

“The Dream that Became a nightmare”

by Allen Larsen

It all ended glorious enough. Pedaling up the final feet of the world’s toughest race, I couldn’t believe it was finally over. Nine states, 100,000 feet of climbing and 2992 miles of non-stop pain and agony were now behind me.

I’d finished 3rd in the toughest race in the world, something only two other people in the race’s 20 year history had accomplished. My family and friends, who had helped me make it this far, greeted me with tears and hugs. It had seemed like an eternity since I’d held my daughter, Kimbrlee.

The beauty of the Gulf with it’s white sandy beaches and glistening teal blue waters was a welcome sight almost worth the pain and torture it took to get me there. As the MCs voice resounded through the Gulf Breeze Beach pavilion announcing my arrival and the crowd began to cheer, I found myself overcome with a wave of emotions.

Feelings of relief, joy and exhilaration were hard to identify in the midst of all the excitement. Television interviews with OLN and ABC along with a personal interview from David Jacobsen masked the excruciating pain that was beginning to build. Yes, this was truly a glorious moment, but one that came with a high price.



The road began 8 months prior when I decided to attempt RAAM, “the worlds toughest race.” What compels a person to abandon all reason and rational thought, mount a bicycle and pedal 3000 miles? This was a question that even I could not answer. Something deep inside yearned to push the envelope to the brink of self-destruction testing the very limits of my own mortality. Some people are just made with a drive so fierce it causes them to do things beyond themselves and unfortunately, I happen to be one of them.

The task appeared insurmountable, to race, not ride a bicycle 3000 miles from Portland Oregon to Pensacola Florida. While most people require 8 hours sleep after a day of mowing the lawn, eating bon bons and watching a movie, I would be riding 22 hours a day while consuming 10,000 calories watching mile after mile of highway shoulder pass by and only pause briefly to sleep 1½ hours. To top the ante and the pain, my goal was to finish in 9 days so I knew my time off the bike had to be minimal. I wasn’t sure how to prepare for this, let alone all the other elements of RAAM, so I decided early on that it would be essential to find a personal trainer.

A friend of mine recommended John Hughes, an ultra cyclist and certified trainer from Boulder Colorado. As a RAAM veteran, John had experienced the horrors of this race for himself. Sleep deprivation, blistering saddle sores, debilitating muscle fatigue and surrealistic delusions just to name a few were by no means unfamiliar to him so I determined who better to help prepare me. When I contacted John he asked for my cycling history and other necessary details concerning my physiology, before he would assemble a training plan specific to my abilities and goals. I made it clear my desire was to do well not just survive, so John developed the plan accordingly. He considered it to be quite aggressive in comparison to my past volume of cycling. I would ride more miles in the next six months than I had ever ridden in a year.

The training proved quite difficult. Not due to the intensity of the speed work or the number of miles, but to the amount of time I was away from my family. Hour after hour, day after day, mile after endless mile were separating me from time usually spent with my wife and little girl.



The Pacific Northwest climate proved hostile and seriously deficient in preparing me for the variety of climatic conditions I would experience on RAAM. While other competitors were logging thousands of miles in the warmer southern states, I was out riding in temperatures as low as 15 degrees, which did little to prepare me for the sizzling heat and dense humidity of the southeast in June.

Much of the time I found myself going nowhere as the severe weather forced me to the drudgery of an indoor fluid trainer. Little did I know, that this boredom would help prepare me for surviving the seemingly endless desolate highways of our countries plain states.

In June of 2002, my crew and I were assembled and ready to go in “the city of roses” Portland, Oregon. Although we lacked experience, we weren’t short on heart. It quickly became apparent that the competition was once again more prepared than I. With doctors, nutritionists and massage therapists, my crew, consisting of six people who loved me and were committed to the goal, seemed laughably inadequate to those “in the know.” 3000 miles of highway has a way of exposing all your weaknesses, whether it be the logistics of crew organization or deficiencies in ones training. Yes, we lacked experience, but in the end we would prove that it’s not doctors and masseuses that get a RAAM rider across the country, but determination and commitment to complete the race, whatever the cost.

The start line activities were invigorating with Outdoor Life Network conducting interviews, multiple meetings and press announcements. I could think of nowhere else I wanted to be. The festivities, exciting as they might be, did little however to ease the tangled knots in my stomach as gripping fear of the unknown invaded my thoughts. “Would I finish this race?” “Would I do well?” “Is it possible for me to reach my goal of ‘rookie of the year’?” Or, would I become just another statistic along with the other 50% of the riders expected to DNF (did not finish)?



The feelings were nothing new. Before my previous races, I’d experienced these thoughts and I’d went on to win. But this was a different ball game, a whole new level of competition requiring demands my body had never experienced. How do you know if you’re ready to cover 3000 miles on a bicycle in 9- 10 days on 1½ hours of sleep a night? As a rookie, you don’t. It’s not something you go out and just do for a trial run. My longest training rides had only been 24 hours over the mountainous Oregon portion of the RAAM course covering about 400 miles. Now I had to do that same 400 miles, sleep for an hour and a half, get back on my bike and keep going, for 10 days straight. This time I felt my feelings of fear were quite justifiable.

The moment arrived, the one I’d been waiting for, training for, losing sleep over. The countdown to the start of what would prove to be the most difficult endeavor I’d ever undertaken was upon

me, RAAM had begun. The first miles were quite easy going. The entire group of riders would stay together for the first 15 miles or so. It's what they call the parade route. Talk was limited on my part, I tried a few times to engage other riders in conversation, but not too much avail. At one point I found myself along side Rob Kish, the icon of ultra marathon cycling having completed RAAM in all of his previous 16 years. Struggling to find something relevant to say, I mentioned that he was "quite an inspiration" or something to that effect only to be scoffed by another rider. I purposed at that moment to at least defeat this other veteran rider if that was all I did. That proved quite easy as he DNF'd about a third of the way into the race.

