

Underneath the Surface – Marko Baloh's 2005 RAAM story
By Allen and Teresa Larsen

As RAAM 2005 approached it carried with it the normal sense of anticipation that I had become accustomed to, but this time it was different. For the first time in my Ultra Cycling history, I would find myself in the support van rather than on the bicycle. Never having even done so much as a hand off, I had now been cast into the unlikely role of crew chief for one of RAAM's 2005 top solo contenders, Marko Baloh. I first met Marko in our 2003 race and enjoyed the limited time we had to talk during the neutral start, coming to like the soft spoken, polite Slovenian immediately. After the '03 race and Marko's unfortunate withdrawal due to serious medical issues, we stayed in touch via e-mail. As time progressed and I withdrew from the '04 race due to personal reasons, I found myself in the perfect position to try crewing. I was not going to be prepared for the '05 race as a competitor, but why not support another riders dream. The van setup I'd developed over my previous RAAM's was ready and uncommitted so I chose to offer it to a foreign rider who would have a difficult time properly equipping a rental and who better to crew for than Marko.

I must admit that as I thought of crewing it didn't really seem like that big of a deal, but everybody I talked to led me to believe that I should be nervous and that I was in for a big dose of reality. I weighed these comments over, but not having any crew experience all I could do was rely on the theoretical crew procedures I'd developed for my RAAM crews. Marko had assembled a multi national crew with 3 Slovenians and 5 Americans along with an embedded cameraman to make a crew of 9 traveling in one RV, the typical cruise America variety, and my customized Chevy Venture. Pre race contact with other crew members was minimal, but I did send an occasional e-mail encouraging them to read the crew book procedures that Marko had modified from my previous RAAM procedures to fit his own goals and style of riding.

Having no idea what to expect as far as crew dynamics were concerned, all I could do was hope and pray for the best. As our crew slowly convened on the parking lot of the San Diego Holiday Inn on the Bay, it appeared that Marko had assembled the right crew for the job. Steve and Charlie were to take care of the RV, relying on their previous RAAM experiences. Both of them were obviously easy going, very adaptable guys with unique, yet contagious humor. Julie came offering massage, but also a wealth of knowledge about the muscles in the human body and how they work. She is a caring individual that is immensely concerned with helping others and teaching them how to help themselves. Due to Marko's previous medical issues, it only made sense to bring a doctor along. Milos came very determined and well equipped to care for Marko as his doctor and his friend. Since Milos did not have RAAM experience and having experienced the brutality of RAAM myself, I wondered if his job of caring medically for Marko would clash with my job to encourage Marko to do his very best. Andre and Anders, both long time friends of Marko, came to RAAM with plenty of cycling experience, but not RAAM. Competent bike mechanics and skilled drivers, they would prove invaluable in the days to come. This would be my wife Teresa's first RAAM crewing experience. Though she'd been very close to the race from my previous RAAM's, she'd never actually been in a crewing position. She feared that she did not have any specific skills and hoped she would be an asset in some way as a crew member. Loaded with enthusiasm, encouraging words and a servant's heart I felt Teresa possessed everything she needed to integrate seamlessly into Marko's crew. Our assigned cameraman Ben, also came without any RAAM experience, but appeared ready and willing to help out as necessary. With everyone in place, the first task at hand was to load and organize the vast quantities of gear and personal items into the limited space that would become our home for the next week and a half.

Though we had all come well prepared, the process of being ready to take off from the start line seemed to take every moment we had even making it difficult to find enough time to meet and discuss our overall RAAM strategy as a crew. Late the night before the race, we all assembled together in the RV and worked through our plan. While in my mind everything seemed clear and each seemed to understand how things would work, many adjustments would be made as the reality of RAAM took its course.

Finally the day Marko had been preparing for at least the previous 10 months had arrived. It was a beautiful day on the San Diego Bay and all systems were go as the riders at the start line awaited the gun with anticipation. A million thoughts and questions raced through my mind as I contemplated all the last minute details of what was needed to successfully support Marko across the country. Our plan was simple, to get Marko from the start to the finish as fast as possible. How little did I know what lay ahead in the days to come.

As the gun went off and the racers rolled down San Diego's Harbor Boulevard, Ben Milos and I headed towards the end of the neutral start where the race would officially begin. With great expectation we awaited the riders' arrivals. A quick roll call, a bottle change and the race was on. The course immediately began ascending and due to the close proximity and number of riders, we were instructed to hang back for a few minutes before beginning leap frog support. This delay ended up being necessary as Milos booked a lengthy stay at the local Jack in the Box restroom. Once we got rolling, it took forever to catch up with Marko as we rolled passed the bulk of his competitors one by one. Marko was right where we expected him to be, riding strong at the front of the solo field.

