

# California Anesthesiologists Win “The Amazing Race”

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Jeffrey R. Staab/CBS

**T**wo anesthesiologists, Natalie (Nat) Strand, M.D., and Kathy (Kat) Chang, M.D. (left to right above), teamed up to win the seventeenth season of “The Amazing Race” (“TAR”), a “reality show” competition on CBS television. Millions of viewers watched on December 12, 2010, as the three finalist teams (of the 11 teams that began the competition) completed physically and intellectually challenging tasks in their race to the finish line. Nat and Kat, as they were referred to in the show, were the first all-woman team—as well as the first anesthesiologists—to win this event in which teams compete in locations around the world. I would like to think that most of the TV audience cheered for Nat and Kat, as they are among the nicest and warmest people whom I personally have known.

Nat and Kat both finished their anesthesiology residencies at the University of California, Los Angeles, a year and a half ago. I had the pleasure of working with and teaching them when they rotated through obstetric anesthesia at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. Nat also served on the 2008–2009 CSA Board of Directors as the director of the residency district (#15). She went on to complete a pain fellowship at the Mayo Clinic in Arizona. I thank Nat and Kat for granting me individual interviews, and Mallory Mason of CBS for her assistance. Following are excerpts from those interviews, conducted on December 22, 2010, and January 10, 2011.

## The Amazing Race (cont'd)

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**MZ:** What are you doing now that the race is completed?

**Nat:** I'm working in the private practice of pain management in Newport Beach [Orange County]. About half of my time is spent seeing patients in the office, while the other half is occupied in performing interventional pain procedures. Currently, I rarely administer anesthesia. I also still am involved with research in that I am writing papers to be published on work that I did in my pain management fellowship. At this point in time I am adjusting to the pace of the private practice.

**Kat:** I'm working full time in the operating rooms at Kaiser Woodland Hills.

**MZ:** Did your medical education and training help you compete in "TAR"?

**Nat:** Without question, our medical background helped us. We joked a lot about how often people asked us, "How did you keep your cool under such stressful circumstances?" In fact, we were called "unflappable." Well, as anesthesiologists, we all know that we frequently are presented with critical, life-and-death situations, so how can putting a rickshaw together [one of the challenges, in Bangladesh] compare in "scariness" with having to anesthetize an emergency heart transplant, or crash cesarean delivery, or intubating a small child with epiglottis? When we were physically and emotionally exhausted, we still were able to keep that important perspective, although the TV viewers might not have understood that. We were used to working together as a team under duress and also were able to communicate efficiently. So we certainly had an advantage because we avoided those communication breakdowns while other teams "lost it" and began to scream as they flailed with managing their stresses. Being accustomed to dealing with difficult and distressing challenges, and having familiarity with the potentially adverse effects of sleep deprivation and physical exhaustion, each of which one experiences in anesthesiology, were extremely useful during the competition. I have received messages from viewers who said something to the effect of, "You gals are acting like typical anesthesiologists, staying cool, calm and efficient under pressure."

**Kat:** Oh, definitely. The other teams all were saying, "Oh, this is the most stressful thing I have done in my entire life." As "TAR" progressed, the other teams became more tired and sleepy and stressed-out. Nat and I looked at each other, and we both thought that our day-to-day lives are more stressful. On "TAR" the worst thing that can happen is that we are eliminated from the race. At work, the day-to-day "worst" thing that can happen is orders-of-magnitude worse. It helped us to keep perspective and took away a little bit of the stress. We were used to being sleep-deprived as residents, and it helped us to be able to go a day and a half without sleeping. We were pretty functional without adequate sleep.

## The Amazing Race (cont'd)

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**MZ** (with a twinkle in my eye): I agree that the ability to assess quickly, prioritize, and make critical decisions at a rapid pace would be quite helpful in “TAR.” Would you recommend that all future participants in the show go through medical school and an anesthesiology residency?

**Nat:** Well, if you are competing for the prize money, that kind of “preparation” would cost you a bit more in years and cash than what you could get from winning the race! But, if you happen to have a passion for becoming a physician, then that kind of background assuredly would be helpful.

**MZ:** Do you feel as though you had personal growth by participating in “TAR”?

**Kat:** Absolutely, yes. The race helped me to realize more clearly that in order to grow personally, you have to enjoy life, and you can do that by introducing into your daily routine something crazy and uncomfortable—just to try to live in the moment a lot more. So much during medical training is delayed gratification and always looking to the future. Even if you only have an afternoon off, try to do something small that makes you feel alive. It benefits you for a much longer period of time. These kinds of little things make a big difference.