As the parade route came to an end and we were left to begin establishing our positions, I found myself focusing on "riding my own ride." I didn't intend to be swayed or pressured into keeping anyone else's pace but my own. After all this was a 3000 mile race, what did it matter what position I was in for the first 100 or even the first 1000 miles for that matter.

To make the race "more interesting," race organizers decided to add "primes" to this year's race. Little races within the race offering bonus cash, in this case \$500.00, to the winner. Three primes were offered, the first being awarded to the person who reached time station one, Maupin, Oregon, ahead of the rest of the field. While \$500.00 was quite a temptation, especially considering how much this race cost me to be a part of, I had made the decision that I would not go for it. "This is a 3000 mile race," I kept telling myself. "If I push too hard now I may hinder tomorrow's performance," besides to receive the prime money you had to finish the race so thoughts of going for the cash and counting my losses hardly seemed practical. I was here to do my best, finish this race and be "rookie of the year," those were my goals and I was intent on reaching them.

I found myself in 1st place at the front of the field and was still riding my own pace. "Could this pace get me to Maupin first", I asked myself. "NO just stay focused on your goal," I replied to the somewhat schizophrenic conversation going on in my head. "But I'm even ahead of Fasching" I argued further. Austrian Wolfgang Fasching, having won this race in quite convincing style two times prior and recently summiting Mount Everest, was the definite favorite. But I was ahead of him now and even though we were only 30 miles into the race, it felt pretty good. As we drew nearer to time station one, my lead proved brief as other riders, with dollar signs in their eyes, pushed up to the summits of Government camp and Blue Box passes. As we repeatedly leap frogged one another, I lost count of the number of riders ahead of me. But one thing I was sure of, Fasching was up there and now my job was to ride my ride as planned. It was to no ones surprise Fasching was the first rider to Maupin and no surprise to me that I would never see him again unless I made it to Pensacola.

By the end of the first days riding, after passing and being passed multiple times, I found myself securely in second place only 1½ hours behind Fasching. Pre-race jitters had made sleep the night before next to impossible, so faced with the unknown element of a multi-day race and a tired rider, my crew opted to put me down in Unity, Oregon for an unplanned and unwanted sleep break. But after 1½ hours I was back on the road chasing down Germany's Stefan Lau who had passed while I slept, a scene that would play out a number of times in the days to come.

Day two was quite docile in comparison to the prior days activities. The pack had spread out with all riders falling into what, for the most part, would prove to be their relative positions for the remainder of the race. I caught and passed Stefan outside of Bliss, Idaho while climb-



ing on one of the days larger, but by no means big, climbs. As we approached Bliss I heard the all familiar, but unrecognizable, German words of encouragement Stefan's crew would blast his way from an outdoor speaker the size of the Liberty bell perched atop their support vehicle. The sound from that over sized bullhorn carried for what seemed like miles in Idaho's serene Snake River Valley. But this time the sound seemed closer than before, too close. As I turned to evaluate Stefan's proximity, to my dismay, I discovered he had gained some ground back. It was now apparent that Stefan was intent on reclaiming his prior position. So much for riding my own pace, as my uncontrollable competitive instinct kicked in, I dropped Stefan easier than I had anticipated as I arrived at time station 9.



Miles continued to pass as the beauty of Idaho's Snake River Valley slowly faded to the black of night. Night riding was quickly becoming the preferred time of travel as the cool Pacific Northwest training rides had ill equipped me for the lowland heat I was now experiencing. My fastest split times were at night, as the days heat would drain much of my energy reserves. It was suggested that we strongly consider changing me to a daytime sleep schedule in an effort to alleviate the midday heat's devastating effects on my performance. An idea that was easier said than done, after all I'm a human, we're not nocturnal creatures. But, in spite of my insomniac tendencies, after a few days of riding 22 hours and resting for 1½ hours, sleep was not difficult to accommodate, whenever or wherever it was available. But sleep at night I did once again as I rolled into Burley, Idaho.

After one sleep cycle (1½ hours), I was back to the task at hand. As the night dragged on,, reaching the border of Utah was a welcome milestone. Not that it was anything special, but it meant I had conquered two of the nine states and was still maintaining a comfortable second place standing.

By morning light I found myself in Snowville, Utah a bit fatigued, but wanting to continue on to Brigham City where I would begin my daytime sleep periods. Brigham City proved farther than desired as the effects of sleep deprivation were beginning to show. The Howard Johnson Inn was a welcome sight as I was unwilling to proceed even one more block without some rest. My crew had determined that I would more than likely sleep for two sleep cycles, or 3 hours, as I was more than exhausted at the time. So rather than immediately prepare for my awakening, they decided it prudent to gather some much needed supplies for the following days journey. I awoke to an empty room with nothing but a sweaty, stinky pile of cycling apparel haphazardly deposited by the foot of the bed in which I laid. . "Where are my clean clothes?" I pondered. "Where's my crew?" "What time is it?" "Where am I?" Though slightly disoriented, I knew we had carefully laid out plans on how my sleep breaks were to be conducted and this was unacceptable. As questions swiftly raced through my mind, I could come to only one conclusion. I was alone.

Faced with no other choice I reluctantly reached for the previous days clothing, though more than a little soiled, they would serve they're intended purpose. Next I was faced with the task of locating an even more important artifact, my bicycle. As I peered out the door, I gazed upon a welcomed sight. Crew B had arrived and Micky, dressed in his Pensacola beach attire, was at the door to greet me. Micky brought a natural comic element to the crew that always put a valuable smile on our faces in times of need. This time however, his eyes revealed fear as he explained that my bike was nowhere to be found and Crew A were AWOL. Both my crews had been performing quite well up to this time, but this was a gross error in judgment. I had only slept for one cycle and despite my body's

desperate need for additional rest, I was in a race and sleep would just have to wait.

Stefan and Italy's veteran RAAM soloist Fabio Biasiolo had again passed me as I slept. It was now time to get back on my bike and chase them down. The unusually long hill out of Ogden, Utah was just the place to do it. A feat that would prove impossible had my Trek Y-foil not showed up when it did. Crew A was back, bike and all, and though surprised to see me awake and waiting, no time was wasted in sending me back on my way.