It's quite a climb to time station #1 in Pine Valley which quickly separated the solo riders except for four. To no one's surprise, it was Jure Robich, Marko Baloh and Mike Trevino leading the way along with an unknown rookie Chris MacDonald. Marko continued riding strong over the top and across the plateau to the courses first section of freeway that dropped the riders some 5,000 feet into the Mojave Desert. Marko's first stop was nothing more than a 30 second bike change at mile 85 to a more aero dynamic and slightly heavier bike to aid his descent and to trek across the flat, yet brutally hot Mojave. With enduring strength Marko took on the rough roads and rising temperatures and rolled into time station #2 El Centro California in second place. Ben enjoying the desert shots, but also proved to be a great navigator and was very helpful throughout the race while in the follow van. The next section of course is personally my least favorite. With blistering heat, mostly lifeless landscape and a name quite indicative of the environment...Death Valley is a portion of the route I believe all riders are happy to see behind them. Marko emerged into the lush fertile valleys of Blithe, California time station #4 feeling strong and riding great! He was still in second place, only a short distance behind Jure. Marko rode on peacefully knowing he was right in line with reaching his goal. Back in the van however, life was anything but peaceful. The theoretical smooth running ship wasn't running so smoothly. Between flat tires, high heat, excessive nutritional and fluid intake needs along with navigation, tracking it all while training a novice crew I realized this job was a lot harder than I thought. Reality had set in. With only 1 van and 1 RV and knowing Marko was not going to stop until night 2, training and adaptation would be mandatory to prevent impeding his progress.

At the top of Yarnell grade, I was pleasantly surprised by a visit from Greg, one of my closest friends and a crew member from my previous RAAMs. I immediately fell to the ground and kissed his feet apologizing for my ignorance in what it takes to crew and all the hard times he withstood in sticking by my side in the prior races. I couldn't escape the fact that Marko is a very low maintenance rider, whereas I had not been. Marko's temperament was always pleasant, appreciative and very undemanding. Whereas mine was always intense, wanted everything NOW and expected things to be done perfectly. So, it seemed my apology to Greg more than deserved and I was glad to be crewing for someone like Marko.

I tried to take a sleep break in the RV and found that my normal sleeping habits kicked in because not only could I not sleep in a moving vehicle, but my mind was on one thing and one thing only...Marko. I couldn't wait to get back in the van to make sure he was ok and everything had been done including keeping the van as orderly as possible and on course, with no time wasting detours. I got back in the van just after Prescott and things had gone pretty well. However, as the day progressed into mid morning I found myself shifting in my mind. Though not part of the original plan, I decided I was not willing to surrender my command post in the back of the van. As hard as I tried to prepare the new crew members to fly solo, if you will, my heart had

joined Marko's and I felt a responsibility and desire to join him in his RAAM effort and be there through every mile, only sleeping when he did. In the back of my mind I knew this strategy wouldn't work for the entire race, but at the moment, it seemed to be my only choice at least until the crew became more comfortable in their roles. Marko continued on through the night riding well with Jure gaining only insignificant amounts of time for this point of the race.

Having settled into my rear seat position, rotating crew in and out as necessary, things were rolling along much smoother. Though Marko was riding very well, his pace began to slow a little. Was this heat, fatigue or something else? I wasn't sure, but was unconcerned at this point of the race and continued encouraging him on mile by mile. Meanwhile, the RV was running along smoothly as Steve and Charlie took excellent care of all the RV details and the off duty crew while keeping in close proximity to Marko. Charlie was always right on top of being at the time stations and making the calls into headquarters. Steve and Charlie's past RAAM experience was truly evident from day 1 and proved consistent throughout the race.

The higher altitudes of the Flagstaff area did not bring much relief as far as temperature goes, but by evening as the temperature dropped Marko's pace increased. It appeared that Marko and I were similar in that night riding seemed to be more our pleasure over the mid afternoon lulls. Near Mexican Hat, we took first place over a sleeping Jure Robich, which was quite exciting. As excitement and adrenalin surged, however, Marko began to suffer some breathing difficulties. Due to language difficulties, this fact seemed to get lost in translation as I was informed that Dr. Milos desired that Marko stop to put on a second pair of shorts in an effort to alleviate emerging saddle sores. My reply was, "he's not going to stop as we are heading into our first sleep break in less than an hour away." I then proceeded to inform Milos that this strategy was senseless and that no stop would occur. We pulled into our first sleep break at Aneth Colorado, Marko having ridden for 40+ hours straight, 727 miles from the start and no more than 20 minutes off the bike. It was at this point, that I found out that Marko had experienced some shortness of breath and that was the doctor's concern and why he wanted to stop earlier, not just to put on another pair of shorts. To be sure, we would be much more careful in translation in the future.

