

PBP for Speedy Riders: Part III

BY BILLY EDWARDS

By now, your PBP ride plan is in place. Your SR series is done. Your reservations are made. You have a few key training rides to complete. You have convinced some friends to meet you at a contrôle or two. Or you are set with drop bags. You are basically ready to ride with the speedies at PBP. You are prepared for two hard days of riding and, at worst, a Charly Miller finish time of under 56 hours and 40 minutes.

In my final article on preparing for a fast PBP, there are a few details and considerations that could help you shave a couple of hours off your finish time.

Pre-Ride

Plan to scout the first 30 to 50k of the ride, a day or two before the start. There is usually a group that rides the start of the route on Friday. This gives you an initial look at the major turns and traffic furniture (concrete structures meant to aid traffic flow, but can be problematic for a pack of cyclists). If you intend to ride at the front, it's good to know where the initial turns are, so you can safely navigate the first part of the course.

On Sunday, get to the start early. Bring plenty of pre-ride fluids and food. Prepare to make many new friends. You need to be ready for an afternoon of being exposed to the weather. Get your hydration and nutrition started. Bring an extra bag of food and some toss-bottles with electrolytes and water. Unless you understand garbled French from a bull-horn, much of Sunday afternoon will be spent following the herds. Initially, you will gather at the entrance to the Velodrome, get your control card stamped and your magnetic card swiped. In previous years, we would

wait in a card-stamping line, then in staging corrals, and finally the start line. Whatever you do, make sure to get your control card stamped and your magnetic card swiped at every juncture.

Go to the Velodrome with a start-buddy or find one as soon as you get there. This will enable you to hold positions in the line. If you are waiting for a couple of hours, eating and drinking, you are going to need to relieve yourself. It is common practice to leave your bike as a place holder, while you go to the WC. You then do the same for your start-buddy. Expect some confusion, due to the many different languages spoken and the many different individual plans coming together to achieve the same objective: getting down the road in the most expedient fashion. Finding yourself next to French randonneurs with low rider numbers, means you are in the right place.

Engage with individuals at the pre-ride to learn a few names. These riders will become your allies in the confusion of the opening miles and once down the road, it will be comforting to see a familiar face.

The Start

Once the ride starts, expect an all-out bike race. If you are unfamiliar with riding in groups, go out and ride with some large, safe groups before you head to France. In the peloton, the faster cyclists will be on the outside moving to the front, while the pack riders who can't draft well, will be shuffled to the inside and out the back. Once shuffled to the back, you are forced to the outside to return to the front. When on the outside, you must be ready to dodge road furniture and to announce turns to your fellow riders.

It is safer, and better for visibility, to ride on the outside and close to the front, but then you are more exposed to the wind. The riders in the back have to worry about gaps opening and being left behind due to incidents.

The First Night

Expect everything to happen in the first 100K, including bike wrecks, failing lights, dropped waterbottles, random touching of wheels, and breaks in the peloton due to all of the above. Farther down the peloton, expect accelerations in order to close gaps that open. Riders are supposed to ride neatly on the right side of the road, but in the opening miles, the pack is large and everyone is fresh. Generally, I relied on my fitness level to keep me safe and away from the curbs, grass ditches and falling gear. It would be smart to do some good interval riding in the two months prior to PBP, so you are physically ready for that aspect of the ride.

The ride will eventually settle down, and become pretty comfortable and social. After the initial sorting, the departure from the first towns, and the arrival of darkness, the ride becomes fun and comfortable, but is still very fast. Last time, I found myself floating along effortlessly at the back of the peloton. Back there, you feel the accordion effect on the climbs, but there is minimal risk and people start to look out for each other. Sitting at the back allowed me to take on much needed hydration and food. I found a bunch of English-speaking friends and also did my best to link back up with those folks I met in the starting corrals.

The early controles will all be competitive. If you can avoid needing



2011 PBP So Close to the Start.
—PHOTO DIRECTED BY BILLY EDWARDS

nutrition at the first (optional) contrôle, you will avoid much of the hysteria of the large group getting nutrition on the go (another good reason to have a Camelbak). However, you will need to stop at the second (first mandatory) contrôle and that is when you need to focus; always get your magnetic card swiped and your contrôle card stamped first. Then, either get water and food as needed or have your crew sort you out and ready you to get back on the road. If you have a crew, they should assist you with parking your bike. If you are being self-sufficient, save the less mandatory tasks, like taking a nature break, for on the road (yes, learn to go on the go before you get to France). As the ride progresses, riders will get less competitive and become geared more to survival. If you are viewed as a worker, you will be welcome and encouraged by your fellow riders to get through the contrôle and ride with them.

Beyond Loudéac

The dynamics of the premier group changes with each edition, but what is certain, is that riders eventually start to look out for each other and structure contrôles within the group, such that no true worker gets left behind. Expect hard riding and even some attacks on the hard climbs as late as Carhaix on the way out to Brest.

If you get dropped, or are solo, don't be afraid to take a short stop between contrôles. The beauty of PBP is that with 5000 other cyclists, you can expect another group or individual to eventually catch up and ride with you after you have stopped. I took two notable breaks in 2011. My first was to take a mental break, and I ended up talking with a British journalist parked alongside the road around the 500K mark. He offered me a Coke and a moment of much needed reprieve, before the hard climbs to Brest. The other break was on night two, when I

asked my fellow French riders to stop, so I could stop pedaling for a moment. I only stopped for about 10 seconds, but it was just what I needed. My new French friends were willing to stop for a fellow randonneur, in this literally and figuratively dark part of the ride. Although not in the front, we were all still pushing for fast times and working together was better than leaving an individual behind at his darkest hour.

Even though this is the largest randonneuring event in the world, do not expect much spectacle or large crowds at the finish. The fun and cheering is along the route. As a fast rider, you get the fun of seeing riders going toward Brest much of the second day. On the second night out, you will see headlights for at least the first several hours as they head to Loudéac on their first full day. Expect random acts of kindness from spectators on the road. At one point, my group spotted a man yelling and handing out flimsy pieces of foil. My group all grabbed them on the fly. Inside was a magical treat: warm crepes with Nutella!

Although Paris-Brest-Paris is not a race, it is one of the most difficult events I have ever entered, because some friendly race tactics are mixed in. I understand the dynamics of Le Premier group, and I have a clear intention to make it a very fast 1200K "ride" for myself.

I hope this series helps many other speedies. I wish everyone, who reads my mini-series of articles, *Bonne Chance!* 🚲

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AMERICAN RANDONNEUR



VOLUME 18 • ISSUE #2 SUMMER 2015

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