This was the longest hill on this year's route and at 36 miles I would definitely be there a while. Hills were not one of my weaknesses and this one really wasn't that steep, so I welcomed to change from the dry desert of the Great Salt Basin to the fresher high mountain air of Monte Cristo summit. It wasn't long before I once again found myself passing Stefan Lau. He made it easier this time as he was off his bike in an attempt to find relief from the relentless heat of the climbs lower slopes. Up ahead however, Fabio was still pedaling on. Having placed third two years prior, I wasn't sure what to expect from this Italian veteran of "the worlds toughest race." Could I catch him as I had Stefan or did he possess wisdom beyond that of my own, enabling him to outpace me in the long run?

I refused to continue that train of thought as I was here to meet my specific goals and Fabio had nothing to do with them. I continued working my way up Monte Cristo until about 5 miles from the top when Scott **Johnson** from OLN came up along side for another interview. I enjoyed talking about riding and how I was doing etc. as it was quite uplifting to think that maybe I'd see some of these interviews come September when RAAM was scheduled to air. They were enjoying the race thus far and then got very excited as we found ourselves coming up on Fabio. I had caught him without even making a concerted effort. I had caught Fabio. This was apparently the type of moment the film crew deeply desired capturing on tape, the pass. Two riders engaged in a battle of will, steadily, but slowly pedaling onward and upward.

I knew at that time I would pass him. There was no way he could stop me. He had at least a 45-minute lead on me at the bottom of the climb and now I had made that deficit back. Fabio was not applying much energy to the pedals as I steadily reeled him in. "Could he be suffering or was he merely pacing himself?" I wondered. Once there, we chatted for a few minutes as the film crew basked in the glory of the often occurring, but seldom caught on tape, pass. Later I would learn RAAM once again showed no mercy to Fabio as he DNF'd 1082 miles into the race at Dinosaur, Colorado, the same location that witnessed his demise in 2001.

The high I received from the passing of two riders and knowing I was back in second place made the remaining miles to the summit all the more pleasurable, not to mention that on the other side I knew I would be reaching speeds in excess of 55 mph.

We rolled on to Woodruff, Utah and Mountain View, Wyoming where I paused briefly to consume the better part of a large Super Supreme from a Pizza Hut located a little too close to the time station. The all-liquid diet consisting of Sustained Energy and Ensure Plus, although working adequately from a fueling perspective, left me desiring something with a bit more flavor and substance that I could actually chew. I worried that I had



over done it, after all eating over half a pizza in a matter of minutes while exercising is hardly recommended, however my digestive tract functioned admirably as we continued on toward Manilla, Wyoming.

The route book provided all the detail a guy like me could ask for. A data freak from birth, I liked to know what's coming up in order to prepare mentally, if it's a 36-mile hill fine, as long as I know. It's the unexpected that always knocked me for a loop. But in this case the book was clear. The hills between Manilla and Vernal were steep, very steep, and long. It was with mixed emotions that I entered the Flaming Gorge Recreation area. I knew it would be one of the more scenic areas on the route and was looking forward to viewing its splendor. But I also knew that it would be unbearably hot, and we had already learned that heat and Allen don't get along. In retrospect, it was fortunate that I tackled these big climbs at night as the heat would not be a factor and I would be unable to see just how enormous these hills were.

It seemed like it took forever to ascend the windy switch backed road to the top. My aching feet were beginning to cry out for some reprieve and my throbbing Achilles tendons, which had been in pain since Oregon, were not improving. But hey, this is RAAM, it's going to hurt a little, right?

Rob Kish had been slowly making up ground on me and I knew he was getting closer. As I reached the summit I noticed his RV parked off to the side. Obviously awaiting his arrival to provide him the much needed rest he deserved.

Rob was riding his own race as well. He doesn't ride fast, but what he lacks in speed he makes up for in consistency. Although my speeds were faster, he was on the bike more. I knew my plan from the start. "Don't get off the bike for anything." If you can spend 85% of your off bike time sleeping you're doing it right.



As is the case with most rookies, we were falling short in this area. It's just a thing you learn from experience, and Rob had that. This was his 17th RAAM and he had finished every one of them, a record that, in all likelihood, would never be outdone. But onward I went to Vernal where I would sleep for one cycle before tackling the dreaded Vernal, Utah to Craig, Colorado legs. Rob would just have to wait another day.

My research had shown that this seemed to be the section of the course that would be one of the most demanding. Mile after mile of desolate wasteland claimed more riders than any other section on the course. And for reasons becoming easily evident. This place was like the moon, with bugs. Thousands if not millions of giant cricket like beetles covered the road for miles. Into headwinds, heat and isolation riders were force to travel. At just over a 1000 miles into the race this was also the time that it's easy to start thinking "I'm not even halfway there yet," the "Rockies are still ahead of me," "this was a really stupid thing to do," or the worst thought of all, "I just can't make it."

Overall I was not feeling too bad physically. My Achilles tendons were still seriously inflamed and showing no signs of improvement, but I refused to let that slow my pace. There were other obvious problem spots, but nothing that couldn't be overcome. So onward I went, refusing to fall victim to thoughts of giving up that had already caused other riders to drop out. "No way, this place really sucks, but it too will pass," I told myself confidently. My dream would not die here, not

today.