Marko was no longer experiencing breathing problems, but other problems were arising as the van pulled in with a physically tired, yet mentally wired rider. Though the crew book combed through how important highly efficient and well run sleep breaks were, this first planned stop proved to be anything, but efficient with over 30 minutes elapsing before Marko actually hit the sheets. With too much stimulus from the riding itself, talking with crew and the lengthy hydrating IV, Marko lay in bed restless and unable to get the rest he so badly needed to revive himself. I had been unaware of the IV process that would be taking place and the time it would take away from Marko's sleep and just stared at my watch as the time was ticking away. My hopes were that Marko would come in and have as little time as possible before his head hit the pillow. Fortunately, Anders and Andre were immediately taking care of the bike getting it ready so this element was running smoothly. As I lay in the RV, I did drift off for probably about 30 minutes before I awoke because Marko was wide eyed and unable to sleep. The other crew were waiting outside hoping that Marko had caught a few winks. A few winks is probably all he did get because after being off the bike for 2 hours, we figured he maybe got 30 minutes of sleep, if that. I found out a little later that the IV process would only be done twice during the whole race which was relieving. I felt like I hadn't done my job well and knew that some reminders and reorganization of how a sleep break needed to go was necessary for future success in our rider getting what he needed in rest.

With Jure back in the lead, having passed him during our so called sleep break, we were still not far from our original plan. Another day of high temperatures did little to aid progress. With the climbs in the Rocky Mountains ahead and a less than well slept rider, I began to have more concerns about Marko's unexpected slowing pace. We decided to take a short power nap at Durango in hopes that some sleep would help Marko's pace. Trevino and his crew passed us during this break, but again we were not worried, but just hopeful that sleep would be attained to renew Marko. However, as the day progressed, Marko's pace began to slow a little more. I felt in

the pit of my stomach that something was wrong. Was it the failure to get sleep at Aneth? Was it that Robich and Trevino had passed him? Questions were running through my mind, but I just wanted to encourage my rider, my friend onward. The day ended with a much labored climb to the top of Wolf Creek Pass. Marko's core temperature had seriously dropped during the climb concerning me deeply. Most riders tend to even get overheated with such a climb, but Marko was asking for a jacket. Again, my mind was wondering why? Is something wrong?

We were forced to take some additional time treating Marko's hypothermic condition, but knew that it was time well spent and overall the process of getting Marko down for sleep went much smoother. Milos and I had a heart to heart about how RAAM works and how it doesn't. Though I respected and agreed with the necessity for a doctor to accompany Marko for his health, I knew that we had to work together to help Marko fulfill his RAAM dream. Milos agreed to discuss all medical issues during the last 30 minutes of Marko's ride so that his mind could begin to rest before he even stepped foot into the RV. Teresa had written the first of many encouragement notes and taped it up for Marko to easily see when he came in for his rest. Upon arrival to the RV, Milos and I would take care of Marko preparing him for rest. Julie would then be ready to massage Marko to sleep. As I laid down to rest, I hoped that both Marko and I would get the rest we needed to tackle more of the course with vigor. Marko managed to get an hour and a half of sleep at this stop which relieved all of us. He painfully mounted the bike due to worsening saddle sores and was off to the next time station.

The last two climbs felt almost as painful to me as they did for my dear friend Marko. Marko's pace was much slower and again I just knew something was terribly wrong. This was not the Marko Baloh I knew that flies like the wind. He's a very strong rider and though we all slow on the hills, he seemed to struggle more than one would expect. Something was holding Marko back and I needed to find out what it was. As Marko did not seem too concerned, I wondered if there was a mental game playing in his mind or if maybe my concern was incorrect. Over the next day or so, I would try to break through and encourage him to push through and rise to his excellence of cycling.

