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INSIDE —

- 2012 Ride Schedule
- The Road To Recovery
- Alaska's Big Wild Ride
- PBP on a Tandem
- Taste of Carolina

THE FUOCO FIVE HUNDRED

Or, A Few Tips and Tricks to Get You RAAM Qualified

By GREG CONDERACCI

You've heard of the Indy 500. And, of course, the Fortune 500. Here's my account of the Fuoco 500, AKA The Texas Time Trials (TTT).

I had a long conversation with Dallas RBA Dan Driscoll at Paris-Brest-Paris this year about RAAM-Qualifying (RQ) at this event. Dan, TTT organizer, is famous for many things in Randonneuring, but mostly for his smooth sales pitch. I was hooked.

As soon as I signed up to RQ in Texas, I knew I was in trouble. My last really successful time trial was in Grand Rapids, Michigan – in 1973. And that was only 25 miles. This one would be 20 times longer (the RQ standard is 500 miles, 30,000 feet of climbing, in 48 hours or fewer).

Fortunately, I could tap the wit and wisdom of one of our DC Randonneur veterans – John Fuoco. John has a lot of ultra-experience and that's exactly what I needed. The TTT would be a *race*. It's one thing to move quickly through a 7-11 on a brevet; it's a whole different experience when your competition shows up with motor homes, pitches shelter tents and sets out cots in the pits. These folks are *serious*.

John's advice was good – *scary* good, in fact. Not only did it get this 62-yr-old

through the TTT, it gave me a MUCH better performance than I could otherwise have expected. So, if you've ever thought of ultra-racing or RAAM Qualifying, read on. Thanks to John, this is how it was done. (His emailed advice is in *italics*.)

John said: *The tortoise beats the hare: you should ride strongly in the beginning but you should also, at all times, have a sense of holding back at least a little. It will pay off for you in the long haul.*

The TTT starts at 6 pm on a Thursday night and ends 48 hours later (or whenever you cover 503 miles). We roll out into the fading Texas sunshine in beautiful Glen Rose, Texas, about 20 of us riding pretty darn quick for a long trip. Three riders ahead disappear in a couple of miles. A few behind pass, then, all is darkness.

We are doing 19 laps of about 26 miles. I settle in. Glen Rose topography is a lot like the Maryland countryside where I train. Soon, I find that the rollers are propelling me along at better than 17 mph on average. I go fast on the downs, easy on the ups....

On my fourth lap the frame on my saddle breaks. I find I can ride it, but it totally changes my position on the bike...with 420 miles to go.

John said: *Be totally flexible. You have a rough plan—and*

it is a good one—but be prepared for unplanned stuff to happen. Hopefully just minor stuff, like rain or wind or a tough flat. Whatever it is, roll through it with aplomb. We want all of your energy to go into the pedals. No hand wringing.

I ride another 40 miles before I can flag down a sag wagon to see if they can get me another saddle. They do. On my next lap, I have a loaner saddle waiting for me, courtesy of another com-

petitor's team. But the saddle is *way* harder than I'm used to. I tell myself that the good news is that I am using different pressure points. But after about 60 more miles, I realize I need the change the saddle – again. Fortunately, volunteer Pam Wright, whom I first met at 2007 PBP, deftly reaches into her car and produces one. You gotta love a woman with a

■Continued on next page



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Fuoco 500....(continued)

spare saddle in her trunk – especially when she even installs it on the bike for you.

John said: *Your brain may simply demand some sleep the first night...don't put yourself in danger. I think building a sleep break into your plan will get you there safely and much more comfortably.*

I'm about two hours ahead of my schedule. It's the wee hours of the morning, the really dead time "after the bars close." I decide to sleep. My hotel is 200 yards from the course. I shower and collapse for an hour. I come back before first light, refreshed. I pass a

rider who has taken a sleep break on the side of the road. Tougher than me...it's 53 degrees, for Pete's sake.

John said: *How will you handle the mental aspect of riding alone for that length of time? I've evolved into someone who can handle it just fine but I don't think it comes natural to everyone. So consider that and develop an honest strategy to deal with it.*

My answer to John's question is simple: iPod...just in one ear so I can hear traffic. Not that there's much of it in Glen Rose. A steady stream of rock, country, blues and even

bagpipes keeps me cranking down the road. It's better than caffeine. But the night is lonely. The TTT is non-drafting, like RAAM. So when I see a tail light in the distance, I work steadily toward it. When I pass the rider, I get a lift.

