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Article/Interview

**2/14/03 FINAL**

Re: Rob Kish Receives Ultra Marathon Cycling Legend Award

## **50,000 Reasons and Counting... The Legend of Rob Kish**

By Scott Johnson

Rob Kish *is* a legend. Few people on earth deserve the title more. He has shattered Ultra Marathon Cycling milestones. He has defied, beyond all reason, limits of human endurance.

In his sport, there has never been a more dominant athlete – no one even comes close.

17-times in a Race Across America event, Rob Kish has pushed away from a starting line near the Pacific Ocean, accepted every pain, factor and obstacle to pedal 3,000 miles to the other coast. And not once has he ever withdrawn from a race. More than 50,000 miles and never once did he allow excruciating physical and mental pain to stop him.

In June 2003, Rob Kish will do it again.

Now 4-months before the San Diego to Atlantic City start of the 2003 Insight Race Across America, Rob is welcomed to starting line early. He is to be honored at the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Competitor Magazine's Endurance Sports Awards.

I spoke with Rob Kish hours before the awards banquet. The 47-year old champion was comfortable, having traveled safely by air from his Port Orange, Florida home. His only trepidation, the borrowed tuxedo he would have to wear later. His partner in life and cycling history, wife Brenda Kish sat nearby as did friend Diane Penseyres (*a former ultra-cycling competitor in her own right, wife of long-time competitor Jim Penseyres, and sister-in-law of RAAM record holder Pete Penseyres*).

Also contributing helpful insight, was Race Across America Managing Director Jim Pitre. At an active 63, Pitre has tackled RAAM as a solo and a two-person team competitor.

**SJ:** Jim, before I tackle talking to the soft-spoken champion here...what is the allure of Ultra Marathon Cycling and Race Across America?

**JP:** It's difficult for me to describe, but I'll call it "RAAM Fever". It's something floating in the air...and it's catching. If one gets it...it seems to grow from the insight out. I could call it a burning desire, but it's really an inside knowing that this is something I had to do. I didn't have an option, it was something I just had to do.

Competing gives me a sense of peace and knowing that is singular to other events in my life. The highs and lows are amazing... going from one moment, feeling absolutely on the top of my game to the next moment, wondering how I'll ever make the next pedal stroke. It's amazing, the roller coaster that you're on.

Spiritualists talk a lot about finding their "enlightenment". This can come at the end of particularly strenuous activities. Tibetans monks that scale mountains and are near death talk about the moment of clarity and enlightenment. I'm not going to boast that I've reached enlightenment but I do feel like I've had a taste of it through Race Across America.

There are moments when nothing else in the world exists other than the next pedal stroke. Everything else is gone, there's no fear, you're just absolutely there in the moment. And that's the "pull" that continues to pull me back to RAAM. It's the training ground that strengthens my inner being.

**SJ:** How does one fathom 17-transcontinental crossings in 18-years? How do you quantify what Rob Kish has done and what he continues to do?

**JP:** From a physical standpoint, it's just impossible. He continues to do what most reasonable people would consider – not possible. More than 50,000 miles in 17-races and he has never dropped out! To never stop or quit with all the factors at play, physical, mental atmospheric...it's just unbelievable.

It's so far beyond willpower. It's a mindset certainly, a determination that is created through training. A racer must accept that pain...is just a part of the deal, it's part of the journey.

**SJ:** Does the term “Legend” apply to Rob Kish?

**JP:** Oh, absolutely. I think what Rob has done in the world of Ultra Marathon Cycling is very unlikely ever to be matched.

Look at other sports, the Babe Ruth’s, the DiMaggio’s, the Michael Jordan’s...Rob Kish is to Ultra Marathon Cycling what those other legends are to their sports.

Rob has not demanded applause, hasn’t sought to be in the limelight but I do think it’s a validation for him and he certainly deserves it.

**SJ:** OK Rob. I know hearing this kind of praise disturbs you. But you had better get used to it today. First of all, in 17-RAAM races, you took only one break...

**RK:** I had one break and it was literally a break...a broken leg. I got plowed into by a vehicle right before the 1986 race...during my training.

**SJ:** You have been very fortunate, during the race, not to fall victim to those kinds of mishaps?

**RK:** I credit my crews for that. If things fall apart, they just put it back together. Keep things going.

**SJ:** In 1999, you came close to withdrawing...close, on Rob Kish terms...what happened?

**RK:** I didn’t like the way things were going in ’99. A lot of people were ahead of me at the front. It was really hot that year. I actually quit, took a long break...then got on rode for a while. It was awful. Really hot. I was ready to go home. But Brenda talked me into keep going. I had no desire to ride anymore...but she got me going again.

**SJ:** Brenda, what did you say to keep him going?

**BK:** He kept saying to me, “why am I doing this?” The only thing that seemed to get him on the bike, I said to him, ‘because, it’s what we do’. It must have clicked ...he thought about it for a while, washed his face and said ‘let’s go’.

**SJ:** Brenda, you know this husband of yours pretty well. Why is he so stubborn, other champions have stumbled?

**BK:** He trains so hard. Everything we do, outside of our jobs, is for RAAM. Could he really invest so much time and not finish the race? It's not an option.

**SJ:** In these 50,000 miles of racing which has been stronger mind or body?

**RK:** My body has failed more than the mind.

First time I did RAAM in 1985, one of my crewmembers actually knocked me down. I was going downhill, probably going 27-miles per hour...

