard last year,” Darden says, “The guys last year joked that the school teachers I’d brought onto the crew were their favorite crew members, ‘cause teachers are organized and they’re used to dealing with children, which is kind of like what sleep-deprived adults are like. You have to be patient and yet firm.” In April the two racers will race the Heart of the South, an Ultracycling race that travels the backroads of Georgia and Alabama, “It’s basically right down the street,” Darden said of the 500-mile event that will serve as a means for the racers and crew to coalesce into an experienced team, one that will see the two women arrive in Annapolis safe, healthy and with a bit of luck—as youngest 2-person woman team to ever complete RAAM.