

Riding Paris-Brest-Paris - A Personal Memoir

by Matthew Chachere

Spare some pity for Matthew Chachere of New York City. His PBP training consisted of commuting through New York's Bronx area, and even most brevet rides started in the city. Little wonder his PBP attempt was unorthodox, ie he tried to come dead last. This story came via the 'Internet', and we thank Matthew for allowing us to print his story.

I became interested in 1995 PBP after chancing upon an article about the 1991 ride. I've developed a passion for cycle touring over the years and have spent nearly every summer vacation over the past nine years touring, the last four abroad on a tandem. I've never been a particularly fast rider and do not have either the stamina or emotional makeup for racing, nor have I taken part in many organized cycling events or ever actively "trained".

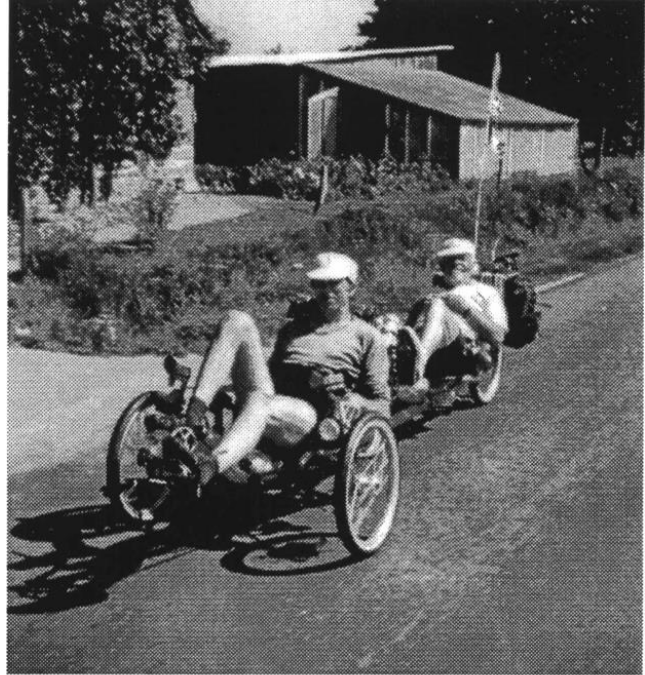
But I do know that really long distance cycling does something magical for me, and when I read about this seemingly insane ride that would involve riding at night to achieve as much as 440km (275mi.) a day, something in me wanted to aim for the 1995 PBP, then some three years away. It seemed impossible - the most I'd ever ridden was 240 kilometres in a day, and that was at the end of 9 weeks of touring when I was in my best shape, back in 1986 when I was 33. Could I actually ride far greater distances for four days at the age of 42? I decided I would just have to find out. The New York City brevets had all started out in Manhattan, heading up through the suburbs and rural areas north of the City. They had anywhere from 8 to 20 riders, a number of them PBP veterans whose experience and advice was greatly helpful to me. Over the course of these rides I learned a great deal that prepared me for PBP.

One of the most vital aspects was understanding how to keep the body going over those distances. I'd ridden plenty of 100 mile rides, and by now knew that I can handle such a ride on little more than stored energy. But once I started crossing the 250km mark, I found out I couldn't fake it - I had to get serious about keeping up the energy levels by figuring out how to continually resupply the calories and liquids to keep going. The second thing was the equipment— what to carry, what clothing, what worked reliably, what didn't, especially lighting (more on all this at the end).

But perhaps the most important aspect was the realisation that the most critical requirement was an unyielding determination. When your body is exhausted and your legs are saying "O.K., we've had more than enough" your mind has to be able to say "well, thank you for sharing that information, but we're just going on anyway." To me, that sort of sheer willpower is the only thing that kept me going during the longer brevets, when it was raining or hot and I was aware that there were hundreds of kilometres before me.

A PBP veteran whom I became friends with during the brevets, Klaus Schreiber (a child psychiatrist in his 50s

who disclaimed any professional understanding of adults) agreed with my thinking on this, noting that while the generally older age of the cyclists involved in this type of riding (randonneurs seemed to average around age 40) might be ascribed to a mass desire to prove to ourselves that we weren't totally over the hill, he felt that younger riders probably lacked the maturity (or perhaps better put, stubbornness) to stick with endurance events of this length.



The Pride of PBP — An Australian made Greenspeed Tandem Trike ridden by Audax UK riders Pete Gifford (front) and a very laidback Noel Simpson. This photograph was taken as the machine cruised at over 57km/h. Like to own one? Contact Ian Sims of Greenspeed on (03) 9758-5541.

After the 1994 brevet series, I decided at the last minute to try the Boston-Montreal-Boston ("BMB") ride, the U.S. equivalent of PBP that covers the same distance, albeit with perhaps only 130 riders. However, I arrived in Boston only a day or so after getting out of my sick bed from the flu, and after riding the first 40 miles from a 4am. start in pouring rain, I knew right away once I starting hitting the first hills that I completely lacked the strength (much less the requisite willpower) to do that ride and dropped out - apparently setting a record for the earliest dropout in the ten year history of BMB. That only made my determination to complete PBP that much stronger.

The last few weeks before PBP I spent cycle touring again on the tandem with my companion, Margarita, this time cycling in Ireland and Britain. There's nothing like lugging 100 pounds of bike and touring gear up and down rolling hills all day to get you in shape! The plan was to end the trip at my sister's house outside London, and then somehow get down to Paris for PBP. But how?

I put an inquiry out again on the internet looking for information on transportation from London to Paris. Within a day I had several responses, including one from

Roger Mason of Cambridge, who said that the English Willesden Cycling Club was taking a vanload of cyclists down and had space for one more. Arriving in France at midnight, we drove out of town a ways and pulled over by the side of the road to sleep under the stars. As soon as we lay down it began to drizzle, and the whole group tried to make do under a tarp until it just got too ridiculous and we got back in the van and drove the rest of the way down to Paris, arriving at dawn Sunday at a campground in St. Quentin-en-Yvelines, the ultra-modern and seemingly soulless Parisian suburb where PBP would start.

