

PBP with Le Premier Group

BY BILLY EDWARDS

In 2007, as my wife was preparing for PBP, I decided to join her on the Rocky Mountain Cycling Club's Black Forest 300K brevet. The ride goes south from Denver, and through the high plains of Colorado with 10,000' of climbing, with much of the route above 7500'. (We really cherish our RBA, John Lee Ellis, who always gives us enough training in climbing for PBP.) I was also racing triathlons professionally at the time and figured a moderate 300K ride could not hurt my fitness in preparation for my next ironman.

Soon after the ride started, a group of about 20 took off. The pace was well within my abilities, but the group was maintaining a speed that separated it from the other cyclists. Over the next nine hours, the size of the group dwindled down as some riders decided to slow their pace or take longer breaks at the controls. Our group leader, Michael Fulton, then a two-time ancien, guided us through the brevet at a fast, challenging, but fun pace. By the end, there were only three riders in the lead group. We chose to ride together, and we worked together to ride a speedy time.

Ever since that ride in 2007, I have learned what I can about randonneuring, but not the style of randonneuring that most people are accustomed to. I am always seeking to be in le premier group, to push the previous best times on the course, and to push my endurance limits. I enjoy being self-sufficient for 200–1200K on the road, and I like to get the ride done. However, I don't like to ride alone, so I do my best to keep a fast

group together and assist fellow riders that are both capable and willing to keep up the pace.

The Rocky Mountain Cycling Club situates most of its controls in small towns at amazing little country stores. Having drop bags or friends and volunteers at controls is not a normal part of our brevet series. I know some areas are not as fortunate, but to me this is one of the most unique aspects of our rides: true self-sufficiency.

As a rider seeking to be in le premier group, I do things that others might consider unnecessary or even detrimental to my ride. I use a very light set-up and carry a lot less gear; my bike looks more like a race rig. I also don't like to go to bed during a

most important consideration at this point is a broad strategic plan. PBP is one of a couple of 1200K brevets that you can safely ride without sleep, or very little sleep, and know that you will always have someone to ride with and great volunteers at every control at all hours. I recommend several techniques that you can use singularly or combined.

HAVE FULL SUPPORT AT ALL OR NEARLY ALL CONTROLS

In recent editions of PBP, support has been permitted along the route, within a short distance of each control. Regulations to be published in December or January will address this matter. Riders can have crews at

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brevet. When I wake up the next day, I want to get brunch, not get back on my bike. If I can do a 600K in 24 hours, I can wake up Sunday morning and play with my kids.

In preparation for PBP 2015, I hope to shed light on the concept of riding in le premier group in *American Randonneur*. If you are interested, the

or near each control to service them and their bikes (get more nutrition, clean clothes, batteries or new lights, etc). Support like this allows cyclists to spend nearly all their time off the bike going into the control to get books signed and stamped and dealing with other needs. If you are a very strong cyclist and would enjoy the thrill of

attempting to be in Le Premier Group, this is the only way to stay with these riders at PBP. It is also a great way for a small group of strong friends or a pretty strong cyclist to go for the Charly Miller (complete PBP in less than 56H 41M). If considering this, you must have a crew that is good with French and patient with maps. Crews are not permitted to drive the route or be on the route outside of the distances allowed around the controls. In the past, crews were required to have signage on their vehicle denoting what rider they were supporting. Remember, that if you have your wife/husband act as crew, they are dealing with foreign languages and tricky roads/control maps, and a lack of sleep. They are not enjoying the trip like you are on a bike.

TWO DROP BAGS

This was offered by a U.S. based company in the last two PBPs. They had your gear in the vicinity of the control of your request. They offered several options and normally performed as advertised. For those travelling solo and not wanting to carry their extra clothes or food, this is an ideal set-up. You will have to pay a fee, but it's cheaper than flying over a crew. I recommend two bags at the same control (Loudeac or around the 400/800K point) so you can properly space your nutrition and new gear. Two bags will also add some redundancy should one of them get lost. In 2007, it rained nearly the entire time, so some who did not properly pack their bags or were unlucky enough to have their stuff left in water, ended up with wet new gear. I have also heard of gear being lost or sent to a different control. Additionally, some people have had a more difficult time finding their gear as the navigation around the controls is not clear until you get there. The language barrier and the unknown small details can make link-up difficult and time consuming.

PARTIAL SUPPORT AT ONE OR TWO KEY LOCATIONS

This was my method of support in 2011, as I missed out on the drop-bag option (they had actually sold out by the time I considered it). I had a friend who was fluent in French and knew the roads. She and her friend drove to Loudeac and stayed flexible for two days, doing some sightseeing when not waiting for me. I recommend this option to those who might have family in France with them. My crew did things like taking an afternoon at the beach and having a beautiful three-hour, five-course dinner in a castle while I was riding. I picked up the tab in this instance and it was well worth it. There is a lot more certainty with true support than with drop bags. They can also assist you with your bike/gear and it is really great to see a clean, friendly face. They need to be able to navigate, but are given much more time to do so. I also recommend they stay within the controls for their entertainment so they won't miss you. It should be noted that not having full support until later in the ride, you will lose the quick moving Premier Group at the early controls, but you can still go very fast and attain the Charly Miller.

I won't dig into tactics in this issue, but know that if you want to consider Le Premier Group, the pace is fast and practically a full-on bike race for the first 140K. It is also very tactical around the controls. There are many ways to lose the group, and there is also a huge risk factor in Le Premier Group, especially early on. I personally witnessed four very serious early wrecks, one of which put me off the road into a ditch. Fortunately, I had the ability to chase back on. Another wreck involving an oncoming vehicle occurred at around the 60K mark, taking out two Italian riders. I could see one writhing from a broken collar bone as we ripped by him. Le Premier Group is highly competitive. You need to decide what

you want to do and what your goals are. You also need alternative plans for pacing or meeting your crew should you get caught out or be unable to hold the pace.

Some might be concerned that this form of randonneuring is unsafe, especially since I mentioned being a witness to several mishaps. However, as with your local group rides, communication with fellow cyclists, being vigilant around traffic (no matter how little there is), and being honest with yourself about fatigue, are keys to a mishap-free ride. With PBP specifically, learning a little French, understanding the traffic nuances of France, and knowing when to rest and not push for an unreasonable goal, are key.

Ladies and gentlemen, coming to randonneuring from racing and triathlons where time is a serious aspect, I hope I can share with you some of the etiquette and techniques you can employ in your brevets next spring. I will also share some things to do once at PBP to be in or near Le Premier Group. I also recommend that those seeking the challenge of Charly Miller start to reach out to other similar riders in their clubs or around the U.S.

In 2011, I rode at 30.2 km/h out and 25.2 km/h on the way back, in 20:37 going out and 24:27 on the return (data taken from my bike computers which seem to add about 15K to the 1230K route, but you get an idea of the pacing). I also had nearly four hours of off-bike, stoppage time, finishing in 48:46. 🚲

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