Dry desert landscape slowly disappeared turning into beautiful sub alpine terrain as we approached Steamboat Springs. The beauty of Steamboat's surrounding mountains stood in sharp contrast to the seemingly endless miles of barren wasteland that now lay behind me. Surprisingly enough, I was happy to be here, even though I now had to attack 3 major climbs in a row. In the Tour de France, these climbs would not be ranked receiving the "UC" or uncategorized identification meaning these climbs can hurt. "I don't care, just keep me out of that desert," I thought to myself. Back home I live in the mountains so this type of abuse was all too familiar. It was approaching 6:00 pm as we rolled into lovely Steamboat and I had been riding for about 12 hours now. This was the start point for the second prime, Steamboat to Leadville, 117 miles with 10,000 feet of vertical. Truly a challenge to any rider, especially considering this prime hits you 1200 miles into the race. My original plan was to try to take this one. I had hoped I would arrive at Steamboat rested enough to challenge Fasching's time. As was the case however, rested, I was not. The desert with its 125 miles of headwind had drained me of any extra energy reserves I had hoped to retain. I wasn't going to sleep yet though as I did not want to waste any time trying to sleep before I was ready. We decided that the prime was insignificant in the big picture and that the most prudent approach would be to continue on and sleep in Wolcott.

As we said goodbye to Steamboat Springs the broad valley floor provided some of the most beautiful scenery to date. Gentle rolling hills covered with lush green grasses escorted me to Rabbit Ears pass where I found a photographer obviously interested in capturing this RAAM rookie's ride on film. Before too long we discovered this was my coach, John Hughes up from Boulder to collect photos for the upcoming RAAM issue of his Ultra Cycling Magazine. I paused for a few minutes to talk with John, as I had never personally met him. All of our correspondence had been limited to e-mail and the occasional telephone conversation. I listed off a few of my concerns and pains out to my coach only to receive a somewhat harsh, but brutally honest reply. "This is RAAM, you didn't think you were going to get through it without pain did you?" "No," I replied hesitantly. "Then get back on your bike and stop whining about it." It took me a few miles of riding to come to grips with this blunt, but very factual synopsis of my current situation. But those words would prove invaluable later in the race. Whenever the pain would become so intense that it could no longer be ignored, I would recall John's words and realize that pain and RAAM, like Siamese Twins, are inseparable partners, .



By nightfall we found ourselves entertained by a brilliant lightning storm on the first of the three remaining climbs leading to the continental divide. Bright flashes lit up the sky in one of mother natures most impressive displays this rider had ever witnessed. The first hill was a steady climb that I was once again happy to be ascending in the cool of the night. As I approached the summit I was absolutely exhausted. Every stroke of my pedals was providing minimal forward progress in my 39-25 low gear combination. I realized then that Wolcott was not the night's destination.

Crew B was escorting me up the mountain doing their best to keep me alert with radio chit chat containing encouraging words. My brother Larry and Jim had come back from the motel up the road in Vail where they had chosen to rest for the night. Despite their obviously sleep deprived state,

they sensed a need to return to me and see how I was doing. I saw my brother, who'd traded his normal accountant suit and tie in for a pair of denim shorts and Mariner's t-shirt, standing on the side of the road providing much appreciated words of motivation. Though growing up Larry did his share of picking on little brother, he was also one of my best inspirations and it was proving through as I continually heard his shouts of "way to climb" on many of the steep hills that accompanied this horrendous race.

Shortly before the summit my body had the last word. I pedaled right into my brother's arms barely able to utter the words "I'm done." As I collapsed, the crew quickly sprang into action and got me to the makeshift foam padded bed in the support van, designed for just such an occasion. Although we desired to reach the next motel, descending the winding road on the other side of the pass was definitely not an option as my body cried out for rest and was going to get it whether I was in bed or on the bike.

Two sleep cycles provided the necessary rest to continue the journey. As I was sleeping, RAAM veteran Rob Kish finally passed me. It seemed inevitable that this was going to happen as every time we got word of his position it seemed he had gained on me. I was riding faster than Rob by our calculations, but he was still proving more consistent, a trait that 17 RAAM's has a way of developing. Third place was nothing to scoff at as the race wasn't even halfway over and being behind Rob wasn't a bad place to be. Besides, this guy has done more RAAM's than anyone, and was currently the only man to have won three times so just being close to him at this point in the race was something to be proud of for me.

Back on the road it took me a number of miles to fully regain a state of consciousness. The effects of sleep deprivation were starting to take a toll. As dawn drew near I was on my way up the second climb. The steep walled and narrow canyon outside the Vail area was the gateway for the remaining miles to the divide. As I continued up, a headwind had developed that made what was already a challenging climb even more so. But the beauty and the cool mountain air was all I needed to keep me happy and pumping. Before long the Continental Divide, Tennessee Pass was in sight. At 10,424 feet this was the high point of RAAM. Now with most of the races vertical behind me the route was expected to be much easier.

Leadville followed closely thereafter where officials required a drug test upon my awakening from another desperately needed, but undesired sleep break. Pain was now without end as my rear side and Achilles tendons had fallen victim to four days of unceasing demand along with a severely sunburned set of lips and my mouths upper palette. Now it was not only uncomfortable to sit, but eating would also provide for a great deal of pain. John's words rolled through my mind.

Misery is the best way to describe the next 200 miles of riding. As I descended from the top of the Rockies, I met with a serious amount of opposition in the form of relentless headwind. This



was a very unwelcomed development along with the fact that it didn't take long to leave the splendor of the mountains and I found myself back in dry wasteland. Riding in an aero dynamic position for most of the day placed an extreme demand on my already weakened neck muscles. By nightfall, I was approaching the half waypoint of the race, Walsenburg Colorado, when my neck muscles breathed their last and failed completely. "Shermer Neck"

had set in.

The phenomenon of complete muscular failure in the necks supporting structures named after Michael Shermer, one of the races 1st competitors and the first person to abandon the race due to this failure was nothing new to RAAM racers. But I was only halfway into the race and this was a serious problem. Many a rider had been forced to DNF due to this problem with a few deciding to fight their way to the finish line in spite of the obvious setback. “Had anyone ever ridden 1500 miles with this condition?” I asked myself. “Would this improve if we can find a way to rest the muscles,” I thought further.

