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Biking for a cure

BY JOEY CHANDLER • GAZETTE SPORTS WRITER • JUNE 27, 2009

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It's 8:30 p.m. Friday and Steve and Dan Kendra are sound asleep in their hotel rooms at the Baymont Inn.

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At that moment, Bill Edmonds and Bill Hardy are nearing the end of their 12-hour shift of biking, and will meet up with the Kendra brothers on East Main Street around 11:30 p.m.

The four-man team is competing in the Race Across America, the world's longest-running ultra-distance bicycle endurance competition. With the help of an eight-man support crew, the bikers, who started their 3,022 mile cross country journey Saturday, June 20 in Oceanside, Calif., will finish their race Sunday in Annapolis, Maryland. Once they hit Chillicothe, the team had biked 2,517.5 miles - with just 445.9 miles left to go.

The Ari's Angels team is one of three four-man teams competing in the RAAM, representing the NF Endurance Team, an organization which raises money for the Children's Tumor Foundation.

Steve's daughter, Arianna, 13, suffers from neurofibromatosis, which can cause tumors, learning disabilities, behavior problems, blindness, deafness, a higher likelihood of cancer, and even death. Arianna's uncle, Dan, has a photo of his niece taped to his bike to keep him motivated during his daunting trek across the country.

"Every time the going gets tough I just look at my niece and think about what she is going through, and gone through during those 14 surgeries, and know I can peddle my bike a little further," Dan Kendra said.

There is no cure for the disease, and NF Endurance is doing what it can to raise awareness and make money during their nine-day excursion.



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Connie Oslica, left, and Tom McVaugh stand behind one of their team's chase vehicles as two of their four riders sleep at the Baymont Inn Friday. The bicyclists were in town for the Race Across America which started in California and ends in Baltimore. The team, Ari's Angels, is sponsored by NF Endurance and money raised will go to Children's Tumor Foundation. (Lindsay Niegelberg/Gazette)

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"It's just been life changing, really," Steve Kendra said on the trip. "Our foundation is trying to enable some effective treatments and making some great progress, and it's an honor to be a part of this adventure."

So far along the route, the bikers have been chased by dogs, ran over armadillos and smacked into elk, and biked through the Rocky Mountains - a 7,000 feet to 10,000 feet elevation - which led to 38 degree temperatures across the trail.

"They started going up at 6 miles per hour, and came down at 50," said Connie Oslica, the Ari's Angels crew chief.

But no matter what they've endured and encountered, nothing compares to what prompted the bikers to join NF Endurance in the first place - to aid in the effort of NF research, in hopes of one day finding a cure.

Oslica's daughter, Katie, also suffers from NF, and joined her parents on the RAAM trip, celebrating her 18th birthday in the Ari's Angels camper.

Friday evening Oslica and crew members Tom McVaugh and Taylor Gentile patiently waited in the Baymont Inn parking lot for the next exchange to take place.

Earlier in the day, the crew arrived in Oxford and visited with a 6-year-old boy diagnosed with NF who lived along the race route. The family welcomed Ari's Angels with encouraging signs and plenty of food, and the young boy rode his tiny bicycle down the street with one of the off course bikers. Oslica said one of the best parts of their journey has been meeting others who live with NF along the way, and continuing to raise awareness.

"It's very rewarding, and I had no association with (NF Endurance)," McVaugh said. "It's one of the greatest decisions I ever made to support them."

For more information on the Children's Tumor Foundation and the RAAM, visit www.ridingforari.com, or www.raceacrossamerica.org.

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