The Beatles are singing "Here Comes the Sun" in my right ear as first light brings the promise of warmth. Strange that Texas, so long in a withering drought, can be so cold at night. Before the sun sets tonight, I will know whether I will qualify.

John said: *You have to keep the calories coming in like clockwork. Never take an hour off. Watch out for decreased intake once you get tired. You have to be alert as the hours progress to keep up with the basics.*

I budget two feed bottles a lap, one with water or unsweetened tea and one with a mix of HEED and Perpetuum, laced with a little energy drink, supplemented with a liberal supply of Hammer Gel. I am living on liquids because eating solids seems like soooo much work, though I work in a couple of ham and Swiss sandwiches and a few Pay Day candy bars.

The sky is a brilliant, cloudless blue and I am bathed in sunblock. I roll past ranches baked brown, empty stream beds, and the parched town of Glen Rose. The hills are relentless rollers, and as I get to know the course, I name them: Johnson Hill, Bumpy Hill, Dead Deer Hill, XXX Hill and 18-,19-, and 20-Mile Hills.

Around 6 p.m. I realize that I have set a new personal 24-hour record (344 miles) and I know that I will RAAM qualify sometime the next day. I begin to relax.

John said: *Riding 500 miles is never a plum even if you have a generous 48 hours to finish. To your favor it is nondrafting and you should revel in the fact that you can ride your own pace the whole time.*

I want to sleep again once the sun disappears, but I need two more good laps – 52 miles before I do so. I can feel my own pace slackening. A woman whizzes by; she's part of a relay team. I need a rabbit to chase, so I cruise about 100 yards behind her. She's very good, clearly knows the course, and her pace never slows.

I register a nice fast lap, down a 16-ounce Coke in a chug and do an "easy" recovery lap. Like an angel from above, Debbie Breaud, a veteran randonneur and racer, volunteered to crew for me and the other self-supported riders. She mixes feed bottles, goes out to buy more energy drinks and organizes the back of my SUV, which looks like the remains of a teen slumber party gone bad.

John said: *If near the end you are into the second night and feeling awful and you have lots of time in the bank, then you may luxuriate in a longer snooze.*

Around 10 p.m., I tell Debbie I am turning in for a luxurious shower and two-and-a-half-hours of sleep on a real bed in my hotel. She

■Continued on next page

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Fuoco 500... (continued)

tries to talk me into a half hour nap on a cot in the cold. Ah, no. So she makes me swear to be back on the road before midnight. And I am. I come back energized and do another 50 miles with no problem, but then I start to run out of gas again in the early morning hours

John said: *Let your body decide when you need it. You'll know when you can no longer keep your eyes open. Take a cat nap. 10-20 minutes will clear your head.*

I find myself weaving on the road, so I stop and ask one of the road marshals if I can nap in the back of his car. Ten minutes later, I'm better, but still pooped.

John said: *Don't kid yourself. You will feel rotten and you will tell yourself you can't do it and why should you do it anyway and what a fool I am to even undertake this grandiose task. Don't listen to any of that bull! Keep your eye on the prize.*

I am just two laps – 52 miles – from the end, but I am cold, miserable, tired and in the dark. Okay, I am going back to the hotel for a half hour nap in a real bed and eat

the buffet breakfast.

John said: *Enjoy! Remember why we are doing this. Yeab to RAAM qualify yada yada but the underlying reason is we love to ride our bikes!*

I walk out of the hotel into the first light of a new day...a new man loving to ride his bike. It's a little before 7 am. After cranking out a quick lap, I look at my watch: 8:27 am. And then, it dawns on me: if I can run the next 26 miles in an hour and a half, I will finish under 40 hours.

Just two days earlier, to finish my last lap as fast as my first would have seemed impossible. But there will be no tomorrow. I'm not saving myself for anything anymore. I am flying down the road, passing riders who are competing in shorter distances. Sprinting through the brilliant sunshine to the finish I can just make out the time clock: 39:53:00.

At the awards dinner, I am stunned to discover I finished third against riders in their 40s who had pushed through with no sleep. True, they had beaten me by hours,

but they had braved intense fatigue and even hallucinations to do so. Because of John's advice and a little rest, I had enjoyed a much easier ride and successfully quali-

fied for RAAM.

John said: *Your whole purpose is to get the job done and dammit nothing short of that will cut it.*

Thanks, John.

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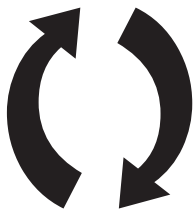
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