**Nat:** I definitely do. The fact that it occurred *and* while having a great amount of fun was, upon reflection, somewhat surprising to me. It is rare in life that you are stripped from all or most of your defining factors. You don’t have your circle of friends, or access to family, or even your own wallet or cell phone, so you are not able to draw upon the support systems that you have in your daily life. All of a sudden, your only resource is yourself and your teammate. It is a unique position in which to be, and I really enjoyed that aspect of the experience. Successfully meeting challenges in multiple countries around the world—all totally foreign to me in just about every aspect—required internal preparation, self-confidence and fortitude.

**MZ:** I really felt compassion for you, Nat [who has a fear of heights], in the season finale in which you had to deal with that frightening experience of the giant bungee jump.

**Nat:** No question that the bungee jump was the most frightening thing that I ever had done, not just in the race, but in my entire life!

**MZ:** Were you “athletic” before the show?

**Nat:** I am “athletic” in that I ski, run half marathons and ride bikes; being active always has been an important part of my life.

**Kat:** I played sports in college and ever since then. I run races—half marathons—and take spinning classes with Nat. Being physically fit really helped us on “TAR.”

## The Amazing Race (cont'd)

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**MZ:** How long did it take to actually film the show?

**Kat:** We were actually traveling for 23 days. Every other day we travelled to another country.

**MZ:** I would think that would contribute to fatigue as a big factor.

**Kat:** Absolutely. I was one of those people who used to watch “TAR” at home and wonder, what happened to the racers? Not infrequently, they are making a simple mistake—for instance, a clue says “walk to the next clue” and they take a taxi. But in the moment you are exhausted and fatigued, just like when you are sleep deprived, and you are more likely to make a simple mistake than you would normally. That is what makes “TAR” so much harder than you would think from the vantage point of your living room.

**MZ:** Nat, how was it being on the show as an insulin-dependent diabetic? Was it particularly difficult for you, or was that just another one of the rigors encountered?

**Nat:** One of the reasons that I wanted to be on the show was to serve as a role model for how well an active diabetic can function even under the most arduous of conditions. Yes, it is a big deal having an insulin pump, but it does not necessarily constitute a limitation on what you can accomplish. Since the show went on the air, I have had people come up to me in the hospital, as well as having received numerous letters and emails, saying something to the effect of “My child was just diagnosed as having diabetes. Your being on “TAR” and going through medical school and residency were an inspiration for him or her.” Some of those comments were personally very touching. In other words, I in some way helped put others at greater ease that their children’s lives weren’t necessarily going to be significantly limited. In fact, I must say that, for me, was the most meaningful accomplishment of my being on TV. Personally, I know that it has been extremely helpful having had role models who are actively pursuing leading very full lives. It takes away excuses and unnecessary feelings or fears of limitations.

**MZ:** Kat, what was your greatest fear during the race?

**Kat:** Other than Nat’s fear of heights, it probably was the same as with Nat—health concerns. Being in a distant place, you are somewhere far distant from your comfort zone. Even with the best planning for medical staff or being airlifted, you realize that a good hospital is not a mile away.

**MZ:** With respect to the teamwork, were you and Kat friends before the show? You seemed so naturally empathetic toward each other.

## The Amazing Race (cont'd)

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**Nat:** Yes, we were, and lots of people commented on the fact that we had been so mutually supportive and genuinely kind to each other. But isn't that how physicians are supposed to behave? When someone is in distress, then it is natural for physicians to offer that person some empathy and understanding, some kindness and assistance, whether it is a patient, colleague, family member, friend or acquaintance. I was really pleased that so many people recognized those qualities in us. Kat was amazing, wonderful, great—I don't have enough adjectives to describe how I felt about her—as my teammate. We had so much mutual respect, trust and caring that we never reached the point where we had a breakdown that resulted in blaming the other. It is interesting that some people blogged that we were “boring.” However, most commented that we seemed to be genuinely supportive and caring and polite, and that it was refreshing to observe in a competition, especially with the winners.

**MZ:** The two of you worked great as a team. How do you feel you best complemented each other?

**Kat:** In large part it was our personalities, similarities, friendship, and being supportive of each other that helped us as a team. Having trained as anesthesiologists, we are used to being autonomous and working on our own, but also being there to help out our colleagues if needed. I don't think Nat and I needed to have someone constantly motivating us. We are used to being self-motivated.

**MZ:** I might add to that comment that I was at the gym during the final stage of the race, and nearby were a sixtyish woman and a trainer, both of whom were rooting enthusiastically for you because, they exclaimed, they thought you both were so nice. Moving on, could you tell me the most important lessons that you learned from participating in “TAR”?

