
Impressions of PBP '07

Mark Purvis

If you had asked me to tell you about this PBP while I cycled it I would talk of the rain always falling when you least wanted it making the nights darker, colder and longer than they should of been, the wind pushing the rain into your face so you were often guessing were you were on the road and making it a struggle even to ride down hill.

I would talk of cresting a long climb always to see yet another longer, steeper climb ahead, the tired, heavy legs, the fog in the brain. I would talk of the exhausted bodies I saw scattered around on the cold concrete floors of the various checkpoints, or lying on the road side in the rain, sometimes covered by an emergency blanket, sometimes not. And always, there was that annoying little voice that gets louder through the day telling you to stop and sleep, telling you that you are cold, and soaked through and what you are doing is just not sensible.

But sitting down a few days later, relaxing and thinking back, other things come to mind. I remember the various nationalities groups cycling as packs. The French and Italians spread over the road talking loudly (encouraging each other I think), the Germans two abreast and quietly taking turns at setting the pace. I remember the rolling green hill when on the odd occasion the sun would shine, and the villages perched on top of hills with the church spires towering over all. I remember sitting at the checkpoints, an activity which took longer as the event progressed, chatting to fellow Audaxers, from anywhere in the world, and thinking at the time it didn't matter where they were from, we had something in common. Sometimes communications was a bit difficult, but certain sign language is universal. I remember the quiet "bonne chance, bonne route" and sometimes a pat on the back from the French controllers as I staggered out of a control point back to my bike, and the smile from the French volunteer serving yet another hot meal at some crazy hour of the night or morning, and I always will remember the French people on the roadsides as we passed. There did not seem to be many kilometres go by when you did not hear "allez" or "bonne route" from a person or group, sometimes in the middle of nowhere, at odd hours. Those French people—set up by the road

side offering hot coffee, cake, biscuits, strawberry jam on bread and a place to sit for a minute, at night, in the pouring rain—were amazing. I'll never forget those final moments coming into the finish, realising that I had completed what I had spend such a long time preparing for. These are my recollections and the following is my story, only one of 5000 others, about my PBP.

I had opted many months ago, before I knew better, for the 84 hour group. It had seemed so much more achievable back then, even though this was my first PBP. However I came to the start line with the dreaded 'flu, brought in from Australia, from where I had arrived three days before. I was physically

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pretty wrecked and any thoughts of going for a personal best time in this event had disappeared. My only strategy for the event now was to get as much sleep as possible and finish in the time.

The 5.00 am start was great. A few spits of rain, hardly any wind. I got my first glimpse of what was to become a familiar night time sight, that is the endless red rear light trail snaking along the road side, as we made our way out of Saint-Quentin and into the French country side. An hour out still in the dark, a fantastically lit church steeple evoked, "C'est magnifique" from myself while in the pack around me I heard, "Oui". These magnificent looking churches were to become another common sight, both day and night, in the myriad of little villages we

cycled through.

The expected rain arrived shortly later—in buckets—and kept up until shortly before I arrived at the first checkpoint, Mortagne-au-Perche, at about 10.00 am. It was my first chance to see what a checkpoint looked like. I moved on about 15 minutes later, impressed by the set up.

The starting group had thinned considerably by this stage and the feeling of having some road space after being in the large group for a few hours was refreshing. I continued like this for most of the day, dropping in on groups for an hour here and there, chatting with people of all countries, keeping time spent at checkpoints to a minimum, but always making sure to keep the throttle well backed off.

A bit after 8.00 pm I decided to have dinner and a powernap at Tinteniac. Food at these checkpoints was of surprisingly good quality and price, though the queues were often quite long. I was hungry enough to wait. Though I was feeling a little sleepy the legs were still feeling strong and I had a growing confidence that the 'flu might not affect me as badly as I had thought it might (and the medicos had predicted). I set a plan on getting down to Brest checkpoint at 5 or 6 am and then having a few hours sleep.

However, that growing confidence was totally shattered 60 km later. The rain was falling heavily again and the night time temperature had fallen with it. The slight headache that been with me all day suddenly became violent and I was shaking as the fever increased. By the time I rolled into Loudéac checkpoint at midnight the idea of continuing without some solid rest seemed outright stupidity. I managed to get a bed here after a half-hour wait, climbed into a dry layer of thermals from my pack (including balaclava and gloves), swallowed a heap of Panadol, crawled under the thick

woollen blanket provided on the camp cot and shivered with the fever until 6.00 am. I may have slept somewhere in this time but it did not feel like I had. Breakfast at Loudéac was out of the question as my throat was too sore to swallow much more than a couple of energy bars and water, so I staggered out to my bike and wished for a hill to appear soon to warm me up.

This was one of those cases of being careful for what you wish for because you might just get it—in spades! There does not seem to be very much flat earth between Loudéac and Brest. The hills were kilometres long and it was as hard to pedal down the other side as it was uphill with that ever present headwind getting stronger as the day progressed. But the rain had let up and there was even some sunshine, so I was thankful for that small mercy.

Finally, a bit after midday, Brest harbour

hove into view. For this first time PBP'er the view from the top of that hill was spectacular, as was the view as we crossed the Brest harbour on the bridge. My day got better when I met up with some fellow Aussie cyclists Matt Bradbury and Bruce Dodds, and their fantastic support crew, Dan and Naomi, at the Brest checkpoint. We had a relaxed long lunch together to celebrate the half way mark, but all too soon it was time to get on with the return journey. I managed to get back to Carhaix-Plouguer checkpoint before the weather broke completely and the heavy rains returned. From here to Loudéac the uphills became heavy going and the downhills treacherous. Even with good lighting visibility was limited. I rolled into Loudéac at around 11.00 pm feeling wet, cold and quite ill, and crawled into a tent which the wonderful Dan and Naomi had set up. It was out of the wet gear, into dry thermals, set the alarm for 5.30 am, Panadol, water, wonder briefly if I would

be able to continue in the morning, then I crashed. I woke briefly when Matt and Bruce arrived a few hours later, coinciding with a phone call coming through from Australia asking if I would be attending a Microsoft product seminar that evening. My response was polite.

