

# THEY SAID WHAT???

By Scott Fraser

## RAGBRAI

Imagine planning for an event that lasts seven days, covers more than 450 miles, has close to 20,000 participants and support staff, goes through more than 50 communities, and is held entirely outside. Sound like something out of one of your worst nightmares? Actually, this is a real event and something that TJ Juskiewicz has planned and coordinated for each of the last 13 years.



Scott Fraser and college roommate, Ed Merker dip their tires in the Mississippi at the end of RAGBRAI.

RAGBRAI is the Register's Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa. Sponsored by the Des Moines Register, the event began in 1973 when two newspaper columnists for the Register were bored and were looking for something to write about. They decided to get on their bicycles and ride across the state, inviting people to join them along the way. That first year, approximately 120 people joined them on the ride that took them from Sioux City to Davenport over the course of seven days.

Since then, the event has grown exponentially to the point that official registration has to be cut off at 10,000 riders. Each year the route changes, always traveling from west to east. Tradition calls for riders to dip their rear tires in the Missouri River at the beginning, ride across the state and dip their front tires in the Mississippi for the official completion of their journey.

"What could possibly go wrong?" I hear many of you asking with tongue firmly planted in cheek. Of course, absolutely everything, which is just what Race Director TJ Juskiewicz has to plan for.

"You prepare for the worst and hope for the best," said Juskiewicz in an interview in mid-July about a week before the ride. "Weather is our biggest concern. We have to keep our guests safe. If the weather turns severe, we have to have plans in place to shelter some 20,000 riders and their support crews. This isn't always easy, especially when some of the towns we stay in might only have 3,000 residents."

RAGBRAI and Juskiewicz have been doing a good job. Most years there are only minimal problems. What is the key to their success? "Planning is crucial," said Juskiewicz. The planning begins in late January just

after the year's route is announced. This planning includes a close partnership with the Iowa State Patrol with whom they have worked for more than 40 years.

What about crisis communications? "It's all part of the planning process," says Juskiewicz who makes himself readily available for media interviews. He and his staff meet regularly with the safety committees in each of the overnight towns. Members of these committees may include the mayor, city manager, public safety officials and police and fire personnel. The key is to continually share information.

One other unique aspect of the plan is that RAGBRAI has officials from the overnight towns in last year's ride, meet with those who are planning for the current year. According to Juskiewicz they offer tips on contingency planning, why you need to be prepared and how to handle the media.

These meetings are especially helpful to someone like Jim Clark who co-chaired the Public Safety Committee for Sioux City, the beginning town for this year's ride. "A lot of personnel has changed since 2010," (the last year Sioux City hosted the ride) according to Clark. The meetings coordinated by the Register "help keep people up to speed," he added.

Clark said they have a crisis communications plan for the town and for RAGBRAI. He said they continually review this plan and make updates when necessary. "It helps to keep people informed," he said.

Clark agreed that going in to this year's event, as in year's past, weather is the biggest concern. "You can't do much about it until it gets here," he observed, "so you have to have backup plans in place and shelters ready to go."

With social media just about everywhere, some might think this would create headaches for RAGBRAI. For instance, a rider could be tweeting about an accident or unsafe conditions before it is even known by someone from the event. Juskiewicz sees this as something positive. "We actually use social media to our advantage. It is a helpful way to get information out to riders and other interested parties. We can disseminate information quickly about weather and other safety issues, and we can use it to keep rumors in check."

What else keeps people like Juskiewicz awake at night leading up to the ride? "We stay on top of current events," he said, with a veiled reference to domestic terrorism. "Ever since 9/11 and Boston we examine different contingency plans and have a few extra items on our checklist. We make sure that our participants are safe and provided for."

So how did this year's ride go? "Very well," was the assessment of Juskiewicz a few days after the event. "We were pretty fortunate. We had real good weather and the temperatures were moderate."

What were his observations from a crisis communications perspective? The race director had the same response, "It went very well. We had some bad storms in Sioux City on Friday, the day before most riders arrived. We opened some shelters and the plans went well."

After a few weeks of taking a collective deep breath, RAGBRAI officials will begin planning for next year's ride. They will start by reviewing this year's event. "We are always trying to pick up on the little things—things we could do better next year," said Juskiewicz. "Technology is

always improving. Good communication is critical. We will be meeting with each of our overnight towns in the next few weeks to discuss the good, the bad and the ugly. We are always looking for ways to become better and for tips to pass along to the communities who will host the ride next year."

Editor's Note: Scott Fraser completed his fourth RAGBRAI this year and as always, the people of Iowa made him feel very welcome.

**Scott Fraser** is a veteran communications professional with more than 30 years' experience. As principal of Fraser Communications Group, he provides public relations, media relations and crisis communications advice for his clients who range from small non-profits, to international corporations. He has been hired to protect the reputations of companies in crisis, and gain positive public exposure for clients ranging from an emerging high tech company to established organizations in industry and healthcare. Sought after as a public speaker, Fraser also is an adjunct professor at Salve Regina University in Newport, RI, teaching courses in Crisis Communications and Public Relations. You can reach Scott at: [sfraser@frasercomm.com](mailto:sfraser@frasercomm.com), (401) 647-3444 and follow him [@frasercomm](https://twitter.com/frasercomm) on Twitter.