I was still riding along on my way to Walsenburg, holding my head up with one hand on my chin while my elbow rested on my aero bar pad. “This won’t get me to Florida” I realized. I radioed my crew and informed them of my condition. I requested they locate duct tape and a bungee cord. I had heard of a rider who had bungeed his helmet to his shorts and thought about this for a few moments. My plan was different. I chose to secure the bungee cord to duct tape wrapped around the bare skin of my waist in an effort to nullify any effects of clothing sliding up or my shorts delivering a fatal wedgy.

When my crew was ready we quickly stopped to try this, the first Shermer Neck relief support. It didn’t take long as they taped the cord to my waist and attached it to my helmet. It was apparent that the helmet would also require secure attachment to my head, duct tape to the rescue again. “Thisotta do the trick,” I said. My crew stood there in disbelief of the sight they were witnessing. “What’s he doing?” “Will this work?” Everyone was aware of the seriousness of the situation. As seeds of doubt and many questions raced through their minds, one thought rose to the top. “Can Allen possibly make it to Pensacola in this condition?” Florida was a long ways from here, but rather than share their concerns and doubts, they chose to continue to encourage me to press forward.



By the time I arrived at Walsenburg the severe stress and pressure the bungee cord was placing on my upper vertebrae was unbearable. We would have to find another solution. The balding and silvery bearded Jim “MacGyver” Miller, my old high school math teacher and long time trusted mentor, was already at work on device number two. Jim was largely responsible for my involvement in many outdoor activities including cycling. I guess it’s safe to say that Jim was partially responsible for getting me into this mess, but I thought it not fair to hold him accountable after all these years. He devised an aerodynamic support box fashioned out of corrugated cardboard taped to my aerobars. Outfitted with foam pad from my vans bed, it would provide a soft support to rest my chin on. It was now near midnight and my mental state had declined to the point of defeat.



Faced with 30-40 mph headwinds and a neck that wouldn’t support my head any longer, I’d had enough. I stopped believing that I could make it any further, nor did I want to. Sitting in the van on the verge of abandoning RAAM, my brother decided it was time to call my wife Teresa back home. It was good to hear her voice. As I told here of my present condition it was all I could do to hold back the tears. “This is stupid,” I informed her, “I’m only

half way and I can't hold up my head, there's no way I can make it." Teresa paused a moment before she reminded me of how hard I had trained, how badly I wanted this and how many people were praying for me. She spoke to my brother again and made him promise her that he would not let me quit as she was the one that had to live with me post RAAM.

My crew decided I should sleep there, but before they got to the motel I said "No, I have to keep going." This was the farthest that I had dug down inside myself yet and I was actually surprised at my resolve. The prayers were definitely being answered. I explained that the next 40 miles to Trinidad would be very difficult into the wind, but if I could get through that I would have a good chance of riding with a strong tailwind for up to 150 miles to Springfield. There was a tornado warning that night and the winds were quite strong. With unwavering persistence, I forged my way into the unyielding cross headwind. My frail head was resting atop Jim's box as the gusts would practically blow me over at times. It was all I could do to stay upright without the help of my torso and head to aid in counteracting the severe gusts of wind.

Right before Trinidad, the OLN film crew passed me. This was the boost I needed. As we pulled into the Trinidad time station they were eager for a brief interview. They learned of my Shermer Neck and seemed quite impressed with my diligence to continue. My spirits were lifted and soared even higher as the tailwind we hoped for was there. I went sailing across the eastern Colorado plains at speeds up to 40 mph on the flats. This was what riders live for. Only hours ago I was at the lowest point of my existence and here I was as high as could be. We learned that the 4th place rider, Stefan Lau, had last been seen passed out on the floor of the Walsenburg time station and now I was putting some serious distance on him as well.

I took a short sleep break in Kim Colorado after having ridden for 21 hours pretty much non-stop. As I arrived in Springfield, the wind that was so helpful the night before, had now turned against me. I had another 40 plus mph straight on headwind for the next 48 miles. This was not something I looked forward to tackling. Upon finding out that Rob had left Springfield only 30 minutes ago we decided to take a break, get cleaned up and get some solid food in me, a decision that I would later call a "rookie mistake." I ended up wasting about two hours there before I battled the headwinds into Oklahoma and took a sleep break at Boise City. I had now stopped at three time stations in a row, oooops.

Upon leaving Boise city we tried device number three. Similar to two except that the support was given to my forehead to relieve the abuse my chin and teeth had been taking for the last 200 or more miles. This solution didn't last long as it was difficult to navigate only looking straight down at the little white line. Mile after mile we went through the flat western Oklahoma plains. "Boy this place smells bad," "What is that rotten stench?" I asked my crew. Before long it was back to the bungee cord equipped device number one. We were quickly losing any time we had made on Stefan as the stops were increasing exponentially. My neck was not responding to any of the attempted treatments.



Somewhere in the isolated flatlands between Guyman and Slapout Oklahoma I fell victim to doubt and despair. In a moment of disgust I stopped, threw my \$3000.00 bike in the ditch and said, "I can't make it, not another 1200 miles without being able to hold up my head, no way!" Dave, the last of my close friends to join my support team, calmly said "Allen, if we can get this neck

thing figured out, you're gonna make it, just give us time."

Dave stood my height, about 6'2", with sandy brown hair. Dave was determined to get me to the finish line no matter what and at that moment believed more in me than I did myself.

I didn't know it at the time, but Jim had already been designing device number four. The "traction contraption" as it had later been deemed. Jim told me "Al, I have an idea, just give me some time." As I sat there utterly defeated Jim and Dave looked for the desperately needed support stick that Jim was lacking to see his idea come to its fruition. But here we are in the middle of Oklahoma in the middle of the night and 7-11 just doesn't carry what we need. We needed a miracle, and we got one. In a place where there was nothing besides grass, dirt, wind and manure, Jim found an old surveyors stick lying in the ditch. It was the absolute perfect stiffness and weight, possessing the necessary strength as well. As Jim and Dave jumped for joy at this discovery it was apparent that prayer was at work again.

