

# Return to Race Across America

After finishing the 4,800-km ride in 2007, Peter Oyler failed to finish his second attempt in 2009. Would the ultra cyclist be able to complete the event, which is longer than the Tour de France, in this third appearance?

by **Tara Nolan**



Somewhere along the flat plains of Kansas in June 2013, the storm that Peter Oyler had been determinedly trying to out pedal since Colorado, finally caught up to him. With tornado warnings in the forecast, violent winds, driving rain and 360-degree lightning competed to throw Oyler off his bike. The storm was very inconvenient as Oyler was in the middle of his third Race Across America (RAAM), a 3,000-mile (4,800 km), coast-to-coast cycling test of both mental and physical fortitude. Kansas had been Oyler's nemesis once before – it was in this very unassuming state that he had to bail on his second attempt at RAAM in 2009 due to kidney complications. During his 2013 comeback, the weather – not to mention certain aspects of his bike kit – were conspiring against him.

Peter Oyler grew up in Leaside, a neighbourhood in Toronto. The tall, lanky 44-year-old said he's been riding bicycles since he was born – trikes, BMXs, Canadian Tire Supercycles. It was upon leaving high school that Oyler really connected with endurance racing. He started with triathlons (he's done 13 and a half Ironmans), and then adventure races, expedition-length events and ultra cycling. Oyler says he can remember wanting to do RAAM since 1992, but it was a chance meeting with two-time RAAM competitor Kevin Wallace while he was out on a training ride for his 2006 solo attempt that propelled Oyler's dream forward. After the race, Oyler contacted Wallace, the founder of Gears Bike Shop, for a little advice. "He said, 'If you've even thought about doing it, you've got to do it, but you've got to ask for help,'" Oyler remembered. "From there it was game on." He started looking for financial support immediately and gathering his crew. In 2007, Oyler's first RAAM race, he placed eighth in the men's solo category.

When talking about any of his races, Oyler emphasizes that without an amazing crew, you can't compete. "No crew, no race." For his 2013 race, Oyler's crew included clients from WattsUp Cycling, the training centre Oyler co-owns in Toronto, as well as his coach, chiropractor, a massage therapist, a bike fitter and his father, who hasn't missed a race. "You've got to be able to get a group of people who can get along. If they're not getting along before the race starts, it's not going to work," he said. Oyler also stresses that his sponsors are an integral part of the journey as it's not cheap to put a crew together and cycle coast to coast.

RAAM doesn't bill itself as "the world's toughest bicycle race" for nothing. Starting in Oceanside, Calif., the route, which is 30 per cent longer than the Tour de France,

OPPOSITE  
**Monument Valley,  
Utah**

BELOW  
**Peter Oyler rides  
the flatlands of  
Colorado, at  
1,500 m above  
sea level**

BOTTOM  
**Oyler on the  
lonely roads  
of Arizona**





"He said, 'If you've even thought about doing it, you've got to do it, but you've got to ask for help.'"

puts its competitors through 51,000 m of climbing as it crosses 12 states towards Annapolis, Md. There is also a benevolent aspect, as riders raise money for the charities of their choice. For 2013, Oyler raised money for the Jack Project, an organization that helps youth who face mental-health difficulties.

The race book, which is full of rules, maps, elevation graphs and records, is about a couple of inches thick. Each time Oyler pedalled across the U.S., he relied on his crew to use this book to steer him in the right direction – there are penalties if you break any rules. Two groups of three would take turns in the follow car. They'd do everything from keeping an eye on the rider to making food. A third group of two drove a runner car that would drive ahead booking hotels or finding food. "We try to make each stop like a Formula 1 pit stop," Oyler explained. "Your crew is costing you huge time if they're not co-ordinated."

At a certain point in the race, Oyler said that he basically became like a baby – that's how much care is required for

for avoiding this affliction, which he had suffered from in 2009, in his 2013 race.

Unfortunately, despite all the planning, Oyler's kit arrived late, so he'd only ridden in his new chamois for a couple of weeks before the race. Riding behind in the car in California, Judges noticed that the chamois was not wide enough – Oyler apparently has unusually wide sit bones. Saddle sores are the bane of any distance rider. A particularly rough, worn-down stretch of highway did not help; Oyler experienced some major saddle issues, to put it delicately. ReSkin, a product made by Bescot, one of Oyler's sponsors, as well as feminine hygiene pads and Bag Balm, a salve originally developed to soothe irritation on the udders of milking cows, helped him through. "I think he would tell you if he hadn't had the issue with the chamois, he wouldn't have had any trouble at all," Judges said.

