

Bec's PBP

Rebecca Morton

Having defied the weather conditions and the high dropout rate, Bec rightfully reckons she's earned her new title: PBP Ancienne.

After deciding to attempt to qualify for PBP 2007 in late October 2006, my partner Howard Dove and I completed our PBP qualifiers in March. Being a strong rider, Howard decided to opt for the 84 hour start as it has the advantage of much smaller queues at checkpoints and a morning start. I knew I would need every minute of the maximum 90 hours allowed, so my choice was easy. We did a lot of long-distance training in the months leading up to PBP, so we arrived in Europe on 5 August feeling well prepared. Howard subsequently managed to injure his knees walking in Switzerland and could barely get down the stairs at the hotel the day before he started PBP, but I'll let him tell you that story.

The day of the 90 hour ride start was spent shopping for items which we didn't bring with us, namely batteries and food, packing the rack bags and preparing the bikes for the long journey ahead. There was supposed to be some time for sleeping in the afternoon, but although I managed to lie on the bed for an hour or so, I was unable to sleep.

In the very long starters queue I met up with Kerri-Ann Smith and Michael Bentley

who I had met on a recent (very cold) ride in Canberra. We chatted while slowly inching forward in the queue. It showered on and off during this time and I dithered about what clothing to start off in. I was feeling both nervous and excited and just wanted to get on the bike and start pedaling. We eventually started in the fourth wave of 90 hour participants at 10.30 pm. As we rolled out of Paris I quickly lost sight of Kerri-Ann and Michael in the crowds of people (some of whom were riding quite erratically) and rode on my own.

I was surprised how quickly the bunch split up and there were times very early on that there were reasonable gaps both in front and behind me. At first the weather was quite pleasant for riding—cool and no wind. Unfortunately the good weather didn't hold and by the time we reached the feeding station at Mortagne (140 km) I had been wet through by the heavy rain.

The weather for the rest of the ride included the odd sunny patch, showers, periods of heavy rain and some strong wind. Given the weather I was surprised by the number of locals of all ages who

lined the route at all times of day and night calling encouragement to the riders. As well as the calls of "Bon courage", I frequently got "Bravo Madame" when the supporters realised I was a woman. It was very encouraging and made me feel a bit special to be singled out from the string of riders going past.

Quite early on I was descending around a corner when I heard the unmistakable ping, ping, ping of something small and metallic leaving my bicycle, hitting the road and bouncing away from me. My heart sank as I prayed it wasn't anything too important. Immediately my rear rack started to rat-tat-tat loudly against my frame. The ping on the road was one of the screws which held the rack to the frame near the rear axle. I did have a bit of a look for it, but decided it was a lost cause and used a cable tie to attach frame to rack, passing it through the hole that the screw would normally occupy. This seemed to work and I prayed that it would hold as I knew there would be no opportunity to replace the screw en route. I went through several of these smaller cable ties before I ran out and had to use a couple of larger ones without threading them through the

Mortagne around 5:00 am on Friday 24 August: Bec with Howard, Warren Page and Dave Hart.



rack. This caused frequent squeaking and rattling for the rest of the ride (and no doubt some scraping of the paintwork), but at least it held the rack on and I was extremely grateful that it wasn't something more important to the functioning of the bike. In fact, the bike itself held up very well over the entire journey, the only other problem being slipping handlebar tape.

I saw Howard quite a bit along the way; more than I thought I would. I was coming out of the control at Loudéac and I saw him come in. He had gained six hours on me over those first 450 km! We had dinner together, then got changed and slept on the bus (not a good idea—very noisy and uncomfortable). However, it was raining quite heavily and we didn't know where else to go. The dining room was full of sleeping bodies and the "sleeping quarters" had long since filled up. We rode out together early the following morning (I'm not sure what time, but it was still dark). Howard stopped to fix something mechanical and we met again at a local food stop for a hot chocolate and baguette. Howard rode on ahead and I didn't see him again until I got back to Loudéac early the following morning.

