

# PBP—How the Big Tent of Randonneuring Came About

BY JAN HEINE

*“I dream of a truly utilitarian race, with racers who will sleep when their nature demands it, who will be true wandering cyclists with bags and lanterns.”*

That was Pierre Giffard’s dream in 1891. Giffard, the editor of the Paris newspaper *Le Petit Journal*, had fallen in love with cycling, and wanted to promote this new means of transportation. Bicycles were still considered toys—expensive and difficult to ride. Giffard wanted to capture the nation’s imagination with an incredible race: from Paris to France’s westernmost city and back, over a distance of 1200K.

Giffard reasoned that if cyclists could cover that distance, it would prove once and for all that bicycles were a viable means of transportation. He foresaw a true cycling boom, and already predicted doom for the railways in the face of this new competition.

A 1200K race was unprecedented at the time. Most bike races were held on tracks or urban boulevards. Earlier the same year, the world’s first true long-distance race, from Bordeaux to Paris over a distance of 560K, had been run. And now Giffard was proposing a race that was more than twice as long. He envisioned a race where amateurs, riding smartly, might be able to outrun professional racers, whose superior speed might not count for much if

they didn’t know how to ration their effort over the incredible distance.

These were revolutionary ideas. Cyclotouring was not yet a popular pastime. *Vélocio* had just started publishing his magazine *Le Cycliste* in 1887, and it would be years until he undertook his long voyages in the mountains for which he later became famous. The word *randonneur* was not yet known in a cycling context. The first PBP truly was heading into the unknown.

Was it even possible to ride that far? Would riders have to stop and sleep, taking the better part of a week to cover the 1200K? Or would some ride straight through and complete the race in 90 hours or less?

As a “utilitarian race,” PBP also

was intended as a test of bicycles. Who made the best long-distance bike? Were the new-fangled pneumatic tires superior to the flat-proof solid and hollow rubber bandages? Participants in the first PBP were not allowed to change bikes or wheels. They had to finish on the equipment on which they started the event. Before the race, there was a bike check where every bike and every wheel was equipped with a seal to make sure these weren’t changed during the race. Today, this tradition lives on in the pre-PBP bike examination. It now serves to make sure bikes comply with the safety rules regarding lighting and other features.

The first PBP captured the imagination of an entire nation, just as Giffard had hoped. Everywhere

A rider checks in at a controle during the first PBP in 1891.





in France, people discussed the incredible race. For the organizer, this meant millions of extra newspapers sold! But it also meant that the French for the first time thought about the potential of the bicycle, just like Giffard had intended.

206 riders started the first PBP. All were French men, since foreigners and women were excluded from the first PBP. British riders had shown their superiority in the Bordeaux-Paris race, and Giffard wanted to stimulate interest in cycling in France. For that, he needed a French winner. The exclusion of women was for different reasons. Several women had wanted to register, and there was little doubt that they were capable of riding the distance. Even in 1891, there were already strong and experienced female cyclists. But how would their male competitors react, if they were passed by a woman? To avoid ugly displays of chauvinism, Giffard decided to restrict the race to men.

The full story of the first PBP was told in a 20-page excerpt from Bernard Déon's classic book "Paris-Brest et Retour" (*Bicycle Quarterly* Winter 2014), so I'll just recount the

highlights of this incredible race. Two well-known racers, Charles Terront and Joseph "Jiel" Laval, rode off the front, leap-frogging each other all the way to Brest. Both were sponsored by tire manufacturers, who provided pacers to help the racers on the road and mechanics who waited at the controls to fix the inevitable flat tires. To some degree, it was a race between Michelin and Dunlop, too. Terront was held up by multiple flat tires. Jiel-Laval's team thought his lead was great enough for him to take a sleep break. Terront avoided the look-out posts stationed outside Jiel-Laval's hotel by taking side streets, and resumed the lead in the middle of the night. Despite a valiant chase, Jiel-Laval was unable to catch Terront, who arrived in Paris after 71 hours and 27 minutes. Considering the unpaved, rutted roads of the time and the single-speed bicycle he rode, this was a remarkable feat.

This first PBP already had all the elements that make the ride so varied and fascinating today. Racers lined up next to pure amateurs. Some rode the latest, stripped-down racing machines, while other preferred fully equipped

(title): The start of the tandem in 1951. In the middle are Jo Routens/René Fourmy, who were the fastest overall. On the right are René Gillet/Odette Seurin, who set a tandem record that stood until 1999

Charles Terront, winner of the "utilitarian race" in 1891.



touring bikes. Some riders had support, while others were completely on their own. Riders had to weigh whether sleeping would refresh them, or break their rhythm and slow them down overall. There even was cheating, with one rider having his brother impersonate him on part of the course. And then as now, the local population was most enthusiastic, often feeding the riders without asking for anything in return.