That day, we all had to check in with the ride organisers (the “Audax Club Parisien”) at the “Gymnase des Droits d’Homme” (Rights of Man Gym) where our bikes were inspected for adequate lighting and I picked up my route card and identification number tag. There were some wild looking machines there, such as trikes, tandems, two triplets (3 person bikes), some recumbents, including two fully faired Lightning F-40s which look sort of like watermelon seeds and hold impressive speed records, and a tandem recumbent tricycle.

I spent much of the day hanging around the campground, which was an interesting scene as well, with cyclists from a variety of countries setting up camp. I went out to dinner that night with some of my cycling colleagues from the New York brevets I’d met up with, and we were joined by Lon Haldeman, a three time winner of the Race Across America (RAAM). I remarked to him that PBP (of which he was first in the men’s tandem category in 1987) must seem like a grocery run to the corner store for him, but he assured me that it was quite a challenge, although his goal was to get a reasonable amount of sleep this time.

Finally the dreaded day had arrived. After trying to sleep until noon, I lay around the campsite most of the afternoon, alternately fussing with my bike, packing and repacking my rack bag ten times and portioning out my food and clothes in the bag I was leaving in the van. Finally, I managed to nap for a couple of hours under a tree. The rest of the gang seemed to be doing much the same. Roger was busy all day doing things like re-retaping his handle bars and other essential matters. I drifted between feeling like I was going off to my execution and about to be launched into space - I was so nervous.

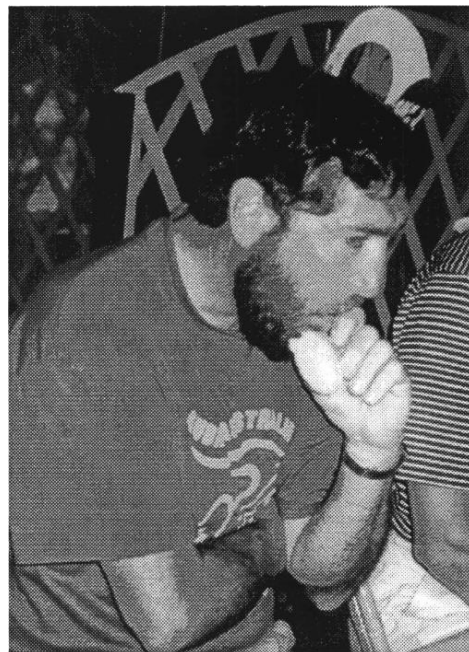
Finally, it was time to go. I rode to the Gymnasium with Klaus and Miguel Vilaro, a neighbour of mine in Brooklyn, and we shuffled into this massive line of cyclists spread out across the field behind the gymnasium. I still thought I was crazy for attempting this ride, but sandwiched between Klaus and Miguel (a psychologist), I thought myself at least well prepared for that contingency! As we approached the exit gate, it closed on us. Apparently, the 10:00pm starters were such a large group that the organizers had decided to break it up into three groups, to reduce the chances of some major pileups (they marked our cards to indicate that we were actually starting at 10:30). We were in the last group.

After about another ten minutes, we were ushered up to the starting line. Klaus, Miguel and I were ranged across the road right behind the ribbon, with a huge mass of bikes lined up behind us, headlights flashing. We felt like we were at the very head of a race, even though there were now several thousand riders who had already left ahead of us. Various ride officials and local politicians gave excited speeches, cameras flashed, and at last we were off, charging out between parallel columns of spectators cheering us on!

A pace car led us through the first ten kilometres or so, so we were somewhat limited in speed—probably a good thing, given the crowd. Finally it pulled away on a turn and we were off into the darkness. By now the pace picked up to a good 30 to 35km/h or so, with Klaus and I pulling away from the pack. Although I know that I usually need to keep a nice steady 25km/h on these long rides, I’ve accepted the fact that I can’t control my adrenaline-fueled desire to just crank it out for the first hour, so I may as well just let it happen.

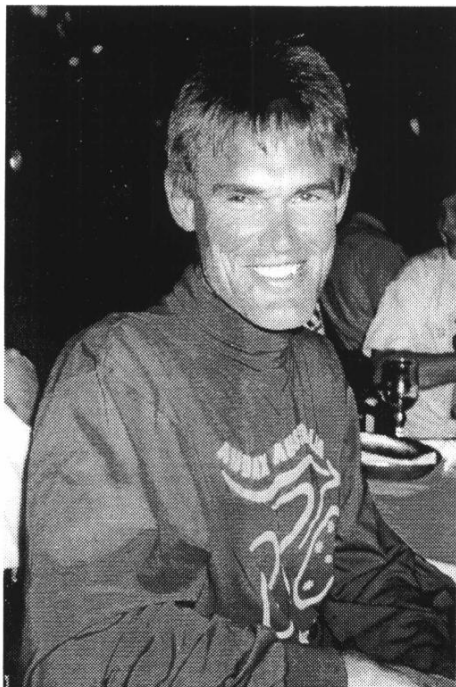
We soon found ourselves catching up with the end of the group that had left 15 minutes before us, and it seemed that within no time we were well enmeshed in an endless snaking line of red tail lights before us. Although the route was well marked with pink arrows by the side of the road, it would be hard to lose the route with this sort of crowd for the first day.

I don’t think I can fully describe the heady excitement of finding myself finally on this ride, after all the preparation, anticipation, and just plain fear of pain and failure. I was probably a bit of a Pollyanna that first night, babbling like a fool about how much fun I was having.



John Quinn (Tumut) having a good think after completing PBP. Of course it was worth it!!!

Riding Paris-Brest-Paris ... continued



Why is Gary Beasley (Melbourne, though presently living in UK) smiling after PBP? Perhaps it was the thought of his recently arrived baby. Congratulations!

Eventually we settled down to a reasonable pace, falling in with the occasional faster pace-line. As we barreled through the various villages that night, clumps of spectators would cheer us on, even in the wee hours of the morning. Then we'd be back out on dark wooded roads or passing through empty cornfields under an endless starry sky. It was totally exhilarating.