One of the crew members had this basket on a stick...it was nicely made...I didn't really need it...but he went to so much trouble making it, so we used it. For some reason he felt like he needed to put that basket on my brake levers. Well, the brake levers stick up...and he just kept handing me stuff, he was excited. So I had a banana in my hand, he started handing me more stuff, somehow the basket hooked onto my handle bars, I went sideways over the embankment...I still have scars there (indicating left hand) and here (elbow)...

**SJ:** 1985 was a tough year for you even without the accident?

**RK:** The accident happened only 50-miles into the race. I had immediate road rash on my back... I liked to change my jerseys often and they had to pull it off my back, it had stuck...I couldn't wear cycling jerseys anymore I had to wear t-shirts...it was like they were glued to my back.

Not knowing about RAAM we made a lot of mistakes. I should have taken showers after sleep instead of before...the road rash was bad...open sores...it hurt so bad to take a shower.

The first year in '85 was the only year I had a lot of visual hallucinations. I saw a lot of unusual road kill. And I ate a lot of junk. Corned beef hash out of a can. I didn't know better, I was a rookie.

**RK:** My back was infected and that probably added to the images. Like I always saw people on the side of the road. They were always asking me questions involving very long numbers. They asked me for phone numbers, serial numbers. Things you couldn't possibly answer. It would give you a headache. I use to see mailboxes popping out of the pavement too, I would have to dodge them.

Nowadays, I don't see things that much. I just kinda dream on the bike. Just weird thoughts. Like a couple of years ago, I thought I was going on a fishing trip, going camping somewhere.

**SJ:** Which other years presented serious challenges to overcome?

**RK:** I tore a muscle in my leg in '89. That was rough, one-legging it. 2000 was bad. My shoes caused nerve damage in my feet and it affected my leg. My knee got swollen. I didn't think I was going to make it. Our van broke down early...we were able to borrow another one and it broke down in Oklahoma.

I just don't think about quitting. Great racers have. But I don't let myself consider it. I've had bleeding saddle sores...but RAAM is long enough that a lot of things have time to heal.

**SJ:** It's amazing, but your streak of 17 complete races was nearly ended before it began in year one?

**RK:** Yeah, it's been all down hill from there. (laughs)

**SJ:** "Ultra Marathon Cycling *Legend Award*"...how does it feel?

**RK:** Actually I'm not that excited about it... I get a meal. (smiles) I am excited about free access to the "Penseyres Training Facility"...but now I'm pissed off 'cause the staff has been cut in half...Pete went and crashed.

*(Referring to a recent accident by Pete Penseyres. The RAAM record holder broke three ribs, punctured his lungs and broke his collarbone, but is resting comfortably at home in California.)*

**RK:** (Talking to Diane Penseyres) Jim (Penseyres) used to race with a broken neck.

**DP:** We did the tandem in the Salt Lake Century 6-weeks after his broke his neck. He had to wear a neck brace. It was crazy. He couldn't turn his head.

(Everyone laughs)

**SJ:** Is there anything other than training, that prepares you for the monolithic challenge of RAAM. Your day job?

**RK:** Well, I'm a land surveyor in Florida...I move files around, GPS, data files... I think my job and the racing career are total opposites.

**SJ:** You train among busy streets, around lots of moving vehicles. It's not your favorite place?

**RK:** I would rather be bored on an open highway than to stop at red lights. Especially when you're tired and weird and you forget you're in race anymore. Better to be on the highways than with the city traffic. Tough to be in a race with a red light.

**SJ:** You don't like to be called a "legend"?

**RK:** I would just insert the word "longevity" where legend is.

**JP:** I think longevity plays a part in who becomes a legend...

**RK:** I thought you had to be dead to be a legend.

**SJ:** No, there are "living legends".

**RK:** Oh, yeah. I'm not looking forward to wearing the tuxedo.

Do I have to say anything up there? Maybe I'll get an interpreter.

**SJ:** If the attention of your accomplishments mean so little to you, why do you undertake this incredible undertaking every year?

**RK:** Pretty much the reason I'm doing it is because of Brenda. We would probably argue about it. I do it for her, she does it for me. Probably neither one of us really want to do it – we just try to please the other one. (Laughs)

**SJ:** Can this arduous journey be fun, Brenda?

**BK:** Yeah, it's fun. It's fun for me to see him do something he enjoys so much and that he's so good at. It's fun to travel but especially the bond you share with the crew. You become a family.

**RK:** When it comes to the crew, I never argue with anyone except her. But she takes all the weight. She carries it all.

**SJ:** Is there a remaining goal? A milestone left for Rob Kish? 20-RAAM's?

**RK:** No, just one year at a time. I might want to do a two-man team one day if someone pays for it and I can just go along for the ride. (smiles)

I would like to try breaking 9-days one more time.

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It was close to midnight when the awards banquet came to end. Staggering stories of endurance were shared: Olympic swimming legend John Nabor with his 4-gold medals in 1976, Cycling legend Davis Phinney now overcoming daily life with Parkinson's Disease, Challenged Athlete of the Year Muffy Davis mastering the ski slopes without the use of legs. These and more human wonders were celebrated under a crisp winter night at the Sea World Pavilion.

Though he may not admit it, it was with this elite athletic gathering that Rob Kish was most at home. His achievements and those of the amazing men and women around him are part of the same galaxy – within the same narrow scope of incredibility.

We all walked away together with a heavy bronze trophy in Rob's hand and the weight of a very emotional ceremony in our collected souls...

Though his triumphs have been as a solo racer, Rob Kish doesn't believe it for a moment. With quiet thanks and a heart filled with love, Rob quietly gives the all the credit to his wife, Brenda.

This team is the stuff legends are made of.