The leads that Marko had established early on in the race were disappearing quickly as a strong and well rested Chris MacDonald passed us in LaVeta Colorado. With relief of climbing the last hill, we hoped for better progress on the flats. Teresa suggested that the team get some photos of Irma and the kids to tape on the roadway to spur him on and she spray painted Ana, Eric and Irma's names to bring smiles as he came up and over the hill. Marko's pace definitely picked up on the flats and things seemed to be much better. Since Marko was doing so well and we were on a fairly straight stretch of the route, I decided to hand the reins to what would later be called the "dream team." Marko rode on by himself while we made the switch to Andre, Anders and Milos. When we pulled up to the RV, the first thing Milos said to Teresa was "Marko's got to catch that guy!" He, of course, was referring to MacDonald. A transformation was taking place in Milos. Teresa pointed her finger at Milos and said, "You're getting into the race doctor," with a big smile, which would be seen often throughout the course of the race. Despite our own lack of sleep, the longer the crew was together, the better we seemed to mesh. We were quickly becoming a family all with a heart's desire to help Marko in any way we could. As the all Slovenian crew piled into the van, us American's jokingly wondered if they were ever going to let us back in. Marko rode relatively well throughout that leg and arrived not too long after MacDonald in Kim Colorado. There, Marko had a sandwich, some ice on his feet and a quick massage by Julie while sitting in the van. I got a chance to take a breather and the dream team continued through the night. It was interesting to leap frog the van and hear Slovenian in full form for hours and hours. Another memory is seeing Milos with the van door open as they passed the RV on the side of the road swinging his water jug and shouting triumphantly in Slovenian. They were having a blast and seemed to be inspiring and encouraging Marko greatly.

Steve, Charlie and the off duty crew decided to drive the RV ahead to our next time station and await Marko's arrival. Arriving at the time station, Steve pulled into the low clearance location of the pay phone. As I shouted, "stop, we'll never fit," Steve relaxingly rolled to a stop by the pay

phone and assured me that there was plenty of clearance as the RV was definitely not that high. Not being fully convinced, but acquiescing to Steve's confidence, the conversation switched back to the race. Things were tightening up between Chris and Marko so we decided to go back for a firsthand look. As Steve pulled forward, a loud crunch and grinding noise filled the air. As Teresa looked up, she could see the air conditioning unit coming down inside the RV and was concerned it would hit Julie. Steve quickly stopped asking "what was that?" It turns out, there wasn't enough room and we were forced to back up to release a seriously demolished AC unit from its original location. After a short, but meaningful eulogy, we laid to rest Coleman, the AC unit, in Colorado. Steve and Charlie took this loss quite well and we ended up laughing about it, along with a few other collisions that occurred in the ensuing days. We were glad to hear that Steve's insurance is quite faithful! Shortly after this, Marko rolled past a stopped Chris MacDonald to regain 3rd place.

Dawn found us in Kansas and the previously fully charged Slovenian crew were in dire need of sleep. We decided that it was important to at least have one of them in the van at all times so the faithful Anders stayed in while Teresa and Allen took their positions in the van, Teresa behind the wheel and Allen manning the GPS and nutrition. Andre and Milos went to pass out in the RV to revive for their next shift and we were off again.

It was during this mid-morning shift, that Marko mentioned that he was swelling in his arms and legs. Not overly concerned at this point, we altered his electrolyte intake in hopes of decreasing the fluid retention. One error we recognized after the race was that we hadn't noticed Marko's legs and arms before the race to realize that the swelling was more significant than we were giving credit. We all would watch this closely the rest of the race and care for it as necessary.

Headwinds and above average temperatures once again plagued Marko. Though the flats definitely improved things, the power that we knew existed was just not apparent. As the day progressed, I was not the only one who could see that Marko was not performing to his ability. Andre commented, "he must move faster," as he picked up a knife and threatened to insert it in Marko's behind to pick up the pace.

At the next quick stop, I sternly reminded Marko of his goals and that he had to push harder or he wouldn't achieve them. Marko assured me that he was giving his very best and that no more power was available. Still perplexed, I encouraged him to dig deeper and try to push harder. Since this was a crew change, I sat in the Motor home frustrated and confused. Frustrated with myself that I just wasn't doing my job of motivating Marko, I felt like a failure as a crew chief. I was failing my friend and not doing what I came here to do, which was help Marko do his best. I verbalized that he might need a kick in the hiney or he just wasn't going to make it. I loved Marko so I wasn't mad at him, just so desiring him to do his best and bewildered as to why he wasn't. I appeared angry and tenderhearted Teresa was hoping that I hadn't and wouldn't hurt Marko with wanting to push so hard. Both Teresa and I wanted the same thing and that was for Marko to fulfill his dreams, but neither knew for sure what the best approach was.

