

Type 1 Diabetic Races Across America

It spans 3,000 miles across twelve states, climbs 175,000 feet, and takes eleven days to complete – the Race across America (RAAM) is one of the world’s most grueling bike races, and Thomas Haas is the first type 1 diabetic to finish it. “I could not have participated in the RAAM without a strong team, the right preparation and regular blood tests.”

Text: Helen Baer





When Thomas Haas was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes in 2003, his whole world fell apart. A passionate athlete, he questioned whether he could continue pursuing high-performance sports as a diabetic. After some in-depth research into his condition, however, he learned that sports and exercise are actually a key component of diabetes therapy. “Since my diagnosis, my training volume has increased from ten to

20–25 hours a week, and I am in a better physical condition than ever before,” says Haas. He is a role model for many patients. “I have met many diabetics who felt that their condition kept them from doing certain things. But that definitely isn’t true.” With a certain level of preparation, diabetics can lead active and athletic lives, and even pursue sports at the highest level – that’s the message Thomas Haas wants to spread.

A strong team and the right preparation

Preparations for RAAM start a few years before the actual race. Haas and a personal trainer created special training plans and built a team to support him both prior to and during the race in the US. "A good team is vital for a race like this. It's not easy to find people who are willing to put someone else's interests first for a certain period of time," Haas tells us. His team of ten includes his wife and two sons, his physician, and a media team.

Haas made his way to the coast of California with 120 kilos of luggage. In contrast to the Tour de France, which is a stage race, the RAAM is just one stage – the world's longest time trial. It is open to professional racers as well as amateurs [1]. "If you want to raise awareness of a certain cause, you have to do something extreme, or no one will listen," says Haas on his motivation. He had participated in several bike races and runs before, but he was always just one of thousands of contenders. "Only 566 participants have finished the RAAM since 1982. If you accomplish this, you get your moment in the spotlight." And that's what Haas wanted to achieve as a top-level athlete with diabetes.

20 hours on the bike every day

Haas took eleven days to complete the 3000-mile trek. Since the racers are free to determine their own ride and rest phases, Haas spent about 19–20 hours on his bike each day. "I slept about 35 hours during the race, that's only about three hours a night. Sleep deprivation was by far the most challenging aspect of the race," he says. While Haas was riding, his team took care of his nutrition, helped him change his clothes, and provided ice cubes to put in his helmet for the heat. "The team was great – they drove alongside me and assisted whenever necessary. All I had to do was pedal – left foot, right foot," Haas remembers.

Medical assistance is crucial for any contestant in such an intense race. A diabetic racer, however, also depends on continuous blood and glucose monitoring. The epoc® blood analysis system from Siemens Healthineers' Point of Care diagnostic portfolio allowed the attending physician to regularly monitor the major parameters, electrolytes and lactate, and intervene immediately whenever blood values were off or hyperacidic. "Checking my blood with the epoc® blood analysis device was immensely helpful. We kept a close watch on all the levels and I didn't have any problems at all throughout the entire race," Haas reports.

Nutrition is another important factor for diabetics who pursue high-performance sports. "Due to my diabetes, I had to completely change the way I eat," says Haas. On a race day, he consumes an average of 8,000 to 10,000 calories. Most athletes eat carbohydrates. "Carbohydrates don't work well for me because at this intensity level, it is very hard to gauge how much insulin the body needs. This is why my diet is totally carbohydrate-free," Haas explains.

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Thomas Haas



Through the 46-degree desert heat

Haas vividly remembers the stunning landscapes he crossed during the race. “My favorite part was riding through the desert, despite the 46-degree heat. To me, that’s America’s most beautiful landscape,” he says. Weather conditions varied between extreme heat and rain with flooding sometimes for days on end. It was impossible to process all these impressions in such a short span of time. “When I look through the photos now, everything comes back to me. During the race, your mind is in competition mode and fully focused, there is no room for anything other than what’s straight ahead,” explains Haas.

Even though Haas just accomplished the greatest achievement of his athletic career, he is already setting new goals. “I definitely want to continue doing sport, but for now, I’d like to go back to triathlons. My next goal is to qualify for next year’s Ironman World Championship in Hawaii,” Haas says. The message he wants to send is clear: “Diabetes is nothing to be scared of.” In his view, with the right education and thorough preparation, diabetics can pursue competitive sport like anyone else. ●

Helen Baer is an editor at Siemens Healthineers.

Reference

[1] <http://www.raceacrossamerica.org/about.html> (15 Aug 2018)

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