

Riding PBP with Le Premier Group: Part II

BY BILLY EDWARDS

I typically pursue several tiered goals with endurance events. In 2011, when I approached my first 1200K, Paris-Brest-Paris (PBP), I was nervous but definitely goal-oriented:

#1 Finish and have fun.

#2 Earn the Charly Miller, that is, finish in not more than 56 hr 40 min.

#3 Finish in less than 50 hours or even 48 hours.

#4 Hang with Le Premier Group (This seemed far-fetched, but you need to dream big!).

I finished in 48 hours and 46 minutes, which was about as good as I could have hoped for, given the logistics I had planned. The first small groups, supported by crews, would finish in about 44 hours. I recommend having similar tiered goals for your PBP, because a lot can happen in such a long event. Many things are out of your control, such as weather and the behavior of other cyclists.

In the meantime, with your preliminary goals set, you should focus on the few things you can control in preparation for PBP. By early spring you should have planned your training rides, prepared your bike, considered your gear plan, and preliminarily made a decision on whether to sleep during PBP.

Early spring is the time to either have a schedule or finalize a schedule to complete the PBP qualifying brevets and perhaps some training populaires. Don't be afraid of the difficult brevets. Hills and mountains are your friends in training and will make the arduous sets of rollers in the final 300K of PBP

much easier. In 2011, I did a 400K brevet, 75% of which was above 8000', with stiff headwinds and serious mountainous terrain. I still sarcastically curse Vernon Smith, who designed that course, but it clearly made me stronger for PBP.

It is a long year, but work to complete your brevets early, no matter the order. Scheduling your Super Randonneur (SR) Series early is good in case you have a mishap on a ride, or work or family gets in the way. I recommend knocking out the 600K early and perhaps even before the 400K, if your region's brevet schedule allows it. Any lessons learned about gear or nutrition from a fast 600K, can be tested again over a 13- to 16-hour hard 400K. You need to complete a 600K for registration, and you may actually lose some of the physiological

randos and plan on pushing through the controls. The general qualification times are only to be considered in that you want to be doing your brevets in 50-60% of the maximum amount of time allowed. If your club keeps records of its brevets, consider trying to go for a club-best for that route. RMCC has several rides with long-standing fastest times that we will often attack with vigor in small groups. Inform fellow riders of your goal prior to the ride and encourage them to join you in not lollygagging at controls and carrying the right amount of nutrition between controls. Start practicing now to think ahead, stopping only at the controls, because at PBP you can survive and thrive by doing so.

Don't taper for brevets. Brevets are long, but compared to the goal of 1200K, they are just a few controls.

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benefits of that ride before August. However, after June, don't put your body through a really hard 600K or 1000K. You are better off keeping your rides to half days over the summer and not dealing with unnecessary fatigue. Additionally, once you have done your SR series, you can truly focus on PBP with a solid amount of training completed.

Plan on doing the brevets fast, like you would PBP. Find like-minded

You need to do more than ride long hours to garner the full strength benefits of cycling, so consider interval sessions to boost fitness. Doing difficult interval sessions the week of the brevet or even the day prior is great for adding a little fatigue to the legs like what you will have coming back from Brest in August. Riding with the premier group is not always smartly paced. Interval training will help you be ready for the accelerations.

Once you have completed an SR series, you need to do some long maintenance rides. I recommend some very long hard group rides or even mixing in some long road races. If you have never ridden in a pack, you don't want to do it for the first time in France. The behavior in some groups over the first 200K is similar to peloton riding. Some areas of the country have hard 200-mile or longer bike races or timed events. I highly recommend doing one where you can ride in a group (not a fully-supported, follow-car event). Note that you should remove aero bars because you can't use them in France.

It would be worth doing an overnight populaire to assure you have the proper light set-up and are comfortable with maintaining speed at night. Speeds drop at night, but the more you train and get comfortable with night riding, the better you get at maintaining momentum. Riding in a group at night is different, so look for chances to experience that before PBP.

Your bike set-up and fit for PBP needs to be comfortable for two continuous days of riding. Move to a slightly less aggressive position if you have had any issues with your neck or back in your SR series. Whether your bike is carbon or steel, it needs to be rugged and not too unique, in case you have a mechanical. Fancy race wheels are not necessary; consider strong, forgiving wheels and bigger tires up to 25mm width. When you ride PBP straight through, there is less down time, so there is an even greater chance for numb feet and hands. You want to go fast, but physical fatigue from a poor set-up can slow you down.

You need a light plan. I recommend strong rugged lights that you can change out completely from a control drop bag or by your crew. Use the same mount but change the lights so that you do not spend time changing batteries. Use lithium batteries that are lighter and last longer. A headlight for your bike, along with a strong headlamp on

your helmet, allows you to look out beyond the funnel of your bike's head light, which will help aid depth perception and prevent visual fatigue.

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You may have time to buy a few things at controls, but you can't be picky; un jambon fromage (ham and cheese on a baguette) is likely your best bet along with pain au chocolat (dark-chocolate filled croissant). Carry a few Euros in your back pocket to buy a quick Coke or croissant. The controls always have free water. Coke is available for purchase. Whether you carry rice balls or bars or gels, plan to have 70-90% of your ride nutrition on you or easily grabbed at the controls where you have support or drop-bags. For just Charly Miller, you might be able to consider one stop where you grab a hot meal. But even then, sitting

down should be regulated and kept to a minimum.

As a strong cyclist who was not having issues keeping pace over the first 200K in 2011, it was the need to fill my water bottles and Camelbak that left me behind, in the dark, at the first mandatory stop. Anyone who stayed with le premier group at that point had crews replace their bottles at the controls while they got their cards stamped. A Camelbak is a great way to maintain momentum without adding too much weight to the bike, plus it can be used to keep food close to your hands for quick access on the go. I also used a small Bento box, but that only contained my camera. With food, don't act like a Tour rider; this is not Le Tour and you do not litter. You need to carry your trash.

To sleep or not to sleep: that is the final big question to consider this spring. I can tell you from my observations, you will have difficulty going under 50 hours if you sleep, but you can do Charly Miller with one short sleep break. Le premier group will not sleep. By registering for the first start time, Sunday afternoon, you will get, what I consider, a free night out. The first night will fly by, if you are doing your best to stay with the fastest groups. The second night out will be a bit of hell. I recommend bringing some No-Doz caffeine caplets for you and your friends. (I made some French friends this way.) Once you can see the sun on morning two, you should be well under 300K and perhaps be able to plan on sleeping in a bed that night.

I hope this helps your brevet and training planning. In the next issue, I will discuss in-ride and start tactics for having a safe, successful and speedy PBP. 🚲

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