Chris MacDonald ended up passing Marko for what would be the last time before we arrived in Pratt. We knew Marko needed rest desperately and though he was dropping down in position, chose to give him a 3 hour sleep break in hopes of reviving his strength. During this break, we searched our hearts and minds trying to figure out what was happening. Marko was by far one of the strongest riders in the field, but no matter what just couldn't rise above the performance he was putting out. Fabio was closing in fast as were other riders and we realized if things didn't change, it would only be a matter of time before Marko would continue to be passed by the field. We hung on a prayer that this sleep break would light a fire and put Marko in the placement that he deserved and was capable of. The race was still young so we knew anything was possible and hoped that Marko would be able to continue strong and meet his goals.

As the sun was setting, we woke Marko up in hopes that our next push across Kansas would be a strong one and would require no more sleep. The evening's cooler temperatures, though still

warm, made for much more comfortable riding. However, comfort was not a word to be used at this stage of RAAM for Marko's backside which was by now ridden with extremely bad saddle sores and bruising that would be opening at some point soon. In great pain, Marko remounted and pressed on through the night, riding better on the three hours of sleep, but still not completely up to speed. As we pulled into El Dorado, Kansas mid morning, we treated Marko's saddle sores and changed his shoes. During this short break, Fabio passed us and went on to Yates Center, the next time station, arriving shortly before us.

Marko requested more sleep. Unable to say no to the obviously fatigued and increasingly ademic rider, Milos decided it was time to investigate the swelling. After 30 minutes of sleep, Marko got back on the bike heading towards Fort Scott. Marko was riding about 21-22 miles per hour with a slight tailwind as Charlie radioed us from the RV stating that Marko would need to stop at the lola hospital quickly as they would not accept the blood sample that Milos presented, but had to take their own. Upon his arrival and admittance to the lola ER, the answers to all our previous questions came quickly. Chest x-rays and cat scans revealed everything. Slowing pace, lack of power, breathing difficulties, etc...all were results of pneumonia. As the doctor reviewed the x-ray with us, even I could see that all the white in Marko's right lung was not good. Continuing on was not even an option as pneumonia is nothing to be taken lightly and could even take his life if untreated. Teresa and I knew this as we had just months before almost lost her cousin to the very same thing.

Marko had literally been riding on 1 lung or less for who knows how long. He still managed to hold on to the front of the field in such a condition. His immense preparation for this RAAM showed strength beyond with how well he was placing with such a condition. 36 hours later we would find ourselves teasing Marko that he was still ahead of some without being on the bike all that time. Amazingly enough, he not only kept riding through all of this, but exhibited a friendly, always grateful attitude in the midst of it all. Polite and kind are two words that mark who he is as a person. My heart broke for my fellow cyclist and newfound very close friend. As tears filled my eyes, sorrow and gratefulness filled my heart at the same time. Sadness at Marko having to forfeit this year's RAAM to something he couldn't control and gratefulness that my friend was going to be ok. Teresa and I cried many tears before we got to see Marko face to face. We loved him and somehow wanted to be of encouragement even at this time. As we walked into the room, he was as usual smiling, although the disappointment was evident. Marko knew that the most important thing was to put his health and family first. Irma was flying in that very day and he couldn't wait to see his Irma. There was really no choice, but still we knew it was hard to say goodbye to the RAAM this year. Being who Marko is, he of course, went to the finish line and banquet. On the way he assisted Fabio with some hind end creams, left some nutrition for David Haase at time station 40 in Indianapolis, rooted Jure in and shook his hand as well as Fabio and other riders before he left for home in Slovenia.

Marko may have left not being a RAAM 2005 champion, but he is a champion and one of a much more important kind. Marko Baloh is a man of great character. All of us on his crew saw a man who endured much and yet never complained or treated us with anything, but exceptional gratitude. Rarely do you find someone like him in today's society and we feel honored to have crewed for him and call him friend. His good sportsmanship and overall kindness is exemplary. Slovenia should be proud to have Marko Baloh representing their country. Slovenia has a champion of the heart which far outweighs any race. Whereas fame lasts 15 minutes, character lasts a lifetime.

As I consider my own future, one thing is clear. I desire to ride like Marko. I saw that someone can race in RAAM with a godly attitude throughout. I learned that this race doesn't have to bring out ugliness, but rather can show strength and character beyond physical. I saw a man struggle with adversity yet maintain an attitude of kindness. I'm sure Marko will race again, maybe RAAM, maybe not, but regardless of what he does, he is a winner. He can look in the mirror each day and know this truth without a doubt. I give thanks to Marko for showing me what a true champion really is.