Reluctantly I remounted my 2-wheeled steed and continued on while Jim fervently went to work crafting the new contraption. A fishing pole like device that would attach to my lower back via duct tape, go up my back over a foam spacer block and provide a place to secure my helmet via nylon rope. The idea was simple enough, to hang my head off a pole as to not place stress and pressure on my vertebrae, but would it work?



I pulled off the road and once again tireless support crew working as busy little bees attaching this newly constructed brace to my back surrounded me. Upon completing the task at hand Jim wondered, "Oh my gosh, what have I done?" as I stood there resembling a criminal restrained by some new fangled immobilizing device with my face pointing straight toward the stars. Unable to even see the ground, let alone my bicycle, my crew aided me in remounting. I clicked into my pedals and off I went. Despite the obvious drawback when I was off the bike, I was able to get into my aero bars and look right down the road, a position I'd not known for days. After about 5 minutes Jim asked, "how's it going?"

My response was unexpected, thumbs up, BIG thumbs up, this was going to work. Shermer neck was not going to stop me. Shouts of joy and triumph echoed through the Oklahoma night skies as we continued on past Slapout and into Mooreland.

As daylight broke and the full detail of Jim's apparatus could be defined, it was quite the work of art. Word of the "Traction Contraption" quickly spread and became the talk of the race. The OLN film crew once again found an interesting interview along with some much appreciated comic relief as they approached this strange looking creature on a bicycle that more resembled a physically handicapped person rather than a competitor in this world class sporting event. Yes, I was quite a sight to behold, but I wasn't riding to look cool, I was doing what it took to see the finish line. "Laugh if you will, but don't get in my way, I'm going to Pensacola."



Oklahoma went on for what seemed like ever. With the most mileage of any state traveled by this year's course I knew Oklahoma would be the make it or break it point. "If I make it through Oklahoma, I'll make it the rest of the way" I would say often. I was still feeling pretty good, but there were areas of my body that were protesting quite loudly concerning the demands placed on them.



“Just keep going,” I’d tell myself. By this point it seemed no longer a matter of physical ability, but rather a mental willingness to continue, as my body, aches, pains and all, had settled into some sort of sadistic rhythm, driven on without cause or reason.

In the early morning hours, somewhere after Bristow, I was literally falling asleep on my bike in spite of a recent sleep break. I was inadvertently awake mid cycle and had just gotten back on the bike. No matter what I did I couldn’t wake up. I rolled to a stop completely exhausted to find my crew once again rushing to my aid. In one last ditch effort I found the strength to raise my arms up enough to wrap them around the 6’0 Greg Reynolds. Greg was a trusted friend and a stabilizing force on my crew. Whenever I was sleeping Greg spent that time praying for me. We joked how he had been praying for parts of my body that had probably never been prayed over before. As he later recapped, it appeared to him that he was now the recipient of a thank you hug. Greg quickly realized however, that I could no longer stand under my own power as my legs decided it was time for reprieve. All my weight was now bearing down on Greg’s shoulders. Peter and Micky helped stabilize my tattered body and helped drape me over my handlebars. After a quick prayer and some water in the face, I was back on the road. They knew that sleep was not an option, this was a race and I’d just have to fight off my body’s desperate cries. Though only a couple of minutes in length the quick stop, water and prayer seemed to be adequate as I began to pedal again.

The heat and humidity were beginning to make their presence known as I wheeled into McAllester Oklahoma. “Boy it’s hot.” I said quite distressed. I was not accustomed to these conditions, and they too were taking a toll. I took another much needed 1½ hour before finishing off Oklahoma’s last few miles.



As we approached Arkansas it was apparent that I was in unfamiliar territory. Fireflies filled the night sky with fascinating trails of radiance that I’d never before experienced. This was Ozark country and I was quite thankful that the Ozarks pale in comparison to the grandeur of the Rockies and Cascades out west.

It was dark when we entered Arkansas. I wasn’t there long before I noticed a faint glow in the distance. “What was this large glowing building?” I thought to myself. As I approached I realized it was a chicken farm. Lets just say I no longer eat southern grown chicken. We arrived in Mena to find a small town with little nighttime activity. I paused briefly to change shorts in a somewhat vain attempt to provide relief to the incessant pain now dominating my rear side. We got back on the road and learned from race head quarters that Stefan was gaining ground. All the problems and stops of Oklahoma were now going to come back and haunt me.

My brother had known for some time that Stefan had been gaining on me, but thought it better not to be the bearer of discouraging news. Not being the type that takes defeat easily, I reprimanded my brother for this poor decision and then I poured on the gas. And I poured it on hard. I don’t really know where the energy came from, but I know adrenalin was involved. I was absolutely burning up the road, first Glenwood and then on to Arkadelphia. I resembled a Tour de France individual time trail rider as I bore down hard on the pedals. The pain in my posterior would just have to

be put aside; I had a job to do.

We arrived at time station 40 and calculated that I had not only reestablished my lead on Stefan, but that I had also made up one hour for each of the last two stations on second place Rob Kish. We were flying high. But my rear was in need of medical aid. We were told of an all night pharmacy just a mile down the road. "Ok, we'll take ten minutes and get some Lanocaine." Well, one mile turned into two and ten minutes into 45 before I was back on the road, another rookie mistake. Although I had lost some time, I hadn't lost my legs. I continued hammering the rough Arkansas highways with anticipation of seeing the flashing yellow lights of Rob Kish's support van.

My crew was growing steadily concerned, "How long can he keep this up?" They would ask each other. "Sure, it's fun but what's going to happen when he runs out of adrenalin?"

Somewhere between Arkadelphia and Fordyce it hit. The full blunt blow of what RAAM's steady and unceasing physical effort with little to no sleep does to the human body. I no longer knew what I was doing, where I was at, or why I was chasing some guy named Kish. Here it was, we had read about these experiences and now they were our own. I had gone delusional. The effects of sleep deprivation were obvious and disturbing. My crew did everything to transfer me from the surrealistic realm that I had slipped into back to reality. Dave was continuously probing me with questions, drilling my mind to remember some detail that would engage my mental capacities. Question after question, still forging my way along at full velocity. Are you married? Do you have kids? How did you meet your wife? Where are you from? For the better part of an hour the questions went on before Dave prevailed in bringing his rider, his friend, back to reality. We arrived in Fordyce to find that we were only 50 minutes behind Kish. The 45 minutes in Arkadelphia had cost us much as I finally went down for one sleep cycle.

