

- [Home](#)
- [About Us](#)
- [Practical Cycling](#)
- [Cyclotouring](#)
- [Outside Afoot](#)
- [The Inquiring Eye](#)
- [Become a Turtle Taxi](#)
- [3, 2, 1... Contact!](#)
- [Links](#)

May 28 2013

## **He Said He'd Do It, and He Did!**

### **Paralympian João Corrêa Triumphs in the Ultramarathon Challenge**

**by Marcos Netto**

*Back in early December of last year, our Southern Hemisphere Correspondent, Marcos Netto, wrote about a remarkable man named João Corrêa. João lost the use of his legs in a construction accident, but he refused to allow this tragic misfortune to defeat him. Instead, he set himself a series of physical challenges, culminating in the aptly named Ultramarathon Challenge. And here is Marcos' story of João's triumph:*

“I do not know that it is impossible. So I will do it!”

These words of João's concluded my earlier article about [Paralympian João Corrêa and the Ultramarathon Challenge](#). Some readers, I suppose, might have seen this as dangerous hubris on João's part, but I recognized it for what it was: an unmistakable affirmation of his determination and resolve. João was refusing to concede the possibility of defeat. He therefore had no choice. He had to succeed.

It was never going to be easy, of course, and when an abscessed tooth that required emergency treatment forced João off the road for three weeks, interrupting his training and requiring that the Challenge be rescheduled, it began to look all but impossible. But João wasn't about to quit. As soon as he had his doctors' OK, he got back on his racing handcycle to pick up where he'd left off. And after 10,000 kilometers and 600 hours, both he and his support team were ready to go.

Early — very early — in the pre-dawn hours on the morning of May 11, 2013, João and his team prepared for their Grand Départ. The 200 kilometer (124 mile) route had been mapped and measured. Now all that remained was to ride it out. João had 12 hours. No more. And every mile would have to be cranked out without any assistance from João's legs.

If he succeeded — and remember that João never conceded that defeat was possible — he'd be the first paralympic handcyclist to accomplish the feat.



The Challenge course began at Canoas, Rio Grande do Sul. The team left the starting line at four in the morning. The night air was chill: eight degrees Celsius (46 degrees Fahrenheit), and a biting wind made it feel even colder.





The cold soon made itself felt. Fearing that any pause, however short, might sap his muscles of much-needed strength, João powered right through the five-minute break scheduled for the end of the first hour. And he continued to crank on without respite until seven, when the first rays of the rising sun began to dispel the chill. Only then could he allow himself five minutes' rest. He'd traveled 60 kilometers (37 miles).



João and his “guardian angels” — the cyclists of Team Itati-Stem-Rotary — were not alone on the road. The highway patrol provided a welcome security presence, and the people of Porto Alegre took João to their hearts. Others helped, too, both on the road and off, including the team physician, nutritionist, and mechanic. All worked as one to ensure that João was free to concentrate on the job at hand: cranking out 200 challenging kilometers. When, after 75 kilometers (47 miles), one of João’s brake cables parted, help was immediately forthcoming, and he was on his way again within 10 minutes. (The cyclist who supplied the replacement cable had been carrying it in his tool bag for six years. He’d never needed it, but he was glad he’d kept it handy!)

The hours passed, and the kilometers rolled by under João's wheels. The predawn chill was now only a memory. By one o'clock in the afternoon, João had cranked out 150 kilometers (93 miles), and the temperature had soared to 32 degrees Celsius (90 degrees Fahrenheit). Suddenly, João's arms were wracked by agonizing cramps, but a brief rest and a quick massage from the team physician eased the pain. João was soon back on the handcycle.

The crisis of the moment had passed, but as team coordinator it fell to me to warn João that he could afford no more unscheduled stops. "Now is the time to give it all you've got," I urged. But even as I said these words, I knew them to be unnecessary. From first to last, João never gave anything less than his best.



Ah, yes. The final kilometers. Would they witness a triumphant homecoming or a tragic disappointment? Well, you already know the answer. The headline to this piece gives the secret away. At exactly 3:35 in the afternoon, João Corrêa's wheels crossed the 200 kilometer mark. He had met the Ultramarathon Challenge with 25 minutes to spare. So João entered downtown Porto Alegre in triumph, a triumph shared by his escort of guardian angels and a retinue of many other cyclists, all of whom joined together to celebrate the achievement of a man for whom no challenge was too great.

