

An Interview with a Crew Chief

By Rick Boethling



I remember the first time I met Dave Stiles, he showed up at registration in 2012 wearing a reflective silver warm up jacket and a cowboy hat with three cameramen in tow. He was there to register his rider, Jason “The Hammer” Lane. He had the bravado and size of the Notre Dame football mascot, all 5’6” of him vibrated with energy. I knew one thing right then and there, this guy was going to make some noise. I prayed for him that it wasn’t by falling flat on his face.

This summer will be Dave’s fourth consecutive RAAM as crew chief. Now there are plenty of seasoned veterans out there with more races under their belt, but Dave seems to have a flare for overcoming adversity and building experience the hard way. This makes him an interesting person to talk to.

In 2012, his racer was hit, run-over and dragged in Kayenta, AZ. In 2013, Dave, with only four crew members, supported that same racer to a sub-10 day crossing for pennies on the dollar. And in 2014, ten days before the start, he was hired as a last minute crew chief of a 4-person mixed team made up of high school students and parents.

With a little less than two months until RAAM, I had an opportunity to check in with Dave about his preparations for 2015.

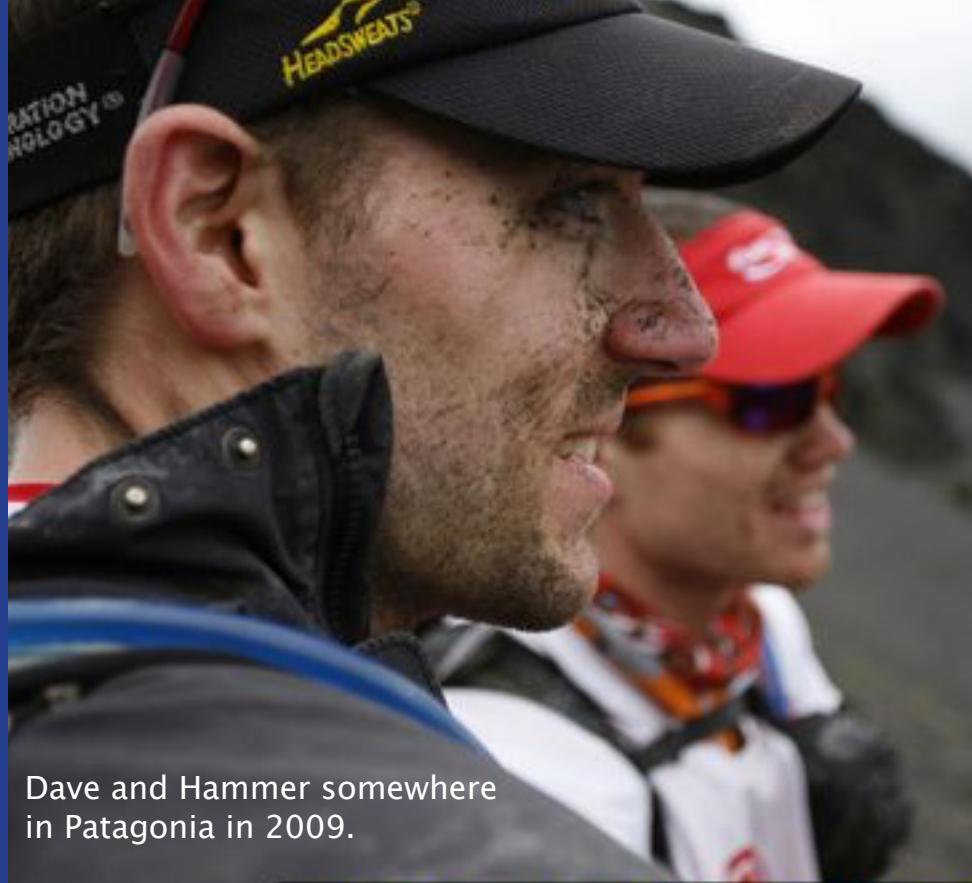


Rick: What's the plan for 2015?

Dave: Wow, you get right to the point huh? Well, this year is going to be a fun one. Jason (The Hammer) is back after the missing the race last year. So, naturally, like a good buddy, I'm managing his team. We are scrambling a little with last minute preparations, mostly sorting out sponsorship and crew but I don't think that's anything out of the ordinary. I know a lot of people who are still finalizing their plans right now.

R: You say Hammer is your "good buddy," how long have you known each other?

D: We met in a swamp in Florida in 2007.



Dave and Hammer somewhere in Patagonia in 2009.



Sleeping in 2013



Sleeping in 2012

R: A Swamp?! Care to elaborate on that?

D: Haha, sure. We were adventure racers and in the Spring of 2007, we were both racing in the Florida Coast to Coast. On one particularly swampy trekking section we were looking for the same check point. We ended up crossing paths and I casually asked "what's over that way?" and pointed in the direction he (and his teammate) were coming from. He said, "A redneck with a shotgun." We ended up finishing the race together and have been friends ever since.

R: What have you learned from your 3 consecutive RAAM's as a Crew Chief?

D: Don't answer your phone.

R: Haha, no really?