Upon my awakening my crew had formulated a new plan of attack and Rob Kish was the target. As I put the plan into action it was evident that Rob's "Krew" knew what I was thinking. They had placed a spy on me, as they were interested in every move I made. I again was hammering with all the energy I determined available, but my mental state was still quite frail. I would slip in and out of reality. It was like living in some sort of dream state, but this was not a dream, this was quickly becoming a nightmare. "Why am I always on my bike?" "What am I doing?" Sleep was again necessary so I went down for another cycle in Monticello Arkansas as Rob increased his lead.



I awoke to a well-prepared crew. They informed me of my current race status and that Stefan was still coming. These multiple sleep stops were not doing us many favors, but I was able to ride faster because of them. I continued on to Parkgate near the mighty Mississippi River, the start point of the third and final prime. This time all was in place for me to go for the cash. Kish was ahead and still within reach while Lau was pushing me on from behind. I chose to again pour on the gas and even though the decision came after a brief stop inside Mississippi to adjust my shoes, I was not too far from where the clock had started. The weather was cool in comparison to the mid days heat as we again entered into the cooler evening hours.

The flat river delta was receiving favorable winds for me that night as I sped off towards Belzoni. Darkness and heavy rain soon overtook me and I found myself cruising along through

thousands of little frogs jumping all over the roadway. “Oh no, am I hallucinating?” I radioed Peter also known as “flight captain,” my newest and closest confident, to verify that there was indeed a large volume of amphibious creatures overtaking the Mississippi highways. To my relief he replied “Yes there is.” Although I had known Peter less then anyone else on the crew, it seemed like I knew him the most. Peter and I think the same, which would prove to be an incredible asset when the crew made decisions concerning sleep and other areas.

After Belzoni the Swedish four man team caught and passed me. They passed me quite slowly however and later I would learn that they were watching me in amazement, as they would say, “He’s still in our rear view mirror!” They threw a couple of new men on the road before they finally disappeared from sight.

The road to Kosciusko seemed to go through the deep dark recesses of the Mississippi swamplands. It was dark and the bugs down there are loud, deafeningly loud. I proved louder though as I went to sit down and the amount of pain resulting from this simple action was indescribable. My crew didn’t know at first what creature could have made such a shrieking cry, but soon realized it’s was not a creature at all, it was their rider. I was in pain. Pain like I’d never experienced, but pain that would pale in comparison to what was to come.

A stop sign at a T in the road provided me with a much-needed support for my ailing body. I paused briefly in hopes of regaining some much-needed energy. The Swedish Team van was still there as my crew hopped out to see if they could help. Everyone just stood around shrugging their shoulder’s as there were no intelligible words proceeding from my still badly sunburned lips. After a minute or two they perceived some English words emanating from this seriously spent individual. “How much farther to Kosciusko?” I mumbled. “Not too much farther,” was the reply so off I went.

I arrived at Kosciusko to a welcome fit for a king. Fireworks, a police escort and a welcoming committee that had been charting my progress and praying for me since day one filled the local high school parking lot. Lead by Johnny Boswell and his wife Maureen, the Kosciusko crew was a sight for sore everything. They had learned of my faith in God early on in the race and informed my wife that they would be praying for me and eagerly awaiting my arrival. I don’t think I had the mental alertness to inform them at the time, but I too had been thinking of them often over the previous 2600 miles and would have to say they played a big role in getting me that far. I often told myself that there are brothers and sisters in Christ praying for me there and that I would not let them down.

I took another sleep cycle there in Kosciusko and awoke to a great deal of pain. By this time there was a number of areas suffering severely. Achilles, feet and rear end were leading the way. I could no longer sit on my seat so I was faced with the challenge of standing up all the way to the time station in Louisville. By this time I was the mental equivalent of a turnip. I ravaged the local mini

mart shelves of all their Honey Buns. This was all I needed, a sugar high. I pranced around quite wired in a state somewhere between dream and reality. On and on I would ramble about how I wanted a spy like Rob Kish. “I need a spy Micky, Rob has a spy right there, and I need a spy Micky, get me a spy.” I was definitely providing some comic relief for my crew and two of the officials that were there to witness my lunacy. “Get back on the bike” Greg prodded, worried that much more of this would invoke a mandatory sleep break at the



officials ruling.

Scooba Mississippi and York Alabama followed. I was still unable to sit as the pain had continued to increase beyond anything I could have ever imagined in the worst of nightmares. In York I wasted another 2 hours in the local emergency room in hope of finding some form of relief for a seriously escalated skin condition that was getting worse by the moment. Another costly rookie mistake as there was nothing the doctor could do. In a strong southern drawl, the husky colored doctor's advice was simple, "Whatcha gotta do, ya see, is get off the bike," unable to understand why this white northerner was participating in such an obviously sadistic event. Any attempt at relief could be compared to placing a band-aid on a severed head, nothing was going to help and I just wasted 2 more hours. Stefan just got his lucky break.

Throughout the race it was easily evident that I was one of the fastest riders, when I was on my bike. However, the lack of experience and numerous problems equated to a rabbit vs. hare kind of story line. When I was riding, no one would catch me; I repeatedly passed Stefan earlier in the race and had almost caught Rob in Arkansas. But the only time they could gain ground back on me was when I was sleeping or having problems, and I was having problems now.