When the alarm went off at 5.30 am I struggled to get upright, still uncertain as to whether I would be able to continue. I decided against seeing the medico in case I was withdrawn from the event and instead decided to see how I felt after a solid breakfast. It was still raining, though not as heavily as it had in previous hours. Pulling on that cold, wet gear from the previous day is never a pleasant experience, but is something I am fairly used to from other activities. I was able to eat a surprisingly large amount for breakfast at the checkpoint,

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"C'est magnifique" Magnificent looking churches were a common sight.



Photo: Gregg Bleakney (fbpphoto.com)

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and this was the sign I needed to continue the event (even just to use the huge amount of calories I had just consumed). As the day progressed I did start to feel much better. The rain turned into the occasional shower, the hills although frequent where not as long, and what wind there was came from behind. By the time I reached Mortagne-au-Perche at 10.00 pm that night I was feeling quite strong and positive.

I considered riding through to Saint-Quentin that night, but had heard from those who had finished other PBPs that the atmosphere of riding into town to the finish with the midday crowds was something that just had to be experienced. I also wanted to catch up with some of the Aussies at the Dreux checkpoint, so decided to sleep the night and time my run so as to finish around 1.00 pm the following day.

I had an inadvertent cultural experience at this checkpoint when I ordered, in French, what I thought was a sausage on bread from the local BBQ. It turned out, as I found out from one of the checkpoint staff I was chatting to a little later, that what I was eating was the regional variant of a black pudding. It was very tasty anyway (or I was very hungry).

Breakfast for me was at 6.00 am the next morning. I was tired but feeling infinitely better than I had in the past two days. The route to Dreux is comparatively flat so I sat comfortably in the mid-30s km/h for much of the distance. Being the final day there where a couple of people on the road with a little excess energy and feeling frisky so a few playful drag races along the longer flats ensued with a laugh at the end (I caught them on the hills and used the excuse that the 6 kg of gear on my rack slowed my acceleration).

When I arrived at Dreux and went through the control I found several Aussies had also just arrived, including a few of my fellow Queenslanders. It was good to finally catch up with them and find out how they were going, but there was also that sinking feeling when I learnt that 25% of the Aussie contingent had withdrawn or had not made the checkpoint close times. It was indicative of how tough this PBP was.

I waited around Dreux checkpoint for quite a while, catching up with various people, then at last moved on to make it to the finish by my planned time. At about 10 km out from Dreux a minor disaster struck. The sole on my cycling shoes peeled off, probably due to being constantly wet for the last few days. I tried various ways of taping the sole back on with the duct tape I carry in my kit, but because the shoe was wet the tape would not hold properly. Finally I shoved my foot back in the shoe and just wrapped the tape around the shoe. I did not intend to take my foot out of the shoe until the end anyway! My emergency repairs held well, even when I showed off to an enthusiastic crowd by turning on the pace up a longish, steep hill climb (they appreciated it, yelling out, "C'est le cycliste magnifique!").

Saint-Quentin and the finish came quickly closer, but those numerous sets of traffic lights in the last 5 km became a stop-start frustration with the end so tantalisingly close. And then it was over. That feeling of excitement and relief riding to the Saint-Quentin gymnasium, with the hundreds of French (and other) people cheering us on to the finish, the walk into that final control, the celebrations with the other finishers. There were the stories of "triumph and tragedy", some of truly gutsy efforts to finish this event which made me feel a little guilty for taking it a bit easy on myself. The whole atmosphere surrounding the completion of this event was truly something to experience. In fact, I found the whole PBP experience, the qualification, the training and preparation was an experience so worth having. However the question is, "Will I do this event again?". I think I will need a couple of years to consider it.

The vital statistics. I finished in about 80 hours. Over the whole PBP I had an on bike average of 28.5 km/h, about 18 hours sleep and as you can see spent too much time at the checkpoints, as I didn't stop much between them (except for nature calls, buying snacks and changing in/out of warm/rain gear). I lost about 4 kg in weight over the event (going from 65 kg to 61 kg).

PBP Aussies

Dave Minter

Audax Australia members might be interesting to know that:

181 Aussies have completed 1 PBP
(including Oppy's race win in 1931)
31 have done 2 PBPs
14 have done 3 PBPs
3 have done 4 PBPs
and 2 have done 5 PBPs

Aussies have ridden PBP in the colours of:

Alleluia-Wolber (Oppy again)
Canada
Denmark
France
Great Britain
New Zealand
Singapore
United States of America
and Australia, of course.

Finisher numbers are:

1931 = 1
1983 = 3
1987 = 12
1991 = 30
1995 = 42
1999 = 62
2003 = 68
2007 = 88

The Aussie team has included a few extras at times, particularly from New Zealand and Great Britain but aren't identified in this list unless their entry listed them as Australian.

The raw information has been drawn from the Paris-Brest-Paris online results list, with a couple of known additions (e.g. Thomas Maslen was listed as a Yank in 1991, I was listed as a Brit in 2003).

I would welcome any information regarding people I may have missed. The intent is put the full list on the website in the future as the listing is a little long and boring for inclusion in *Checkpoint*.

Checkpoint

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