

# GOING THE DISTANCE

**F**or Roberto Santini Sierra, riding dirt bikes is a family affair that began when he was about 9 years old. “I got involved because my dad used to do it, so I kind of got raised into that,” he said. “It’s a family thing.”

Along with his brother and father, Santini Sierra participates in endurance dirt bike riding events all over the 72 municipalities of Puerto Rico through all of the island’s weather conditions and tough terrain. An endurance dirt bike race is a lengthy—around 75- to 100-mile course—off-road motorbike race held over several hours.

A myriad of factors draw the carrier into the sport, including being some-

what of an adrenaline junkie. “I do like the speed,” he says. When riding, you generally travel between 10 and 30 mph, but it can top out at 80 mph.

But one of the biggest perks for him is the atmosphere. “I really like just being out in the woods,” he said. “All these places I ride, there’s no cell phone signal, nobody bothers you. It’s entertaining and peaceful at the same time. I get drawn to it.”

At least once a month, the 10-year carrier gets out on the trails to do a daylong ride to train for endurance events. Planning around his busy postal schedule usually means that he does an 80- to 100-mile ride over the course of six to seven hours on a Sunday, although that sometimes means some sore muscles the next day. “Sometimes it’s brutal,” he says, and added with a laugh, “The next day you’re walking, and you’re like, ‘Oh my God, everything hurts.’”

The Ponce Branch 826 member, who is a steward for the Cayey post office, competes in events several times a year; they are usually on Sundays and move around from town to town. Santini Sierra’s family will sign up, too, which means that he frequently competes against his brother (who is also a city carrier) in addition to his friends. “Sometimes we go alone,” he says, though “most of the time we try to ride together.” His dad signs up, too, but is usually in a different category based on age.

The day of an event, the competitors will show up, check in and get their assigned number. “There will be certain checkpoints throughout the whole route, and they’ll see that number on

your helmet and they’ll write it down and the time you were there,” he said. “They’ll make sure you stay on the route and that you don’t skip or take shortcuts.” The person who wins usually completes the course in under five hours.

There also will be tiny breaks at some checkpoints. Before the race begins, participants put their own gasoline container in an official event truck, and a race official drives it to the checkpoint. Once riders arrive, “you fill up your gas, they’ll usually have a water cooler with a bunch of drinks, a few fruits, and then you just put everything in your system and keep going.”

As a strategy, some people choose not to stop for gasoline. But Santini Sierra usually does once. “If I fill it up one time halfway through the race, I’ll be good to go to the finish,” he said.

For a single-day event, most people finish between the fifth and sixth hour, but riders can encounter difficulties from time to time. “I’ve gotten out of the woods at like 9 p.m.,” Santini Sierra says, due to his own breakdown or if someone with him has a breakdown or injury.

Riders wear protective gear, including a helmet, riding pants, a jersey (usually a dri-fit long-sleeved shirt), a chest protector on top made of solid plastic and foam, knee guards, riding boots, goggles and gloves. It can get extremely hot under all of those layers.

And though those items provide protection, they don’t guarantee no injuries. One of Santini Sierra’s best friends once broke his leg during an event. “There was a tree branch that somebody had cut up,” he explained,



Roberto Santini Sierra



**Santini Sierra (l) and others race through the Puerto Rican terrain.**

that “protruded out of the woods onto the main road a little bit. He was passing by fast and it caught his shin—even with boots and knee guards he had on, it broke his shin bone in half. He had to be rushed to the hospital.”

The carrier is lucky to not have suffered any major injuries. “I’ve had regular bruises and cuts, nothing like broken body parts or anything, thank God,” he said, although he has gotten stung by bees. “There are lots of fruit trees here and bees hang all over them, so every now and then you hit a branch with your helmet and they’ll come after you.”

Bees aren’t the only wildlife riders can run into in the woods. “In Puerto Rico, there are wild horses and bulls in the mountains, so every now and then you might just hit a trail and there’s a bull right in front of you,” the carrier said.