Riding at night is something that had at first terrified me during the brevets, but once I became comfortable with it I began to really enjoy it. All four of this years' brevets I had ridden had started at 10pm, to help us get used to the start time of PBP and the all night riding. Although they all started in Manhattan and ground up through the Bronx and lower Westchester before reaching open country, by 1am I'd find myself with two or three companions gliding along on empty, silent roads under moonlight while all the world seemed asleep, with the occasional sound of an animal of some sort scurrying through the woods." Here, of course, it was a bit different in scale. I remember stopping at one point along a climb out of some village and looking back along the road, where a long line of bobbing white lights could be seen climbing up after us. For some reason, it always seemed to remind me of one of those old movies such as "Frankenstein" with the villagers on the march with their burning torches!

I was carrying two headlights, as I'd learned (like most riders) that all systems will inevitable fail in the middle of the night. My plan had been to rely mostly on a small 2.5 watt Cateye headlight that used only 2 C cells and cast a decent enough beam when one was in a pack, while reserving my 15 Watt NiteRider headlight (which cooks through 5 D cells in about 3-4 hours) for when I was alone

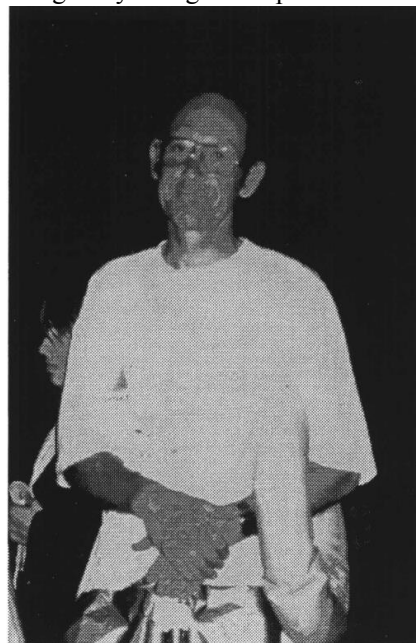
or at the head of a pack or on a fast downhill. Unfortunately, within the first hour the Cateye's switch broke, and no amount of jerry-rigging would get it back on. So now I had to rely only on the NiteRider, which was already falling apart after the contacts broke that morning, and for which I had only one set of cells. Much to my surprise, I was able to nurse the NiteRider through the entire first night on one set of cells, although it was hardly brighter than a birthday candle by dawn. This, of course was of great concern, since not only would inadequate lighting risk an accident, but I could also be given an hour penalty or even pulled out of the ride by PBP officials.

The ride seemed quite effortless that first night. I was riding at a much more relaxed cadence than usual (down around 60 rpm. from my normal 80), pushing high gears at a much higher speed than I expected, I guess because of the slipstream effect of the huge pack. In the 140km to the first checkpoint Klaus and I stopped only once, in a dark medieval-looking town at maybe one in the morning for a bathroom break and to refill on water, and I sat under a streetlamp and tried without success to repair my backup light.

We arrived at the first checkpoint, Mortagne au Perche at about 3:30am. Actually, it was only an official checkpoint on the way back from Brest; on the way out it was a food stop only.

The Willesden support van was at Villaines, however, with lots of pastries and other treats, to repair a slow leak. I changed back to my shorts, refilled my allotment of Power Bars and Cytomax powered energy drink that I'd cached in the support van, and we hit the road.

The next segment, 80km to Fougeres, was one of the prettiest. The route followed many small back roads, winding through tiny villages and past comfortable



Bernard Collins (Melbourne), complete with doughnut ring under his arm. Whatever for?

Body and Soul

Body maintenance was a major part of making this ride successful for me. Over the course of the brevet series, I had learned how to nourish and hydrate myself properly - and how to recognize early enough the warning signs that something was amiss.

Foremost was eating. I hate Power Bars (concentrated food bars), but I've found that they do work for me, and the new banana ones are relatively easy to chew, and provide 250 low fat calories. I had brought two cases with me to France, and aimed to consume about one for every 25km (i.e., about once an hour while riding).

This seemed to work quite well as the mainstay of my diet, although I did snack on fruit, pastries and cheese, and had a light meal at the beginning and end of the day. The trick was to keep eating those damn bars, before I got hungry. I knew that once I reached that starved, hollow feeling, it might take me hours to really recover. By keeping the fires steadily stoked, I never really felt physically tired or exhausted (mentally was a different matter).

Drinking was a similar issue. I perspire (OK, sweat) more than just about any human being I've ever encountered, so I know I really need to get a lot of liquid in. This year I started using the Camelback system during these rides.

Preventing soreness and pain was another concern. I've learned some pretty good measures to take as far as the derriere department is concerned. Number one is cleanliness, since sitting in your own sweat all day and grinding it into your flesh is bound to create problems over 1200km. Even though I was never able to bathe during the entire PBP I carried a supply of alcohol baby wipes with me and cleaned potential problem areas assiduously. I also carried an extra pair of riding shorts with me so that I could change in the middle, of each day to clean shorts, which, whether or not physically beneficial, made me feel a whole lot better; for a few minutes at least.

The only real pain I had to deal with was in my hands and wrists. Even though I had extensive padding on my bars and used padded gloves, by the end of the second day my hands were killing me. Oddly enough, I discovered that part of the problem was the gloves, which were soaked with sweat (I said I perspire a lot) and combined with the leather formed a potent skin irritant, so eventually I dispensed with them.

looking farms, occasionally dropping into some early morning fog. By the time we reached Fougeres it was getting quite hot. The checkpoint was very crowded, and rather than eat there, we rode to the next small village and bought cheese and bread and juice, and Klaus and I found a shady spot under some trees along the road and picnicked. We promised each other not to nod off, but it was so relaxing lying on the grass watching the cyclists go by, and within a few minutes of finishing lunch we both were asleep, though thankfully we woke up within maybe 15 minutes. That brief nap really helped.

There was by now a slight tailwind, and although the country was fairly rolling, we had a nice ride for the 60km to Tinteniac, the next checkpoint. Although I usually find that Klaus kept a good pace for me - indeed, I often have trouble keeping up with him - I was starting to pull away from him a lot that afternoon. I tried to slow down and trade pulls with him, but I began to find that I had a good deal of power the longer I rode. He begged me to just go on ahead, but I was reluctant to leave him that day, as I had gained a lot of respect for his judgment as far as pacing ourselves.

