



Race Across America

The AFP's Natasha Horne took on a whirlwind, record-breaking ride across the USA.

Six days, 13 hours and 27 minutes.

That's the time it took for Natasha Horne and her three teammates to cycle across the United States, a total of 4828km.

It wasn't a fast paced scenic holiday for the Sydney-based AFP member – the women were competitors in what is known as the world's toughest cycling race.

Since 1983, competitors across the world have travelled to Oceanside, California, to compete in Race Across America (RAAM).

Riders are faced with the terrain of 12 different states, from the Rocky Mountains in the west to cornfield country in Kansas to the Appalachian Mountains in the east.

The distance is 1500km longer than the Tour de France and there are no rest days. The elevation climb of 51.8km is the equivalent of climbing Mount Everest six times. The race is a true test of endurance, speed and determination.

Competitors have one goal – get to Annapolis, Maryland, as quickly as possible without stopping and set themselves the challenge of completing the race in less than eight days.

When Natasha and her team, the Veloroos, departed Oceanside on 20 June 2015 they were the first Australian



The Veloroos warm up in Oceanside, California, before the start of the big race.

all-women team to compete. They were also part of a small number of women entrants. Over the last 35 years, only 15 per cent of RAAM competitors have been women.

The record is calculated by average speed. The Veloroos broke the team record of 29.8km/h for a four-woman under-50 team held since 1994, with their average speed of 30.7km/h.

Natasha tackled over 1200 kilometres on her own, the equivalent of cycling from Canberra to Adelaide.

As triathletes, The Veloroos had a high level of fitness prior to RAAM, which enabled them to focus on cycling and simulate different conditions early on in their training.

Before work, Natasha would ride for an hour to an hour-and-a-half, and would also go for a ride after work.

“On the weekends we would build up distances to sometimes riding for 14 hours, and on the Sunday we would do something shorter, probably eight hours,” Natasha explains.

“We also did altitude and heat training. We would simulate 20 minutes on-20 minutes off in 35 degree heat at about 3370m above sea level.”

There were also some ‘short’ diversions during training. The Veloroos visited AFP Sydney Office to complete a 24-hour cyclethon and breakfast to raise funds. AFP members

cheered on the Veloroos around the clock. The event raised about \$3000 toward the US campaign.

The days merged into one when the race began, with the team working in six-hour shifts. Natasha was paired with Julie-Anne Hazlet. Sarah Matthews and Nicole Stanners were The Veloroos’ other pair.

“Julie-Anne and I would always leverage off each other and what we were feeling. By the end we wouldn’t even talk. You’d become so in tune with the other person,” says Natasha.

Each six-hour shift was divided into 20-minute intervals, with one rider taking on 20 minutes while the other followed with three of the crew in one of the support vehicles.

During the six-hour ‘rest’ shift Natasha and Julie-Anne would have to shower, change, be checked by the crew physiotherapist and doctor as well as try to sleep before the next rider interchange.

Lack of sleep was the hardest challenge, with Natasha guessing she only got a total of eight-and-a-half hours during the race.

“Sleep delirium and sleep deprivation were probably the hardest thing of the race for all of us. It’s not something that you can train for. You can’t simulate it,” she says.



Natasha hits the road in Death Valley on the 4828 kilometre Race Across America.

When Natasha arrived in Gettysburg Pennsylvania (home of the Battle of Gettysburg during the American Civil War in 1863) sleep deprivation was taking effect.

“I remember being on the bike and looking around and seeing all these cannons. I turned to the guys in the car and said are you sure we’re going the right way because right now I feel like we’re in a theme park and there are soldiers and cannons pointing at me,” she recalls.

She admits she “was also probably hallucinating a bit,” understating the extent of sleep deprivation.

During night rides when exhaustion and sleep deprivation were at their worst, Natasha’s diet played an important role. Fuelled by a breakfast of oats and a protein shake, the food prepared by the crew’s chef was too heavy for Natasha. Instead, she survived on McDonald’s fruit shakes and Asian chicken salads with orange and edamame.

“Every time we went past a McDonald’s I made them stop and get me one of those,” she says.

In between salads she would snack on corn chips, which she said were one of her saving graces.

Starbucks became vital to staying awake in the second half of the race. The Doubleshot Protein Coffee, a canned coffee with added protein, was Natasha’s drink of choice.

When The Veloroos and the crew reached the finish line at 4am on Saturday 27 June they were exhausted.

If they were expecting a fanfare waiting for them they were in for a shock.

“The finish line is at a Shell petrol station about 5km out of Annapolis, it’s just a line on the road. They tell you your finish time and then they escort you down into the city,” Natasha says.

“So you’re sitting at this petrol station at four o’clock in the morning, everyone’s dead tired and we’re looking at each other thinking this is a bit anticlimactic.”

RAAM staff escorted The Veloroos and their crew to the finish banner in Annapolis. Family and friends were there to greet them and they were awarded first place for their record-breaking effort.

The race also provides competitors with an opportunity to raise money for charity.

The Veloroos chose to support The Amy Gillett Foundation, which seeks to create safe cycling conditions in Australia and reduce injuries and fatalities and Tour de Cure, an organisation that raises awareness and money to find a cure for cancer.

A total of \$50,000 was raised before and during the race, which was evenly split between the two charities. One



AFP member Natasha Horne hits the road for a training run in San Diego.

pre-race event included a 24-hour cycling event at the AFP Sydney office.

“We sat on indoor trainers for 24 hours and people could either sponsor us or pay an entry fee and join us,” Natasha said.

“It was good because the Manager of Sydney Office joined us.”

There are 55 time stations during RAAM that need to be ‘checked off’ by the competitors. The Veloroos created ‘Adopt a Time Station’ and used social media to gain sponsors along the way. The distance between the last and upcoming time station became the dollar amount donated.

“When we got to the time station we did a shout out to the people that had adopted the time station,” explains Natasha.

“We were told to get off social media at one stage because we weren’t sleeping.”

Since completing RAAM, The Veloroos speak to primary school students about cycling and to corporate companies about work-life balance and team building.

“It’s one of those things that you don’t just finish, it keeps going,” Natasha says.

Although they broke the long-held record for the all-women under 50 division, Natasha is quick to say ‘yes’ to taking on the race again.

“In a heartbeat – there were so many things that we could have done better,” she says.