And if you happen to be behind someone with a red bike—which is believed to anger bulls—encountering a bull might be really bad news. The

animals are known to be dangerous and unpredictable. “It happened once or twice. Trust me—it’s not fun. You can be on the bike and still feel him throttling,” he said of a bull he came across. The carrier’s close encounters have been within 10 feet, but he has heard from other riders that they’ve had to climb trees to escape.

Over the course of a race, there are various types of terrain and obstacles: hills, turns, cliffs, rocks in the way, potholes. “Sometimes it’s sandy, sometimes it’s muddy,” Santini Sierra said, adding that dry dirt is optimal to ride on and easy to clean, otherwise it takes some special cleaning to get the bike back in good shape following the race. “When it’s really muddy—especially when it’s rainy season here and it’s raining constantly—I’ll have dirt in my ears, everywhere.”

Competitions, however, are rain or shine. “Only a hurricane will stop it,” the carrier says.

Speaking of which, after Hurricane Fiona swept through Puerto Rico in

September 2022, Santini Sierra, an Air Force veteran, helped his branch coordinate efforts in the aftermath of the storm (see the November 2022 *Postal Record*), before turning his attention to helping get his sport back on track.

“Trails were beaten up,” he said, adding, “Paths completely changed. Rivers were a whole new scenario when we got there—water just swept everything different.”

Santini Sierra said that a collective effort soon took place. “There are a lot of avid riders around the island, so everybody connected through WhatsApp chats and Facebook,” he said. “We pretty much had to go out there with a saw to cut trees up. We had to open trails or deviate trails because of mud slides. It was tough.” Before long, the landscape was back to functioning like normal.

One or two events are scheduled each month except for July and December, when there are none due to high vacation periods, and Santini Sierra tries to participate in all of them. The



Dirt bikes are a part of Santini Sierra's family, as the carrier shares the sport with his brother and father (above) and with his youngest daughter (below).



best he's placed in competition is eighth. Though he doesn't usually notice how many people are in each category, he said there are usually 100 participants altogether each race.

Around twice a year, Santini Sierra will participate in multiday endurance events, which begin on Friday and last through Sunday. They typically start at the most western or northern point of the island. The first day, the carrier explains, you ride from Town A to Town B, which might be 60 miles. Contestants sleep at a hotel at that day's ending point, where he usually meets family, who take his gear. They then wake up the next morning and go from Town B to the next town, and so on until the final point at the end of the weekend.

He says that his day job certainly helps with his endurance for events (although he's not the only letter carrier to ride). "Most of the people that race with me say that my advantage is that I'm a mailman," the carrier said, "because I [do] more cardio than any of them. I have a walking route that's about 10 to 11 miles a day. They're like, 'No wonder you don't get tired—you're under the sun all day walking. Why would you get tired riding?'"

In the past, the carrier lived and carried mail in Virginia. He was able to find the occasional trail to ride for fun, but the competitions would go from state to state and they were too hard to participate in as a letter carrier. In Puerto Rico, he says, the longest drive he does for an event is only about two and a half hours.

When interviewed in late May, the carrier already was planning his next endurance event, to be held later that week, with many more scheduled for the rest of 2023. But Santini Sierra wants to keep it solely as a hobby. "I'm not trying to be a professional or anything like that," he said.

For Santini Sierra, he wants to keep the focus on connecting with family. "I think I love it so much because I get to spend time with my dad and my brother, more than anything, and some friends that I don't get to see often," he said. "It means a lot to me."

And he wants to keep that going forward, including with his three children, who all ride dirt bikes. "My youngest daughter is 6 and I just bought her one two weeks ago," he said, adding that all three kids enjoy the sport. "Almost more than me, I think."

Santini Sierra simply wants to "ride with my kids the same way my dad had the chance to ride with me and my brother," he said. "That's one of my long-term goals, to keep going at it and keep the family involved." **PR**