

Filmmaker completes marathon project

BY WILL WEISS

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OCEAN PARK

Local filmmaker Stephen Auerbach has completed one of the most tremendous projects of his career.

His documentary "Bicycle Dreams," which chronicles the experiences of off-road riders in the grueling, 3,000-mile Race Across America (RAAM), is set to world premiere at the Newport Beach Film Festival on Saturday.

The race has been around for nearly three decades, but limited sponsorship revenue, minimal coverage from major media, American apathy for cycling sports, and the appropriate intimidation of racing cross-country on a bike keeps the event relatively small.

Since the race's inception in 1982, fewer than 200 racers have ever finished the competition; an average of 48 percent of those who attempt RAAM ever finish.

But the film has been a long time coming, and Auerbach has been tried and tortured with almost every step along the way.

"Covering the race was so daunting," he said. "The amount of money being offered to cover it was probably between five and 10 percent of what would be required to do a regular film or television show."

Faced with the seemingly impossible task of filming a trans-continental bicycle race on a shoestring, Auerbach assembled a team of dedicated videographers who were willing to work for the bare minimum.

"I ended up with this hodge-podge team of gunslingers who happened to own a camera," Auerbach said. "But it was the perfect marriage for production; everyone was there for 100 percent the right reasons."

Each cameraman was embedded with the support crew of a rider and spent the race following a bicyclist across the country at an average of 15 miles per hour. Auerbach said that one of the toughest aspects of the project was dealing with the duration and seclu-



ON LOCATION: Filmmaker Stephen Auerbach on location during the making of Bicycle Dreams.

sion of the filming.

"It was like sending a kid off to college," he said. "By virtue of the fact that the race takes a route that is way off the beaten path, I had no cell phone coverage for 80 percent of the trip; I'd talk to my guys once or twice over 10 days."

But it wasn't until after the filming itself was finished that Auerbach was confronted with the greatest challenge of all.

"I came back with 450 hours of footage; it took a couple of years to get the film in the can and done," he said.

During those couple of years, things got worse.

"The money ran out after about a year — they wouldn't go any deeper," Auerbach explained. "But I was a year in. I couldn't stop there."

To make ends meet, Auerbach took on other projects, sacrificing time with his wife and two young daughters to work on "Bicycle Dreams" on his nights and weekends. After some time, the parallel between the documentarian's monumental task and that on which he reported became sorely clear.

"This became my RAAM," he said. "While I was working I kept thinking 'why am I doing this? Nobody is ever going to see this.' But I realized that I was (figuratively) one of the riders, and it came down to 'am I going to get off the bike, or am I going to finish it?'"

So far, Auerbach said, response to the film has been very positive. Viewers of prescreenings at the Newport Beach Film Festival have written to the director with abundant praise.

news@smdp.com