But there was a surprise in store for João. Although he had ridden 200 kilometers, he still had several kilometers to go before he reached the finish line at Porto Alegre's historic Usina do Gasômetro. After we'd mapped the course for the Ultramarathon Challenge, we discovered that it totaled 204 kilometers in all. We didn't let João in on the secret, however. He learned it only after crossing the 200 kilometer line. Now, with all the pressure off and the finish line just down the road, he and the team got to enjoy a leisurely "victory lap." After all, how often do cyclists get a protective police escort? That alone was something worth savoring!





Finally, at 3:55 p.m., João and the team reached the finish line at Usina do Gasômetro, still ahead of the 4:00 cutoff time, despite having ridden an extra four kilometers. Now the celebration began in earnest, with family, friends, fellow cyclists, and sponsors all cheering João's achievement, while representatives of the media recorded the moment.

And what was João's reaction? He was overjoyed, of course. But his elation was tempered by a certain matter-of-fact acceptance. After all, long before he'd made believers of the rest of us, *he* knew that he would succeed. What he did not know to be impossible, he assured us at the outset, he *would* accomplish. And João is a man of his word.





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Of course, he didn't ride alone. The successful conclusion of João Corrêa's Ultramarathon Challenge would not have been possible without the generous support of [Rotary International District 4670](#), [Rotary Clube de Canoas Industrial](#), [Itati Água Mineral Natural](#), and [Stem Pharmaceutical](#). João and I extend our heartfelt thanks to all!



João

*Corrêa and Team Itati-Stem-Rotary*

*From left to right behind João Corrêa are Danilo Machado, João Leite, Daniel Chagas, Alessandra Zucatti, Marcos Netto, Eduardo Gabriel, Juarez Pereira, Walescko Chimendes, and Roberto Senger (not shown: Leandro Leite)*

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## **More About João Correa, Team Itati-Stem-Rotary, and the Ultramarathon Challenge**

NB The starred (\*) clips are in Portuguese, but don't let that worry you. The pictures tell the story.

- [Last moments and the finish line](#) — a video by Danilo Machado
- [TVE News coverage](#)\*
- [Ulbra TV coverage](#)\*
- [TV Pampa newscast](#)\*

And if you want to know more about João and learn how the Ultramarathon Challenge came about, be sure to read Marcos' earlier article for *TNO*: "[Paralympian João Corrêa and the Ultramarathon Challenge](#)."

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Go

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## • Contents

- [Home](#)
- [About Us](#)
- [Practical Cycling](#)
- [Cyclotouring](#)
- [Outside Afoot](#)
- [The Inquiring Eye](#)
- [Become a Turtle Taxi](#)
- [3, 2, 1... Contact!](#)
- [Links](#)

•

## • Departments

- [Absent Friends](#) (12)
- [Beyond the Beauty Strip](#) (27)
- [Bike Monday Gallery](#) (192)

- [Bikes & Infrastructure](#) (26)
- [Capture the Moment! Draw, Photograph, Paint, Write](#) (107)
- [Evaluations: Bicycling & Touring Gear](#) (82)
- [Evaluations: Hiking & Camping Gear](#) (32)
- [In the Sidebar](#) (2)
- [It's Only Natural! Birds, Geology, Wildlife & More](#) (165)
- [Let's Bike! Cycling, Outfitting, & How-to](#) (544)
- [Let's Eat! It's Alimentary, My Dear](#) (121)
- [Let's Hike! Stroll, Ski, Scramble, Snowshoe](#) (176)
- [Let's Paddle! Canoeing, Kayaking, & Sit-on-Topping](#) (237)
- [Others' Outside: Columnists' and Guests' Contributions](#) (126)
- [Photo Finish Gallery](#) (236)
- [Promotion & Site Announcements](#) (9)
- [Scat Gallery](#) (3)
- [Turtle Portrait Gallery](#) (18)
- [Works of the Imagination](#) (43)

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