After Tinteniac, we had just 80km to go to Loudeac.

We were hungry, though, so we stopped at a supermarket and loaded up on food again (as well as D cells) and had lunch again. There was a pretty good long and steep climb to an interesting village named Becherel, with a great view at the top. By 6pm, I was getting sleepy, so we stopped for some cafe au lait at an outdoor cafe. Yes, I think it is possible to fall asleep while pedalling.

As we rode along that afternoon, we still would encounter clumps of spectators along the way, even at isolated country crossroads, cheering us on! We were just starting to reach for the headlights when we reached Loudeac at 9pm I was quite pleased with the pace. I'd covered more than the first third of the entire ride, some 445km in just 22 and ½ hours.

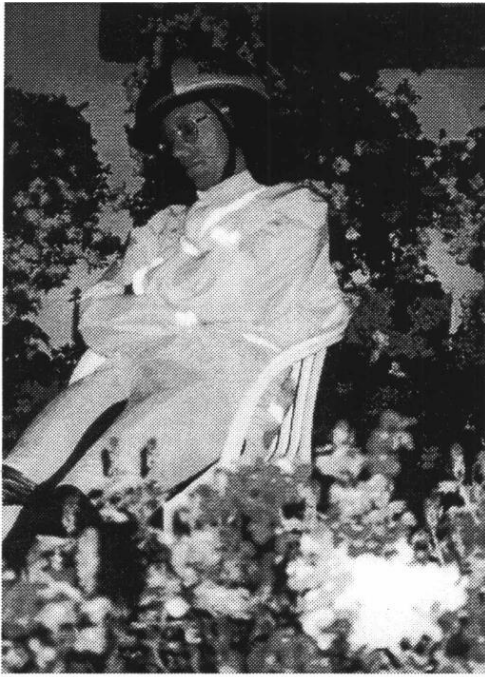
There were big crowds at Loudeac, and the showers were completely out of hot water. I was tired and sweaty, and I craved a wash, but no way was I up to a cold shower - I know I would have gotten the chills in the cool night air. I noticed one of the Lightning F-40 fully faired recumbents laid up for repairs, as well as the triplet (apparently rear axle problems).

At 3 I left the van and went to meet Klaus, who had planned to meet me in front of the control. I waited until 3:15, but Klaus didn't show up, so I took off with David, who had. As we left, we passed a couple of riders already on their way back from Brest! I later learned that the first riders returning from Brest had come in around 10pm.

It seemed like only a few short blocks before we were out of town and into the dark, returning to a line of red taillights as the night before, only now and then we caught the white headlights of cyclists returning from Brest. The group was a bit more spread out now, of course, and there seemed to be a fair amount of climbing, and although it didn't seem very tough, I was very surprised when I returned over this segment later in daylight to realize how much climbing I had done in the dark.

I noticed this phenomenon throughout the ride, in fact; the night climbing never seemed very difficult, yet when I returned later over the same segments I was amazed to see what I had climbed in the dark. I think much of it was psychological—that not being able to see the hill above me lessened the difficulty of the climb. Rather than dwell on a hill seeming to stretch ever upward before me, in the dark I'd just put it in a low gear and grind away.

Riding Paris-Brest-Paris ... continued further



Paul de Floret (Paul Maynard - Sydney) takes a rest among the geraniums.

David and I tried to stay together, but I tend to climb a bit faster than he, and it became increasingly more difficult to find each other among the indistinguishable red lights in the inky dark. After a half an hour, we decided to split up, and I joined a small group of three men and a woman that seemed to be passing just about everyone. We took turns pulling for about an hour, at the end of which I decided to pull into a village square to get some more food out of my bag. As I pulled over, I rode over a rather high curb cut knowing I was cutting it at much too acute an angle, and took a pretty good fall. I wasn't hurt, but my remaining headlight went out.

There were a couple of tables by the side of a closed cafe, with a few riders hanging around in various states (one was wrapped in an aluminium space blanket, asleep sitting up, and oblivious to the comings and goings around him in the gloom). It was a rather surreal scene. I now had to figure out the problem in my remaining light, or I was done for. Deducing that the impact had blown the bulb, I spent considerable time dismantling the rather complicated unit and replacing the (\$24!) sealed beam. A French cyclist lent me a knife to dismantle some of the small screws, as I lacked the miniature screwdriver needed. Voila! It worked.

Forty minutes later I was back on the road, and it was already getting grey out. We began to hit incredibly dense patches of fog, so thick we could hardly see 10 feet ahead in the pre-dawn grey. At one particularly treacherous turn the PBP organization had dispatched someone with a lantern to warn riders.

At about 8am I arrived in Carhaix-Plouguer, with massive crowds at the checkpoint. I waited on an endless line for breakfast, and after 15 minutes gave up and started to look

for a cafe. I ran into David, along with Klaus and Miguel, who apparently had shown up at the meeting point that morning in Loudeac only a moment after I'd left. So we went to an hotel-cafe across the street, which was likewise having its busiest morning in four years, and waited for perhaps another half hour until I was able to get one of the horribly overworked waitresses to begin making coffees and getting pastries for the four of us. As things turned out, I probably spent an hour and a half at Carhaix - far too long.

We rode down a long hill out of Carhaix, and then aimed off the main road into a lovely forest reserve (the return route would be on the main highway from Brest), winding through a long canyon, along rushing brooks and through beautiful villages, and finally climbing up the biggest hill, about 1,000 feet to the top of Roc Trevezel. (I later heard varying estimates of between 30,000 to 40,000 feet of climbing over the entire course!)

Near the top, we rose up into the clouds—literally, it was misting and foggy - and the flora changed from trees to purple heather amid bare rocks. It was like being in northern Scotland; such a sudden extraordinary change. At the top was a secret (i.e., previously unannounced) control set up in some tents. The stop was well worth it—for 5 francs they were selling big bowls of hot bean puree soup, which really hit the spot.

Somehow, I had imagined it would now be a nice, easy long downhill into Brest. We were going down to the sea, right? Wrong. The road dropped down, climbed back up again, then began an agonizing series of steep drops and climb most of the remaining way to Brest. By now, I was on the same route again as the returning riders; Haldeman passed me heading back on the tandem an hour outside of Brest.