**Nat:** The *first* lesson that comes to mind is that teammates have to function as a team—that is, you cannot turn on a partner and blame the other person for their failures or weaknesses. Rather, you function best when you are mutually and cohesively supportive. *Second:* never give up! “TAR” is a good allegory for life: sometimes things bounce your way, and other times they don't. Sometimes your hard work pays off, and other times it doesn't. You never know for certain where you are in relation to other competitors until you arrive at the finish line. There are occasions when you think that there is no way that you can prevail, but never give up, and indeed, you may well be pleasantly surprised with the outcome. And *third,* those of your readers who viewed all of the episodes will understand that you should *not* participate in a Norwegian Christmas tradition without knowing more about it! [For those who didn't see the episode, a challenge in Norway involved a difficult eating experience—MZ]

## The Amazing Race (cont'd)

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**Kat:** *First*, I learned about myself. By testing yourself, you prove to yourself your inner strength. *Second*, how important good friendships are. Nat and I were good friends to start with. If you can manage being with someone 24/7 for a month straight, never more than 15 feet away, especially in stressful situations, then you work out your issues without fighting, and you have a good strong mature friendship. *Third*, the importance of enjoying life and living in the moment, even in everyday life.

**MZ:** Did you have any role models for the show?

**Kat:** Nat and I were not necessarily trying to follow other people. We really just wanted to be ourselves and not change during the race—not be so competitive or cutthroat that we end up being different people. We discussed this before starting “TAR”—that we wanted to do the race as ourselves and not as caricatures or different people. We have role models in our everyday lives, which helped make us who we are. For the race, we just wanted to enjoy ourselves the entire time. We also knew that a part of winning is luck.

**MZ:** Did anything in your childhood or adolescence prepare you for the show?

**Kat:** I loved the show because of the travel. I love to travel and was lucky to have had opportunities to travel as a child. Even though super busy at school or at work, I would always try to find time to travel. I would save up for it because travel is one of my passions, although admittedly, “TAR” is a different way to travel.

**MZ:** What did your parents think about your being on “TAR”?

**Kat:** At first they were cautious about my taking time from the job that I just started a year ago. Then, seeing me on the show and what a great experience it was for me, they were happy and proud.

**MZ:** I would be proud of you even if you didn't win. Were the people in your practice supportive of your taking the time off?

**Kat:** Oh yes, they were great, really supportive. They let me take the time off, and the philosophy here [Kaiser] is much more about having balance in your life. Taking time off to do something special is valued where I work. I really appreciated it, especially as this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

**MZ:** For the people now coming out of residency, balancing their lives is important to them. This is in contrast with the prior generation of physicians, where we “lived” medicine. How important is quality of life to you—your personal interests outside of medicine—and what would you tell your colleagues?

## The Amazing Race (cont'd)

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**Kat:** I think it is really important to have a balanced life outside of medicine. It ultimately makes you happier and lets you take better care of your patients as well as relate better to others. You'll be happier in your job, you'll be less likely to burn out, and when you are at work, you are excited to be there. You will have a happier family life as well. I am a child of the generation that lived to work, instead of working to live. I didn't see my father as much as I would have liked because he was working a lot. That definitely influenced my views on how I want to live my personal life and how to balance my professional work with outside interests.

**MZ:** How meaningful was it for you and Kat to be winners of "TAR" as the first all-female team?

**Nat:** It was not a mission of ours to be the first female team to win. We wanted to represent females in a strong, positive and friendly manner. Being professional females does not mean not being able to have fun, or preclude sweetness or "femininity." I am glad that we could make it happen, as it was meaningful for other females to see us win. There were fantastic teams in the past on "TAR"; we were pleased to be the team to make it through "the glass ceiling."

**MZ:** Are there any further thoughts that you would like to leave with our readers?

**Nat:** Medicine can be such a passion, a noble calling that is time- and energy-consuming, and for me, it was helpful to be able to do something else. As Kat said, one should take advantage of opportunities that can provide a better balance between your personal and professional lives. Taking the risk of putting myself in a new element like "TAR"—and it does not have to be something so "sensational" or "public"—gives you a fresh perspective and appreciation of what it is to practice medicine. It helps to have other sides to yourself so you can evolve and grow personally and come back to medicine refreshed and reinvigorated, an antidote to burnout, a health and well-being issue that finally has become "front page" even in our journals.

**Final comment by MZ:** The triumphant victory of Nat and Kat over the diverse challenges of "TAR" truly encapsulates the values of our specialty of anesthesiology—vigilance, competence, empathy, leadership and teamwork. This team of genuinely nice human beings also served as role models to diabetics and others with illnesses or disabilities across our nation. Congratulations to Nat Strand, M.D., and Kat Chang, M.D., winners of the seventeenth season of "The Amazing Race."