

# From Longwood to Alaska and back -- via bicycle

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When we set out to do the truly incredible, whether it is climbing a mountain or running a marathon or biking thousands of miles to Alaska, we never think about what happens next.

The finish line keeps us going, faster, stronger to the end. We raise our arms when we make it. Sometimes our eyes well with pride. Sometimes we shout with glee. Sometimes we bury our faces in our hands or pump our fists in the air.

Then what? Steven Perezluha and Danny Chew know all about that question. After the two reached their goal of biking to Alaska on Aug. 6, they faced the long ride back to Florida.

When Perezluha, 18, rode up to Pittsburgh to meet his Uncle Danny to start their trip in June, it was easy to envision the road ahead.

He pictured majestic mountains, black bears and glaciers. He imagined how amazing it would feel to rely on their trusty maps, sturdy bikes and strong legs to carry them through. When they made it to Alaska, it was one of the happiest days of his life.

Then what?

The inevitable letdown. Their trip home was a grueling journey full of the unexpected, from terrible crashes to food poisoning to horrendous weather. The obstacles were bad enough on their own. But they were physically exhausted.

### **Mentally tough**

Mentally, it was sometimes hard to continue.

Perhaps that is why their story is more than a mind-bending athletic tour de force. Their journey enhanced their Earth-loving spirit, dogged determination and mental toughness. That, perhaps, is the greatest triumph of all.

"The trip back home seemed like it took longer than the trip up," Perezluha said. "Some parts of it were harder. It may have been harder a little more mentally because all these things kept trying to stop us, and I had to keep telling myself to keep going."

The problems began in Whitehorse, Yukon, a few days after leaving Alaska. Chew, 47, blew a tire at 25 mph and crashed hard, cracking his helmet and knocking himself out. A woman stopped to help and guided them to the nearest bike shop, where Chew made the necessary repairs.

Once they hit the road again, Perezluha rode to "Move Along" by the All-American Rejects and "Into the Great Wide Open" by **Tom Petty** — songs with themes that would keep him motivated.

A few weeks later, disaster hit again. As the two descended a hill with an 8 percent grade near Little Fort, British

Columbia, Perezluha decided to go for a personal time-trial record. So he sped off. At 36 mph, he took his hand off the handlebars to check his time. The bike began shaking and he crashed. A man in an RV offered the two a ride, and for the first time on the trip, they hopped in a car for a 40-mile ride to the nearest town, Kamloops, British Columbia.

The man paid for the two to stay in a motel. Perezluha refused to see a doctor, but the next day his head was still pounding and he went to an emergency clinic and was diagnosed with a mild concussion. He had to rest.

The cyclists were stuck there for two nights before they hit the road again.

"That was only the start of the stuff that happened to us," he said.

#### **4 flat tires**

They finally crossed into the United States on Sept. 11 at Nighthawk, Wash. As they made their way into Washington, the two could see Mount Rainier in the distance. They began getting into higher elevations, too. But they encountered goathead thorns, which puncture tires as easily as pins pop balloons. Chew and Perezluha had four flats between them one day and needed two hours to make repairs.

Smooth biking returned, until Idaho. They set up to camp one night at a truck weigh station, frying up imitation Spam and drinking the water there. The next day, Perezluha began experiencing **diarrhea** and horrible vomiting. The two had to stop. That night, Perezluha was up every half hour. They rode the next day to Twin Falls, about 15 miles away, where Perezluha got anti-diarrhea pills from a walk-

in clinic.

Again, the journey ground to a halt until he could get back on his feet. Perezluha's mom, Carol, was worried. His grandmother asked, "Aren't those two ready to come home on a Greyhound bus?" Carol knew it would be an insult to ask them to give up their bikes for a bus or airplane, so she didn't bother.

After a few days, Perezluha and Chew rode off and into Utah, where they saw oranges, reds and auburns on the changing leaves. But the weather was about to turn ugly.

Through eastern Utah and into Colorado, the poor weather continued. They camped out when the temperature dropped into the 20s and 30s. Their gloves weren't heavy enough, so their hands would freeze. About 20 miles from Steamboat Springs, Colo., Perezluha began hearing strange noises from his bike. When he stopped to check, there was a huge crack in the front tube. He needed a new bike.

The altitude kept climbing, and the weather kept deteriorating. They biked on icy roads during the day and slept outside churches at night.

Then came the highest point of the trip: 11,307 feet at Berthoud Pass. Perezluha was wearing dishwashing gloves, and his hands froze on the way up. On the way down, they got caught in a blizzard. Snow blinded them as they rode down switchbacks for an hour.

The next day they rode out of the mountains and into Denver, but the bad weather was far from over. They headed into Kansas on I-70 in freezing rain and snow. With ice on the road and temperatures plunging into the 20s, the

two managed to find lodging in a church in Goodland, Kan. They were stranded there the next day as they waited out the bad weather.

They finally made it to Pratt, Kan., where they stayed with a friend of Chew's, Steve Strecker. "When they got to me that night, they looked pretty beat up," Strecker said. "They were tired, they were exhausted. They looked like they had been through hell."

The next day they stopped in Pittsburg, Kan., and stayed with another friend, Roger Lomsheck. They ended up biking 277 miles in two days to make up for the time lost in Kansas and Colorado. It took them a frustrating 18 days to cross both states. That would have been enough to send some people looking for the nearest airport and a quick ride home.

Not Perezluha and Chew.

"To do what they did day after day, biking 100 miles, that's pretty impressive," Lomsheck said. "Cardiovascular-wise, stamina-wise, it's beyond the realm of what a noncrazy can even imagine. You're talking about in their situation, 10 hours a day of steady aerobic activity."

Once they cleared Kansas and got better weather, the two wanted to go as fast as they could to get back to Florida. From the Arkansas- Mississippi border to Florida, they biked 1,034 miles in eight days. Once they crossed into Florida at Florala, Perezluha stopped and took a picture with the Welcome to Florida sign.

Finally, he was almost home.

They went through the Apalachicola National Forest, saw

the Gulf of Mexico at Dekle Beach, then came inland through **Clermont** and Sugarloaf Mountain, on the West Orange Trail to **Apopka** and then finally into Longwood.

The two rolled into Perezluha's neighborhood at 7 p.m. Chew and Perezluha raised their arms when they made it, 133 days and 12,510 miles after leaving Pittsburgh. If you count his ride from Longwood to Orlando, it took Perezluha 140 days and 13,769 miles to get to Alaska and back.

"It was a relief to be done," Chew said.

"It was one of the best feelings in my life. Ever," Perezluha said.

There is a natural question left to ask Perezluha.

Now what?

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