It began to drizzle, then a light rain. I put my jacket on, and caught up with three French riders who were putting the hammer down; We all were in pretty good moods, notwithstanding the rain, anticipating the psychological boost of arriving in Brest, and rode together for nearly an hour, before I pulled over at another patisserie for two or three more pains-au-chocolat!



Kristine Kersley (Brisbane) down, but not out. Tables are great to sleep on.

The last few miles into Brest were just impossible. I crossed a long bridge, and thought I had arrived. Instead, there were a few more miles of heavy traffic and obnoxious climbs, including a nasty long hill full of diesel bus fumes which I crawled up in my granny gear (one of only four times I had to use it the whole trip). At the top of that long hill, I FINALLY pulled into the checkpoint at 1:30pm.

The first person I ran into was Jeff Vogel, a New York rider who helps run Boston-Montreal-Boston and who had rescued me last year when I'd dropped out. Back in Paris, Jeff had asked me whether I intended to break my record from last summer, to which I'd replied that I hoped to make it to 41 miles this year. So it was great to bump into him at Brest. He asked me how I was doing, and I joked that I'd had enough, that I was quitting and riding back to Paris!

Actually, though, I felt pretty beat. That ride from Carhaix to Brest had seemed to be the worst segment of the whole ride, and I was positively dreading climbing all those hills on the return.

Lo and behold, I discovered we had a good stiff tailwind. Invigorated, I found the rolling hills to be a delight, rather than a grind. Much of the route back to Carhaix was very different from the route into Brest, and the terrain and wind were such that I could get enough speed going down to just about coast over the top of the next hill without having to get down into the low gears. Most of the time, I seemed to be up in the 35 - 40km/h range! It was such a surprise.

The ride back seemed to pass quite swiftly, I stopped only once for a quick espresso in a quiet bar (I was the only customer) and a refill of my camelback. As I re-climbed the Roc Trevezel, I again rose into the misty cloud. I stopped to put my jacket on again, only to have to take it off a mile later as I dropped back down into warm afternoon sun. A passing rider laughingly pantomimed my repeated robbing/disrobing.

When I hit the main highway back to Carhaix, the wind was smack dab behind me, and I was really cruising. For a while I rode with a couple of Scots on a tandem, and we were frequently cracking 60km/h on the downhill.

Passing through Carhaix, I saw a beautiful little square off to the side, and for a moment my normal cycle tourist instinct said "Hey, that looks like a nice place to hang out for the rest of the day at an outdoor cafe and drink wine." Oops, back to work.

I began climbing out of Carhaix, and the road became absolutely beautiful. I think, of all the ride, this part was the most magnificent. It was the combination of the great late after-noon light spilling into gorgeous little villages bursting with flowers, and painting the surrounding countryside lush shades of green and brown.

Plus, much to my surprise, by this time I was feeling stronger than ever. I just couldn't figure it out - here I was, doing a 320km (200 mile) ride today, after a 445km (275 mile) ride yesterday and getting only a few hours sleep, and I was absolutely bombing along, passing just about everyone, and feeling like I could go all night again, if I needed to. To me it proved that I had figured out how to properly nourish and hydrate myself so that I could continue drawing energy, and that the longer I was riding, the stronger I was becoming. This was such a totally unexpected, though delightful, discovery, as I had assumed that by now I would be absolutely exhausted. The countryside between Carhaix and Loudeac was magnificent and extremely hilly, with some great downhills and great vistas.

I was totally amazed that I had climbed these things in the pre-dawn dark this morning. They hadn't seemed that long and steep!

About half an hour later, though still passing everyone, I saw some distance behind me a pack of about eight riders that were slowly gaining on me. I kept ahead of them for a while, but finally they caught me. I saw why. Pacing the pack were

two French men on what seemed to me to be a very short tandem - the guy in back was practically hugging the captain.

As the group passed, I noticed the Iowa woman at the back. She waved me in: "Join the choo-choo train!" I did, and it was one hell of a ride. I'd seen plenty of tandems on this ride and I do quite a bit of tandeming myself, but I'd never seen any tandem pull uphill like this one. Usually, you try to hang on behind tandems on the downhills and flats and drop them on the climbs, but not these guys. The stoker would get out of his seat and power that thing up, and the rest of us felt lucky to be along.

The tandemists were accompanied by a rider who, I think, was the daughter of one of them. She was a thin, small woman in her early 20s at most, who was one of the strongest cyclists I'd ever seen. Each of us tried to pull ahead and give them a break, but they were just too damn fast, so we just held on and enjoyed the rollercoaster ride.



'Stefan the Swede' has attempted two PBPs on this 1930s shopping bike. In 1991, Stefan made it to Brest. 1995? Wait for the full results in early 1996.

Riding Paris-Brest-Paris ... still continuing

As we rode on, the pack just kept getting bigger, sweeping up additional riders, until it was a massive convoy, whooshing through villages, hurtling down hills and ghosting up the other sides of valleys on accumulated momentum.

It was 9:00pm. I had left Brest at 3:00pm, and had covered the 160km (100 miles) back to Loudeac in only six hours, some four hours faster than it took me to get out there this morning.

I was amazed not only by having ridden so much faster during the second half of the day, but by the fact that I had also ridden those 100 miles in just six hours, when I had never before ridden a 100 miles in much less than eight. That this personal best came at the end of a 200 mile day following a 275 mile day seemed even more incredible. Of course, I also learned at the control that the lead riders had already reached Paris at about 3:20 this afternoon, setting a new record.

I found my wonderful support crew again, and began to get set up for tomorrow. Alas, there were still no hot showers available. Could I stand going to sleep with nearly 800km of road grunge and sweat? Did I have much choice?

So instead, I played tourist and took a walk around town for an hour. After the bizarre modernity St. Quentin-en-Yvelines where PBP had started, it was a delight to stroll through a more "authentic" French town. I even went into a church where a choir was performing, sitting in the back in my (sweaty) cycling gear and for a few minutes mentally removing myself from the intensity of the ride.



