



For diabetic cyclist, spirit is his weapon

By [Sonia Krishnan](#), Seattle Times Eastside bureau, July 19, 2007

Diabetes has taught Bob Heyer a few balancing tricks in the past 27 years. He's learned to ride his bike, prick his finger and check his blood sugar at the same time. His mind computes carbohydrate-to-insulin ratios at warp speed. Multitasking helped the Issaquah man and his team of diabetic cyclists as they pedaled 3,052 miles day and night in the grueling Race Across America (RAAM) ride last month. The eight bikers — who came from around the U.S. and Australia — rode from Oceanside, Calif., to Atlantic City, N.J., in five days, 15 hours and 43 minutes. They biked in shifts, six hours on, six hours off, with a crew and caravan following close behind. The team took first place in its division and is on track to raise \$100,000 for type 1 **diabetes** research. It was the only all-diabetic team to enter the race, and it won for overall fastest time.

For Heyer, 42, the win proved something he has known all along: the disease has nothing on human determination and spirit. "We're not racing to find a cure. We're racing to promote the idea that diabetics can do anything," Heyer said at his home on Lake Sammamish.

Heyer was 15 and living in Thiensville, Wis., when he was given a diagnosis of type 1 **diabetes**, an autoimmune disease in which the body attacks and destroys insulin-producing cells in the pancreas. Insulin is a hormone that helps convert glucose into energy; the disease must be controlled with daily insulin doses. More than 20 million Americans suffer from type 1 **diabetes**, according to the American **Diabetes** Association.

Back in 1980, Heyer was given the available treatment — injections of insulin derived from cows and pigs. He was warned to watch his diet and not overexert himself. Doctors told him that people with **diabetes** were at risk for leg amputation. But Heyer was an athlete. He wrestled, ran track and played football. He didn't want to slow down, he said. So after he left home for college, he ran trial-and-error experiments on his health. He drank alcohol but found it made him feel lousy. He ate sugary processed foods but crashed during long runs. Over time, the "data" he collected helped him become finely attuned to his body, he said. **He realized the best way to manage this disease was with information.**

Heyer now **checks his blood sugar** 15 to 20 times a day; permanent white marks fan across his fingertips from the thousands of pin pricks. He eats between 4,000 to 6,000 calories a day when he's training, which is pretty much always, he said. **Lean meats, healthy snacks and whole grains** are a big part of his diet, he added. All that food is balanced with 12 to 24 hours of intense **exercise** a week, which can include a four-hour round-trip bike ride to his job in Bothell, where he works as chief operating officer of a technology company. Swimming and 24-hour mountain-bike races are also part of his regimen.

Heyer is a self-proclaimed diabetic techie. Wireless insulin pumps are taped to his upper arms and connected to a handheld gadget. He punches in a series of numbers to deliver insulin to his body. "It looks like you're texting on a cellphone with this thing," he said. Such state-of-the-art devices were crucial as he and his teammates rode into the Canadian Rockies, over the blazing Kansas plains and up the steep hills of West Virginia. Getting insulin the traditional way would have swallowed up precious time, he said.

As Heyer and his teammates crossed the finish line in Atlantic City on June 18, he was hit with a wave of emotion. It was his second team victory (the team beat its 2006 time by 21 minutes) and his last Race

Across America. "I figured if I go out, I should leave on top," he said. But don't expect him to rest on his laurels. **He's busy with a nonprofit he founded four years ago called the Diabetes Sports and Wellness Foundation, which supports diabetics in athletic events.** One recent Saturday, he hopped on his bike for a ride to Mount Rainier, then did a 14-mile run the next day. Next on his list: the Ironman Canada Triathlon in August. It will be his third.