D: That's a pretty big question. I mean, I could talk for a few days about that one. How about I tell you something I learned each year?

R: I supposed that will work.

D: Ok, 2012 was my rookie year. We showed up in Oceanside with everything but the kitchen sink, and that's not entirely accurate because we had a 37 foot RV with a full kitchen and washer dryer in it. So we had everything AND the kitchen sink. We had seven crew members and a media crew of seven people shooting a documentary. I learned that 14 people and six support vehicles are just too many people and vehicles for a Solo racer.

In 2013, we flipped the tables on that. We brought a pickup truck, a minivan and four people. That was not enough. But, strangely we shaved 30 hours off Jason's 2012 time.

R: But, in 2012 Jason got hit by a car? Do you think that not being run-over helped you shave some time off?

D: Well, yes but 30 hours is a long time and I think we gained most of that by being smarter about logistics. I think we figured out a few key pieces that really helped cut down our time off the bike.

R: Like what?

D: Well, not having a huge RV that needed a big parking spot was monumental. When Jason got tired we could just pull off the road and toss him in the ditch for a nap. In 2012, we had to try and strategically place the RV and half the time he would get sleepy before we got there or by the time we did get there he was awake again. A small RV or just a conversion van is ideal for Solo riders.

R: What about 2014?

D: That was my first experience with a team. Boy, teams are a whole other ball of wax. Everything happens so much faster. The funny thing is, our 4 person team finished in about the same time that Christoph (Strasser) did. I can only imagine what his crew goes through. The biggest thing I learned was delegation. With a Solo rider, I can kind of micromanage things as a crew chief, even though by day 7, I'm a total basket-case. With a team I had to learn to delegate because you can't keep track of four people the same way as



Dave with Megan Camp, Matias Francis, and Logan & Lucas Weyand of Team BTF

one. Luckily the crew was really eager to learn. I just took a step back and pointed them in the right direction. I actually got more sleep in the 7 days on course with Team BTF than the previous two RAAM's combined. That's probably an exaggeration but I'm prone to that.

R: Is RAAM harder on racers or support crew?

D: I would say crew but I've never raced RAAM so I'm biased. I have done a few 10 day adventure races but Jason says an AR is like a holiday compared to RAAM. I think that it's hard on both crew and riders. Now, I will say riders often know what they are in for, at least generally speaking. They spend months or years training for RAAM but, often times, crew are asked a few months or weeks ahead of time and they aren't really prepared for what's going to go down out there. I always put my crewmates on an exercise program before the race and it's amazing how much it helps. That, and I constantly remind them RAAM is going to be like oral surgery, the worst and best thing they are ever going to experience.

R: RAAM is like oral surgery?!

D: Yeah, you know, you get laughing gas and feel all goofy and it's fun.

They wake you up delirious in a moving car with a strange taste in your mouth. I mean, you don't get laughing gas on RAAM but a few days without sleep induces the same effect.

R: There's a movie coming out about you and Hammer on your rookie year, how do you feel about that?

D: That's a bag of mixed emotions. It's going to be super exciting to see it and show it to everyone. The director is doing a screening on June 14th in Oceanside for the public, and I'm sure a large RAAM audience. Having all my peers see how many mistakes we made, and how cocky we were our first year will be a humbling experience. At the same time, I'm just excited to finally have it finished. You know, the guys at Hornsby Films did a really great job on it and I think it's going to be a film that will resonate with everyone, not just RAAM enthusiasts.

R: Can you share anything specific about the film or why you think it will resonate with the general public?

D: The details are common knowledge for RAAM people, but I think the way the director tells the story is unique to other RAAM movies. You know, the typical RAAM film explains how a

team did in RAAM and how events transpired for those particular racers. Then, the quintessential RAAM movie, *Bicycle Dreams*, answers the question What is RAAM, but our film is different. *The Hammer* lets the viewer feel RAAM, it puts you in the driver's seat next to us and they get to go through the experience with us. It's more of a story about friendship, overcoming challenges and unification than a bicycle race.



R: Well, all of us here at the RAAM offices are excited to see it! I guess I'll close with a question for other crews out there. What is the one thing a Crew Chief must bring to RAAM?

D: That's a good one. I would say duct tape but everyone knows that. The most important thing is a plan and an open mind. I know that's two things but you have to pair them together. You see, a plan is a really good thing. It's a necessity. But everyone's plan blows up at some point. So you have to keep an open mind, but too much of an open mind will be a recipe for chaos. A good leader listens at the right time and talks at the right time, something I'm still trying to balance out. You have to have this ideal plan with a huge margin for error. A crew chief must be able to adapt and change things constantly, especially when they get tired and sleep deprived. Once you change things and improvise you should always be striving to get back to your plan but know that that may never happen. You have to be able to adapt to changing circumstances every second of every minute while on course. I don't know if that made any sense but neither does riding a bike across America in 10 days.

R: Thanks again. One final question. Can people reach out to you if they have questions about RAAM?

D: Absolutely, I'm such a RAAM nerd. I love to talk about this stuff. They can email me (davidnstiles@gmail.com) or contact us through www.teamhammerfest.com or check out the movie trailer at www.thehammerfilm.net