Malcolm Martin (Melbourne) after the party is over. Why not sit down and have a sleep?

I called my sister's house outside of London and spoke with my family. Margarita confirmed that she was definitely coming down to Paris to meet me at the finish, which absolutely delighted me. I still had two days to go,

but I felt like I was already almost finished. I was nearly 2/3 done, and after this afternoon's ride, I knew that I could easily cover in the remaining two days what I had covered in the first.

Getting up again at 4am was not too bad. A hand gently woke me and put my fingers around a cup of hot coffee as I still lay in my sleeping bag. What service! I was looking forward to "just" a 300km (186 mile) ride, aiming for Mortagne au Perche, and I thought it would be a pretty easy ride, in comparison. The crew had coffee and hot cereal ready, and I was packed up from the night before, so I got a quick start.

I hadn't arranged to meet up with anyone, so I rode alone for the first few hours. The riders were much more scattered than the previous nights, and I found myself truly alone and out of sight of other cyclists for long periods, for the first time having to keep a sharp eye out for the arrow markers. I had brought along my small headphone radio for the first time, and listened to Mozart while pedalling along in the dark. Finally it began to grow grey, and I caught my third sunrise of this ride. Shortly after, I came to a secret control, where I read a newspaper article about the ride. The story had some interesting statistics, which, as I remember them, indicated something like 4,000 riders, with the largest foreign contingent being the 300 from the U.S., followed by the U.K., Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Scandinavia, Japan, Australia, and even two guys from Russia who'd cycled thousands of miles to get here, with apparently little or no money, and had arrived only the day before the start (I saw them camped beside the gymnasium before PBP, and later saw their bikes at Villaines, distinguishable by the Cyrillic lettering on the frames and unusual component brands).

After I left, I found a small patisserie and scoffed down a few pastries, and as the morning warmed, I pulled into a field and changed into my shorts. As I came out of the bushes, I ran into three of the Willesden riders, Tracey, Tim, and Ray. We ended up riding most of the day together, I ran into one of the New York riders, Marion, sitting under a tree. When I'd last seen her the day before, she was going strong, but now she was out of the ride, dropping out on the way back from Brest with a knee injury, apparently from riding with a misaligned shoe cleat. She was totally bummed out - "two years of training, and now I have to wait four years to try it again."

We knocked off the next 60km segment to Fougères checkpoint quickly, picking up a couple of extra riders on our pace-line. Fougères was very crowded, and we'd hoped to meet up with our support van, but no luck, so we rode into the town and found a small shop to buy some things for a picnic lunch.

We picnicked in the village square, and probably spent far too much time, lying around for nearly an hour. But we

figured we were already nearly halfway through the day's ride, and it felt nice to relax for a change.

The Bike

The bike I used was an old and trusted friend, a 1959 Atala Italian road bike I purchased back in 1969. (There was at least one rider with an even older bike, an Englishman riding a 1954 model with a fixed gear, who said he wanted to make this PBP a bit "different" than his last one!) The Atala has a fairly long and springy frame, which makes for a pretty comfortable ride.

I used only a 6 speed rear cluster (yes, I'm a bit retro) with a 13 to 24 range and a triple chain wheel in the front (53-39-26). While the hills on the New York brevets were such that I had to use the granny gear quite often, on PBP I only touched the small front ring three times: most of the time, 39 x 24 was a low enough gear for what I encountered. I used Suntour bar end shifters, which I've found less tiring to use on long rides than down-tube shifters. If you can shift easier, you'll shift more often, and ride easier.

I used 36 spoke wheels with aero rims and tubular (i.e., sew-up) tyres (yes, even more retro) - no punctures, although I did completely wear through the rear tyre at the 1,000km mark. (Soon after PBP I discovered that my aero rims had begun to crack at the spoke nipples).

For lights, I used two Vistalight LED units (one as a backup), in non-flash mode (flashing lights are barred) in the rear. In the front, I had the NiteRider 15 watt unit, powered by 5D cells, with a small Cateye 2.5 watt unit (2C cells).

I had been warned by experienced riders to have at least one backup system, and I'm glad I did. I had intended to rely on the Cateye for most of my night riding, since it uses fewer batteries and uses them more slowly, with the NiteRider reserved for fast downhill or when I was alone or in the front of a pack. However, the Cateye failed after the first half hour so I had to rely on the NiteRider for most of the ride. The NiteRider had its own problems.

The best battery lights I saw were the Nicelights, which have reflector that make them incredibly bright, yet use only 4AA cells. Lots of folks had generator sets as well, which of course do make you work a bit harder but at least free you from worrying about having enough replacement cells on hand.

Not too far up the road, we came to a place where a guy had his garage open and was serving free rice pudding,

coffee, and snacks to PBP riders. I'd heard about him from Klaus, who said this spot was a bit of a tradition, and the place had postcards from PBP riders from all over from past years. As I rode along that afternoon, lots of kids were alongside the road holding out cups of water, sugar cubes, chocolate, or just their hands for a "gimme five" (sometimes I could reach down and slap three or four sets of kids' hands going by, a big thrill for them). They were great.

I got into Villaines checkpoint at about 5:30. I'd spent too much time mucking around that day, and I was a bit tired. So now I knew I was going to really have to hammer again if I wanted to get to Mortagne by nightfall. Yet I needed to rest a bit, and stretch.

I left Villaines at 6:00pm with 80km to go. Would I find that same end of the day power as I did yesterday? I was determined to try to get to Mortagne without having to rely on what was left of my lights.

This section turned out to be much more rolling than I'd remembered on the way out (again, I guess because it had been mostly dark), much of it high above open brown fields with great views. But I pushed very hard, and passed scores of riders, not once being passed by anyone the entire 80km. I don't think I ever rode harder (and I paid for it the next day!).

Towards the end, I linked up with a Dane and we took turns pulling each other for perhaps a half hour before he decided to drop back. A couple of ride officials were out on the road a few miles from Mortagne, to make sure everyone put on their reflective vests and lights. I did, although as I neared Mortagne as night fell, my headlight was down to a faint dull red glimmer. But it was the last night riding I'd need to do.