The stifling humidity was absolutely disabling as I struggled for every milliliter of oxygen my lungs could extract from the sticky Alabama air. "My bike won't roll through this," I said in an appeal to my crew for some form of assistance. The officials had told them that a rider will say anything to get off his bike at this point in the race so don't fall for it. "Shut up and keep pedaling" came the unpleasant response. I decided to investigate this disturbing situation myself so I rolled to a stop, lifted my front wheel, and attempted to spin it. It froze. No rotation at all. In a rage, I bellowed at my crew to get my other bike. They quickly and apologetically responded and I was back on my way with a bike that would roll. Any requests that followed were expeditiously accommodated.



Things were quickly going from bad to worse though, as I was growing more and more discouraged. It hurt to sit, it hurt to stand, I still had a stick holding my head up and I was exhausted. With only 141 miles remaining, I seriously doubted as to whether or not I could make it. I went down for another sleep cycle in Camden Alabama as my crew carefully ascertained Stefan's position and state of condition. "When Allen wakes up Stefan will be about 5-10 minutes behind," they surmised. I awoke and took off up the last of the 3000-mile courses hills with a tremendous amount of energy, a long but generally gentle grade. My crew inserted the CD that my wife and daughter had made for me in our recording studio prior to the races commencement. I knew of its existence, but had yet to experience it. Words of encouragement and various audio clips from my favorite movies resounded from the outdoor speakers atop my support van. Adrenalin once again surged as my wife and daughter's words implored me to press on to the end. Again I was hammering the pavement with speed unprecedented at this point in the race. However, my tank was running on fumes. As I approached the final summit of RAAM, the fuel expired. I swerved, first right, then left and finally back to the center of the road where I stopped, with nothing to support me. I toppled over as if I had just kicked the bucket. My crew frantically ran out to check

for pulse and breath as they drug my seemingly lifeless body off the pavement and into the support van for an unplanned, but obviously unavoidable sleep break. “What now?” they asked each other. He needs sleep, a lot of sleep and Stefan is right on his tail.”

I was only asleep for about 10 minutes when in a dazed state of panic, I sprang up to determine my whereabouts relative to Lau’s. “Go back to sleep he’s still behind you,” a reassuring reply came.

Shortly thereafter, my crew witnessed an unpleasant sight. Stefan was coming. They had parked off the road as to not be visible to him or his crew and give them a mental advantage if he did indeed pass. “Now what?” My crew knew my goal to be rookie of the year and Stefan was also a rookie to RAAM so allowing him to go by unchecked was not an option. They didn’t have much time to ponder this interesting development as I again woke in a panic with two words on my lips. “Where’s Lau?” Bewildered and somewhat indecisive, Larry knew I needed sleep and Lau being in front of me was unacceptable. “How could Allen just wake up on his own after only 20 minutes of unconsciousness?” Larry thought to himself. “Where’s Lau?” I repeated somewhat perturbed by the lack of response to my first inquiry. “He just passed you about 5 minutes ago,” Larry hesitantly replied. “Get me on my bike, I gotta go,” I said sternly. “No you need rest,” came the reply.” “Get me on my bike,” I demanded. “I’m not going to give up rookie of the year period, I can and will beat this guy, let me back on my bike” Fear, excitement and adrenalin were now pumping through my veins. “Ok, but only if you can answer some questions first,” they agreed collectively. “Who are you? What are you doing? Where are you? I answered all accurately and without hesitation, I had a German to catch.

Within minutes I blew by the struggling Stefan who had been pushing himself beyond the limits of human ability for days. My crew informed me of his “Deer in the headlight look” as I made him look like he was standing still up this last pitch of the climb. “MACH SNELL,” I heard over his loud speaker “MACH SNELL.” But it was no use, Stefan was beat and he knew it. Try as he may he no longer possessed the required energy to counter this Americans aggressive attack. I continued on with one thing on my mind. This was it, no more screwing around, I’m going to put the hammer down and not look back. Regardless of the amount of pain pulsing through my body, my desire to claim rookie of the year honors would not be relinquished.



At Uriah my newly formed spy posse consisting of a mix of crews A and B informed me that Stefan had thrown in the towel. Upon talking with his crew, we learned of his undernourished and dangerously dehydrated condition. With this newly discovered information, they decided to put me down for one final sleep break. I awoke again having difficulty separating dream from reality as I entertained my crew with stories of aliens and how my wife was one of them. “My wife has to be an alien cause no earth woman could be so wonderful,” I told them as I got prepared to ride the last 82 miles to the Pensacola Beach finish line. Teresa, a petite 5’3” brunette, had supported me without question, even to the point of making me train as she was going into labor. It would be good to see her soon as she, my 4½ year old daughter Kimbrlee and my new baby girl Faith anxiously awaited my arrival in Pensacola sometime Wednesday morning or so I hoped.



Although my current mental state was questionable, the task at hand left no room for doubt. I was going to ride with everything I had and not stop until I saw the finish line. I rode strong and received a big mental boost as I crossed the Florida state line. Nothing could stop me now. I was still a bit paranoid of someone overtaking me and stripping my 3rd place finish so I inquired as to the whereabouts of 5th place veteran Fredi Virag. My crew laughed a bit and said not to worry as he is so far back I could walk to Pensacola and still beat him.

I rolled into time station 53, Pensacola Florida at 9:37 AM to a police escort and OLN film crew eagerly awaiting my arrival. Only nine miles stood between my wife and children waiting for me at the beach, the glorious moment I had been working for over the previous eight months was about to happen.

The last nine miles were the best. Another rolling interview with OLN, police escort, RAAM officials and a slew of Florida motorist's gazed on as this previously unknown rookie rider, now with a surveyor stick supporting his head, completed the final miles of the "World's Toughest Race" in style. "3rd place," I thought to myself. Only two other riders in RAAM's twenty-year history had finished that well their first time. I was number three. The speed at which I completed the final miles astonished everyone, my brother later was told. The escort was actually slowing my previous pace, but I didn't mind too much as a few minutes at this point were insignificant.



The finish line pavilion came into view and as I rolled up the final ramp to the cheers of the gathered crowd it was over. I had made it. The nightmare that I never thought would end finally came to a close and now RAAM was once again a dream.