Overall, 100 participants finished the race within the time limit of 10 days. Unlike typical races, where only the first riders receive awards, every finisher of the first PBP received a medal. That was the start of another tradition that endures to this day.

The first randonneurs in PBP: the Audax peloton in 1931.

The first PBP exceeded even the lofty ambitions of Pierre Giffard. It gave cycling a huge boost in popularity. As the tenth anniversary of the original race approached, it was decided to revive the event. From then on, Paris-Brest-Paris was run every decade.

The next two PBPs were pure professional races. Team cars followed the riders with spare bikes. Their headlights illuminated the road at night. However, amateurs still were allowed in the *touriste-routier* category, just like they were in the Tour de France at the time. They rarely had a shot at winning the event, though, since team tactics and support gave the professionals a big advantage.

The dream of the utilitarian race had not gone away. In 1921, a bicycle builder from Paris, Pierre Desvages and his employee Juliette Gasnier, obtained permission to ride

the event just ahead of the professional race. They completed the 1200K in 118 hours, showing once again that cyclotourists and randonneurs—and women—were capable of riding this event.

Randonneuring was becoming popular in France during the first half of the 20th century. There were two competing formulas. First were the *Audax*, who rode in groups behind *capitaines de route* at a strictly enforced speed of 22.5 km/h. The *Allure Libre* randonneurs had broken away from the Audax and organized their own brevets that allowed riders to cycle at any speed as long as they arrived within the time limits. Both groups decided to organize randonneur rides over the course of the Paris-Brest-Paris race for the 1931 edition. And this time, women were allowed to ride as equals with the male randonneurs, another tradition that continues to this day.

The randonneur PBP increased in popularity after the war, while the professional race withered. The long race was not all that exciting any longer. Pacers had been outlawed in 1921, and the distance was simply too great for lone breakaways to have a chance of success. To win, racers had to stay in the shelter of the peloton for 1000 kilometers or more, and then try to break away as the finish approached—or hope to win the sprint. The bunched peloton winding its way across western France for 35 hours didn't make for an exciting race, and without much public interest, the



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A finisher's medal from the first PBP in 1891.

*directeurs sportifs* no longer were keen on sending their teams to Paris-Brest-Paris. The 1951 professional race was the last.

The *Allure Libre* randonneurs filled the void left by the cessation of the professional race. At the front, the event saw some incredible battles, such as in 1956, when Roger Baumann and Gilbert Lespinasse were almost caught by a late-charging Jean Lheullier, who came within a few hundred meters of the leaders after chasing for hundreds of kilometers. In the race to the finish, Baumann prevailed, Lespinasse cracked, while Lheullier finished second. In 1961 (PBP was held every five years), Jean Fouace broke away before Brest and managed to stay ahead of the peloton all the way back to Paris. 1966 saw a spirited race in which Maurice Macaudière and Roger Demilly set a new record of 44:21 hours.

However, just like in 1891, the vast majority of riders did not set out to break records. Their challenge was to complete the ride within the 96- or, starting in 1965, 90-hour time limit. Many were keen to improve on their best performance in a previous PBP. These riders very much lived up to Pierre Giffard's ideal of the "*utilitarian racers who will sleep when their nature*



Roger Baumann and Gilbert Lespinasse during the last night in 1956.

*demands it, who will be true wandering cyclists with bags and lanterns."*

In recent decades, PBP has grown by leaps and bounds, but the "big tent" of randonneuring still accommodates riders from many backgrounds and with many goals. Records no longer are possible with the enforcement of a minimum time limit, but there are still those who dream of riding at the front, of being among the first to finish in Paris.

A few dozen American riders train hard to become a member of RUSA's Charly Miller Society, which requires completing the event in less than 56:41 hours. And for the vast majority, the challenge lies in completing the event within the time limit.

Each group can point to PBP's long and rich history as a precedent

for what PBP means to them. For most riders, no matter their speed, the biggest goal is to have fun: the fun of riding on beautiful roads in the company of like-minded cyclists from all over the world. The fun of being cheered on by the local population, just like the riders of that first PBP in 1891. And the fun of arriving back in Paris, knowing that they have completed a challenge that is out of the ordinary. 🚲

*Note about the author: Jan Heine is the editor of Bicycle Quarterly magazine ([www.bikequarterly.com](http://www.bikequarterly.com)). He is a four-time ancien of PBP.*

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