The last mile or so into Mortagne had one nasty long climb. I noticed a thumping from my rear tyre, and upon stopping, discovered that I had worn a large patch of tyre right through to the tube (I was riding sew-ups), in just 1000km (I'd put new rubber on before the start of the ride). Given the fact that my batteries were dead, I saw no reason to leave before light.

When it finally was light enough not to need to bother with the headlights, I left with Roger. It was our first time riding together, and we had a delightful time that last day.

Today's ride looked like it would be a piece of cake—a mere 140km (87 miles) to the end, and until 4:00pm to do it (actually, until 4:40pm, since our group had left Paris 40 minutes late). Actually, the problem was not getting there in time, but rather, trying not to get there until almost 4:00pm. We decided we would see if we could kill enough time during the day to get there as close to the deadline as possible, perhaps being the last ones to make the deadline. "After all" Roger added "if we ever do this again, it'll be that much easier to beat our last records!"

However, the riding conditions were almost our downfall. We were riding frequently across flat, harvested fields with a raging tailwind that was pushing us up to

Riding Paris-Brest-Paris ... continued all the way to Paris

remarkable velocities. “Wouldn’t you know it” I said “there’s never a decent headwind when you need one!” (I’d heard that the last PBP in 1991 had a terrible headwind all the way back, and I can just imagine how miserable it must have been on the last day crossing those open fields). We decided we’d stop for a long breakfast when we got to the next checkpoint.

I had thought that Roger had been having trouble earlier in the ride keeping on pace, but he certainly showed no sign of it that day, showing tremendous sprinting power when he had to. After an hour or so, my Achilles tendons had begun to loosen up (or perhaps the ibuprofen was kicking back in). The PBP riders seemed to now be few and far between.

Fairly frequently we saw prone bodies of sleeping cyclists by the side of the road, and I wondered if some of them would wake up in time to make it to Paris (it certainly would be a total bummer to be this close to the end and blow it by oversleeping). In one quaint village we passed through, a woman had her front window open and was handing out bowls of cafe au lait to cyclists.

I was beginning to feel a bit nostalgic already, as this rolling four day mass therapy group for the obsessively compulsive cyclist was nearing its end! We had a wonderful day of riding, laughing a lot and enjoying each other’s conversation as we shared some of our lives, and relaxing with the knowledge that we had this ride in the bag. I think if I ever ride PBP again, I cannot possibly reach that pleasure of knowing for the first time that I will have succeeded.

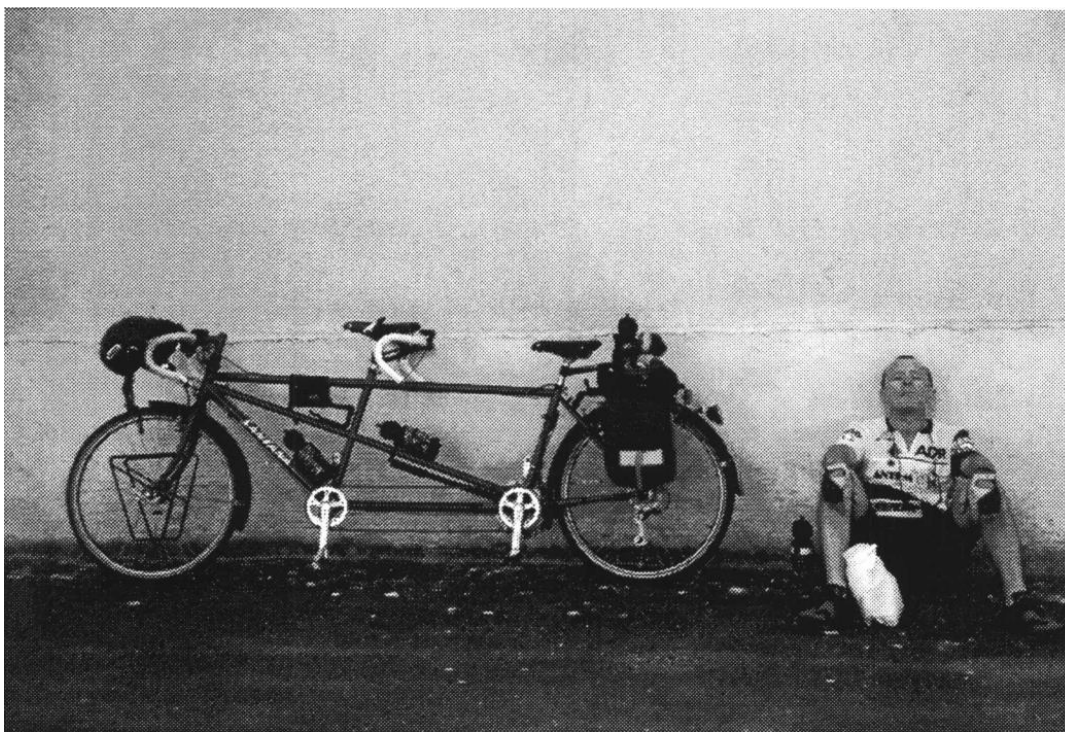
We pulled into the last checkpoint before Paris, Nogent Le Roi. I chatted with Noel Simpson, the head of Audax UK, who looked like a small version of Santa Claus and who was the stoker of a remarkable contraption we’d run into again and again on the ride: the tandem recumbent tricycle.

Affectionately known as the “repugnant,” this aircraft carrier-sized machine hovered just inches above the ground (I wondered how it crossed the many speed bumps on the route), had 72 forward speeds, and attracted a huge crowd wherever it went. It was the one of the more amazing cycling creations I’d ever seen.

