

I'M A COMPETITOR

BY SARAH WASSNER FLYNN

LISA PRIESTLY

This Manhattanite is making history, one pedal stroke at a time

It wasn't too long ago when Lisa Priestly, 49, considered her racing days far behind her. Once a talented swimmer, she suffered a serious back injury and saw her age impeding her from getting any faster. But when her physical therapist suggested she join her in the **Race Across America (RAAM)**—a grueling 3,000-mile cycling event from Oceanside, Calif. to Annapolis, Md.—Priestly's competitive spirit snapped back to life. Now this yoga instructor and wellness coach from Manhattan will pedal towards history as the first African-American woman to ever race a bike across the country, all while raising thousands for children's cancer.



WHAT WAS YOUR INITIAL REACTION TO BEING ASKED TO JOIN THE RACE ACROSS AMERICA? At first I thought, "Wow, what a scary thing to do!" But in the back of my mind, I was thinking, "This is going to be my big event to do before I turn 50." I've always wanted to take on a big challenge. Still, I've never cycled competitively. I ride about 500 miles a season, but I don't race.

SO WHAT CHANGED YOUR MIND? I've always been very competitive. I was in sales and marketing earlier in my career and was driven by success. Then I hit a low point in my career and suffered my back injury, and I figured those dreams of racing and pushing myself to the limit had been put to rest. But for my physical therapist, Toni McGinley, to ask me to join her RAAM team, it meant she saw something in me that I thought was gone. That made me realize that it was possible for my competitive spirit to come back. And, of course, I am totally supportive of the charity.

WILL YOU BE COMPLETING ALL 3,000 MILES ON YOUR OWN? No. We are an eight-person team, although we each ride solo on the road. We'll take shifts riding, driving the van and sleeping. I think we'll average out to about four hours of riding a day.

HOW'D YOU FIND OUT THAT YOU WERE SET TO BE THE FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN TO COMPLETE THIS RACE? I don't meet a lot of black women cyclists, or see many out on the road. So I called the race organizers and asked if there

were any other black women who have done this before, and they said I'd be the first. I was honored, and I knew I had to represent. It's exciting to say you're the first to do anything.

DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF AN INSPIRATION TO OTHER WOMEN? I feel like I'm creating new possibilities for women, especially other black women. And not just because of this race, but because of my age. I hope I inspire women to be athletic—to get out there in your late 40s and take on something that is difficult, and to adopt that never-give-up attitude. We tend to set these benchmarks in our lives, but my life isn't slowing down.

OBVIOUSLY, THIS EXPERIENCE IS MAKING YOU FITTER. HAS IT CHANGED YOU IN OTHER WAYS? It's been a real growth opportunity. I'm more confident and strong. And in many ways, it has strengthened a bond in my marriage. My husband of almost 14 years, Robert, and I train together and he's racing with me too. We have so much fun out there on our bikes. The funny thing is, we actually met biking. So I guess the couple that bikes together stays together!

*Follow Lisa and her team as they Race Across America starting on June 12 by visiting raceacrossamerica.org. Lisa will also be blogging about her experience at wholelifestyles.us. **CM***

Are you a competitor, or do you know a competitor who would like to share their story? Send your ideas to imacompetitor@competitorgroup.com.

Photo courtesy of Lisa Priestly.