Not only does the athlete have to push past the monotony of the ride during the race, the rider has to push through pain. In a book he created about the race, Oyler has a page with the caption, "I'm in my own world now." This ability to slip into another world seems to be inherent in distance athletes. Oyler said one of the clients at WattsUp once asked him what he thinks about. He joked and said "women." But then he replied: "I think about everybody that's involved in making the race happen, the love of riding the bike, the freedom of being on the open roads."

In Kansas, Oyler would have been thinking about trying to stay on the bike. Judges recalled that it felt like they were in the eye of the storm. A gust of wind blew Oyler nearly a metre sideways, but he managed to stay on. "If I didn't have good bike-handling skills, and was aware of what was about to happen, I would have been in the ditch for sure," he said. Still, it got to the point to which he had to climb into the minivan for safety. Judges turned the van into the wind so it wouldn't blow over. They waited out the worst of the storm. When Oyler awoke about an hour and a half later, it was still raining and he felt like "a bag of hammers."

"That moment – that was a really tough moment because in that scenario, I could have been done," he said. But Oyler got back on his bike. A few days later, he finished the race. It took him 10 days, 15 hours and 16 minutes. Oyler is happy with his 12th place overall finish. "There's so much out there to do, but in the ultra cycling world, finishing RAAM twice is like going up Everest and back down twice," he said. Oyler is one of four people in Canada who have finished the race two times. Fellow Canadian, Jason Lane placed seventh.

## "Finishing RAAM twice is like going up Everest and back down twice."

the athlete. "When it's not going well, you don't even want to take your own shoes off. That's how tired you are; that's how much fatigue there is."

"The hallucinations typically happen between two and four in the morning," explained Scott Judges, owner of Fitt 1st, a professional bike-fitting company. "It's the toughest time on the cyclist and the crew." For the 2013 race, Oyler and his group had decided that there would be planned sleep breaks whether he felt good or "like crap."

Oyler approached Judges to be his bike fitter and mechanic for RAAM 2013 in the summer of 2012. Judges had already been fitting Oyler on his bike for a couple of years and said he accepted for two reasons: "Pete is just a prince of a guy; he's well known in the cycling community and will do anything for you, and I thought it would be a good experience for me as a professional fitter."

Judges did a fit assessment, which he describes as a key part of the process – analyzing everything from Oyler's pedal stroke to his position in the saddle and on the aero bars. Shermer's neck – the loss of control of one's neck muscles – is always a concern for a long-distance athlete, but Oyler credits his physical therapy and bike fit

ABOVE  
At the start of the 2013 RAAM in Oceanside, Calif., from left, Peter Oyler Sr., Christian Wasserman, James Young, Janet Wilson, Greg Gannon, Peter Oyler, Scott Judges and Andrew Li

OPPOSITE TOP LEFT  
Kathy Yakimik and Oyler at the finish in Annapolis, Md.

OPPOSITE TOP RIGHT  
Oyler enjoys a sweet treat as he cools down

OPPOSITE BOTTOM  
RAAM completed for a second time





Oyler's wife, Kathy Yakimik, was waiting for him at the finish line in Annapolis. "Even though people don't see Kathy on training rides, she is involved in so many ways," Oyler said. When Oyler's alarm would go off at 4 a.m. to wake him for for training, Yakimik would hear it, and he wouldn't. Apparently he never hears it, so Yakimik is the one who encourages him to get out of bed. Although she's not a cyclist herself, Yakimik recognized Oyler's passion early on and has always been supportive of his training and at his races. "I think he's very lucky that he has a passion for something and that he's really been able to use his passion to fulfil his dreams and goals – and he's managed to turn it into a business, too," she said.

"The motivation to do the training has to come from within, but having that help and that person at home in those training blocks is a reassuring factor," he said.

At some point, Oyler would like to do another RAAM. He'd also like to mentor another Canadian rider who is interested in competing at RAAM. "I love the sport of ultra cycling," he says. "Until you're in it, you don't understand why it's exciting."

This summer, he is gearing up to do TorTour, a non-stop race that will take him on a 1,000-km route around Switzerland. "I've always loved to push my limits. When it comes to being able to do things on the bike and ride these incredible distances, I don't want to just ride them: I want to ride them fast," he said. "It gives me that next goal. I like to push my own boundaries and my own limits." 

