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CYCLING

## Meet Srinivas Gokulnath, the first Indian to finish the toughest cycling race in the world

More people have summited the Everest than completed the 3,000-mile Race Across America.

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Tara Roberts/Race Across America

How does one cycle 3,000 miles in 12 days? Sorry, let's rephrase the question. Rather, why does one do it?

To officially complete the Race Across America (RAAM), riders must cover a minimum of 250 miles a day. To cover that distance, one must eschew sleep – sometimes they sleep for as little as 10 minutes each day – because that is time wasted. And if you have ever had to go through a day without sleeping, you know what sleep deprivation can do to you. But add having to ride a cycle through day and night, through deserts and mountains to that and it brings us back to the same question.

Why?

There are some endeavours that are planned for fame. Some do it for money. Still more because being first is addictive. But the RAAM is above all that. You don't take part in if you have such petty goals.

For Srinivas Gokulnath, who recently became the first Indian to complete the race, the goal was a simple yet complex one: he wanted to get to know himself better.

"I have been an ultracyclist since 2009. Since then, it has been the distance, which has kept luring me in. When I did 150 kms, I thought to myself, why not 200 kms... why not 300 kms. As I kept on doing it, I found that I wanted to challenge myself to do things I hadn't done before. Between 2009-2012, I decided that before I turn 40, I wanted to do a Leh to Kanyakumari trip and the Race Across America.

The self-exploration was getting deeper and deeper through these distances. RAAM is the pinnacle of ultracycling and I wanted to go through that to get to know myself better," said Gokulnath, who was in Mumbai for the Girimitra Sannam.

That the race allows you to get in touch with the real you is a given. In the Tour de France, you stop at the end of the day – you rest, you get a massage, eat a meal, sleep and then start fresh the next day. But with RAAM, you don't. You just ride on and on. To give you some perspective, RAAM is around 30% longer than the Tour and you have roughly half the time to finish it.

If that still hasn't freaked you out, fathom this: More people have summited the Everest than completed RAAM.

While professional cycling has been rocked by numerous drug scandals, no RAAM rider has failed a drug test. Most say that there is no incentive to cheat in the race because it awards no prize money. The reward, then, perhaps is a better understanding of yourself and your limits. Alone on that cycle, you have a conversation with yourself while pushing your body and perhaps the mind to breaking point.







More people have summited the Everest than completed RAAM. Photo credit: Facebook/Srinivas Gokulnath

## A challenge like no other

Gokulnath had an acute understanding of how harsh this race could be. He had attempted the race in 2016; attempted and crumbled in the face of the challenge.

“In 2016, I pedaled 2,450 miles in 10 days, 20 hours. The race did teach me a lot, it was learning in a very harsh way. It was hard – because not finishing is a big mental trauma.”

Ten days, 20 hours... and then you suddenly stop. Because this is a race and you don't have time on your hands.

“It was my mind really,” said Gokulnath, trying to rationalise his decision. “My mind started calculating that I am left with one day and a few hours, how am I going to finish the race. In a sense, I doubted myself. Those doubts and the mental calculation I was doing, caused the whole problem. I succumbed to that.”

But in that failure lay the seeds of success.

“The day I did not finish, my wife and I decided that we will do it again because it remained an unfinished business.”

The experience taught him about the importance of the right crew, about having people who believed in his goal, about motivation, about discipline, about self-control and about preparation.

“The race starts the moment you register. It starts the moment you make up your mind. The race starts there. Whatever actions you take will take from that point on will determine your success. You really can’t mess with this race. In 2016, I was relieved to reach the starting line. In 2017, I wanted it to be different.”

## **But how different could it really be?**

“On June 25, 2016, when I did not finish, I decided I would race again in 2017. From that day on, when I came back to India – I was only focusing on how to finish the race successfully. I started working with my coach Alberto Blanco, who is from the USA and he has done this before. He finished it as a rookie – the best rookie in 2011. I started working with him, and then I started building my crew.”

Building the crew wasn’t easy especially since Gokulnath is a self-funded athlete. He needed to keep working even as he trained. It meant that during the week, he could only ride three to four hours a day. He would significantly up that to eight to 10 hours during weekends.

“Chris O’Keefe [a 52-year-old who also did not finish for the first time in his rookie attempt] came on board as the crew chief. We had an emotional connect. I had to register for the race and also keep working – take out the savings, take loans. But I found that when I started accepting the challenges, it just starting getting easier. It’s a slow process, and it happened bit by bit. You can’t jump. You don’t do this in one day. There are no shortcuts. My focus was training, climbing and working on my crew. Gathering logistics and optimizing whatever resources I had.”







Gokulnath had failed to complete the race in 2016. Photo credit: Facebook/Race Across America

It was a single-minded pursuit and by the time, he made it to the start line this time, he was feeling good. That feeling didn't last for too long.

“Initially, I was in the top 10 – so I was riding fast, I was riding aggressively, then between Time Station 5 and Time Station 9 – I succumbed to dehydration. After Time Station 9 I slowed down and dropped to 27th. So between Time Station 9 and 16, we realised that it is dehydration. That's when we started working on the nutrition and hydration part. We started to stay disciplined and work meticulously. I have to take 8,000 calories and we would jot down every little detail. We kept on doing this and as we did that, I found that I was gaining and getting faster.”

Anybody could talk when the road was smooth. It was what you did when the going got tough that proves your mettle in the end. Gokulnath tried to keep it simple throughout.

## Keeping it simple

“The race is very simple. You need to be consistent. Being consistent and being disciplined is the key. You do the training anywhere but you stick to the plan. Every 24 hours, we planned to sleep for three hours. I didn't hallucinate but others do.

“There were many situations where the race knocks you down but you gather strength. You start believing in yourself. Do it bit-by-bit. Don't focus on how much you are left with. Concentrate on getting to the next Time Station – that is 50 miles. You be the best you can for those 50 miles.”

Gokulnath would ask his crew to tell him the average speed of the leader. If it was, say, 15 miles per hour, he would try to go faster, at 16 mph or 17 mph. “As we approached the 50th Time Station, we just tasted it... we knew the end was here. Through all this, I just wanted to race gracefully, we did that and we killed the race.”



Gokulnath finished the race in 11 days, 18 hours and 45 minutes. Photo credit: Facebook/Race Across America

It really is that kind of feeling. A kill or be killed kind of scenario that Gokulnath, an Army doctor, understands well.

“I could feel that I was getting one with the nature. That the nature is helping out. I am being taken care of. I had that connection. There were varied thoughts. There might be people who can describe these moments better but I can only say that it was very intense and very deep. I can’t even explain it. At the finish line I felt so much relief that I felt that even if I die, I did my best.”

For the record, Gokulnath finished the race in 11 days, 18 hours and 45 minutes. His average speed was 10.86 miles an hour. The winner, Christoph Stasser (an Austrian who won his fourth RAAM), won in eight days, nine hours, 34 minutes at an average of 15.23 miles an hour.

So what next for Gokulnath?

“I am still dealing with the aftermath. I have so many dues, things I need to take care of. The RAAM is still not over for me. The chapter only closes when you deal with all of this.”

Indeed, this cycle race does test you like no other... on and off the road.