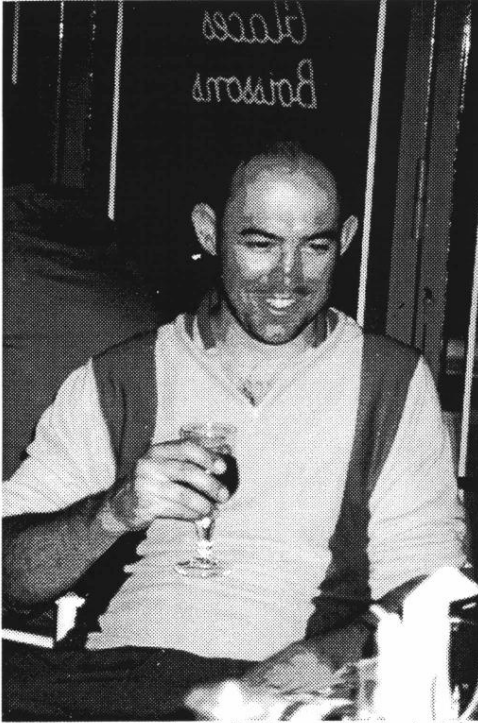
Roger and I left the checkpoint and rode into the village looking for a nice place to hang out and have a long breakfast. Nogent is a charming little village clustered around a small stream, and apparently was the major habitation close to the King’s hunting forest. There were beautiful old half-timbered houses leaning crazily over the street, many of which appeared to have been successfully renovated inside into professional offices.

We wandered into the cathedral, a rather unusual quasi-oval shaped structure with massive flying buttresses and nice stained glass, before enjoying a leisurely cafe and pastries. People would come up to us on the street enquiring if we were lost, since the centre of the village was quite a few blocks off the PBP route.

Leaving Nogent, we entered some cool green forests, and Roger remarked that it was around here that Louis the 16th had learned of the Bastille Day uprising.



Oh! Why am I doing this?



Robin Brown, aka Bullwinkle (Melbourne) sips a local red after a job well done.

Maybe ten miles from the end, I was passed by a small cluster of cyclists, including one whose number tag was "1." I sprinted to catch up with them, and discovered that the rider was none other than Scott Dickson, who had come in first during the previous two PBPs and, along with a group of eight other riders this time, had just set a new record this year: 43 hours and 20 minutes.

Already back in Paris for two days, Scott was just out for an afternoon ride! I congratulated him on his new record, and we chatted for a while, but as he was going considerably faster than I wanted to I jokingly told him I'd have to let him go ahead because he was messing up my attempt to come in last. But at least I could claim that I'd ridden into Paris on PBP with one of the winners (albeit two days later!).

Meanwhile, Roger and I were having increasing concern that we would get to Paris far too soon, and started looking for a nice restaurant to kill off a few hours. Finally, we found a place maybe a mile or so from the end, as we left "old" France and re-entered the creepy modernity of St. Quentin. It was a bit late for lunch, but the restaurant put something nice together for us, and we split a bottle of wine, then dessert, then cognac. We managed to kill about two hours, and were definitely feeling no pain, although we began to wonder if we might blow the 90 hour deadline by passing out drunk under the table. It seemed utterly unreal that we were still part of some sort of timed event going on outside!

So at about 3:35pm we decided we really ought to leave. I stuck the empty wine bottle in the water bottle cage on my bike as a souvenir. We were definitely weaving a bit and barely managed to avoid ending our PBP by colliding with each other during the last mile. Only we discovered that

our calculations were a bit off and we actually had several kilometres still to go, so we did almost blow the deadline! Finally we rode into the circle outside the gymnasium. I felt just fine, relaxed, and utterly content. Except that a number of French men kept coming up to me pointing at their watches and gesturing frantically for me to go in to the gym and get clocked in before 4:00pm. "Monsieur, attention, le temps! Allez! Vite!" (Yo, jerk, go check in, you're almost out of time!) "Pas de problem, j'ai encore onze minutes" (I've still eleven minutes, no hassle).

So I rode into the gym and turned in my route card, racking up a stunning time of 89 hours and 49 minutes. I had hoped to be the last, but even among the several hundred U.S. riders there was one guy who managed to outdo me and come in at exactly 90:00. But then, he was from southern Florida, and probably had more trouble on the hills!

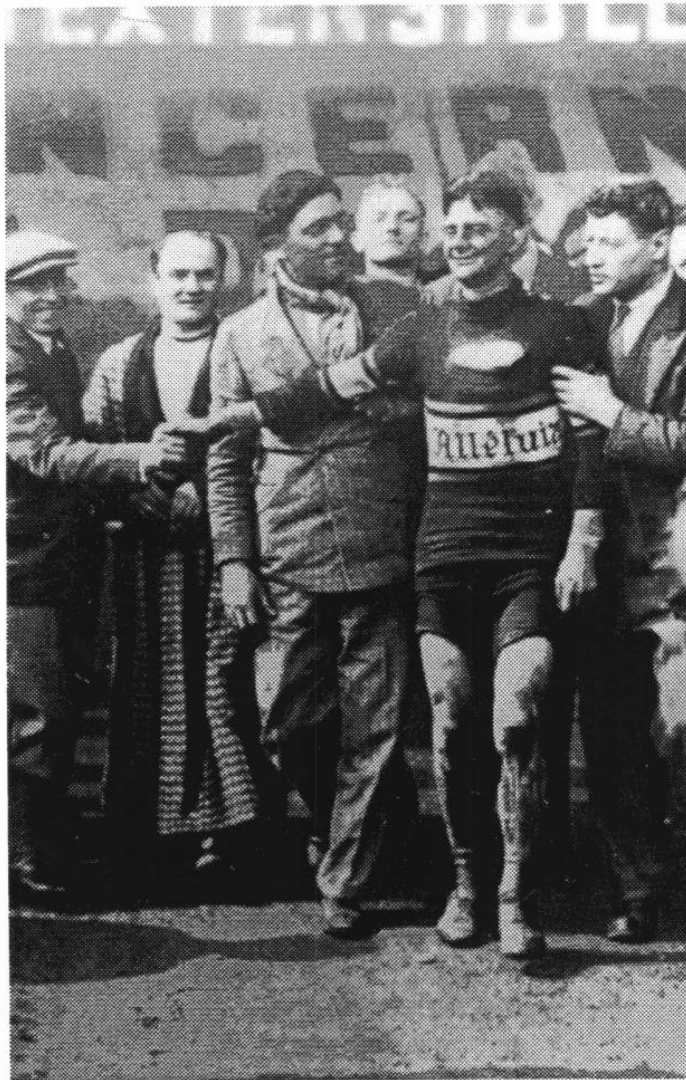




Checkpoint

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