The section from Carhaix to Brest and return was probably the most enjoyable part of the ride for me. I was feeling very tired when I arrived at Carhaix en route to Brest. I wisely took the advice of Bill Surgeon and Douglas Kennedy that I should have a sleep before going any further. At that stage I was wandering around in circles trying to remember what I had done with my chamois cream, lanoline and small alarm, while leaving a string of other belongings on the ground behind me. They picked up after me, Peter Prendergast gave me his tube of chamois cream to use and then I bedded down in the space blanket bag and had a good solid 40 minute sleep. I woke feeling very refreshed and rejuvenated, and thankfully with my wits restored. I rode well, despite the windy weather, both to and from Brest and my spirits were lifted by the sheer magnificence of the view of Brest from the bridge entering the town. Having passed the halfway mark, I started to feel that the ride was achievable and that I might actually get back to Loudéac in time to have a reasonable sleep that night.

It was almost dark when I got back to Carhaix (700 km) and that is when things started to go wrong. My main light failed to start with either battery pack, which meant I had to ride using my backup light and tiny head torch. Soon after leaving Carhaix the

heavens opened again and I struggled to find my way in the pouring rain with lights not really designed to be used in those conditions. I rode with Pat Lehane for a while, but we succeeded in missing a turn and going 5 km off track before someone came past in a car and told us we were going the wrong way. Shortly after getting back on track, I told Pat to go on ahead as I was continually dropping behind him.



Photo: David Tenby

Bec approaching the finish, "literally falling down with exhaustion".

I was extremely tired and began having microsleeps on the bike. I desperately wanted to get off the bike and sleep but I knew I had to keep going, and there were precious few dry places to lie down. As I slowly pedalled on through rain I started to despair that I would ever make it to Loudéac. At the top of each rise I prayed that I would see the lights of the town below me. There seemed to be plenty of lights, but none ever appeared to be that close. It was early morning when I finally got there, completely exhausted and with tears pouring down my face, knowing that I could only afford to have about an hour of sleep.

I underwent the usual ritual of control, then eat (these being the two most important things) and got a bit of a pep talk from Trevor King (thanks Trevor!) After changing into some dry clothes I found Howard packing up the "bed" in a little carport area we had spied heading out the previous morning. I climbed in and slept from 5.40 am to 6.40 am and woke to find that it was still raining, although not as heavily. I seriously

contemplated just walking around to the Aussie bus, paying my 50 euros and climbing in. What a blessed relief it would be—I would be able to sleep and I would be dry and warm. Very tempting! However, I then started to think about all the training I had done and how far I had come and I was still within the time limit. At this point my true Audax spirit kicked in and I decided to keep going until I couldn't go any further or was eliminated.

Thankfully the weather cleared fairly quickly and to my surprise I met Howard coming out of the Tinteniac (861 km) control as I came in. He had fallen asleep in a bus shelter, he thought for about 15 minutes, but it must have been much longer as he left Loudéac well before me, and I had a flat tyre en route. Anyway, it was good to see him, even briefly. He offered to stay with me, but I told him to ride on. The weather remained reasonably good for most of the day. I rode and chatted for some time with a Hungarian man who was riding a fixed wheel bike. I certainly admired his effort as I used every gear I had (I have a 52-42-30 chain ring and 13-28 cluster) to keep myself going!

It rained heavily again for about an hour before I arrived at Villaines (1003 km). This was another low point. I was feeling extremely spaced-out from lack of sleep and the effects of the caffeine gel, but I knew I had to make Mortagne (1085 km) by 5.30 am. I slept for an hour in the space blanket bag on the floor in the control at Villaines before heading for Mortagne. I stopped after about an hour to replace the batteries in my light (had tried main light again before leaving Villaines, but it still wasn't working), and that improved visibility significantly.

The roads were good and the weather had cleared, so that made the journey a little easier. Because I had been lost the night before, I kept getting paranoid that I was on the wrong track, despite there being lots of other riders around me. The signposting seemed to be a bit sparse in this section and for some reason there were quite a number of riders going the other way. The reflective strips on the clothing of other riders created strange, alien-like, moving patterns in the dark as my light illuminated them from behind. I did have a short powernap on someone's lawn as I was starting to have microsleeps on the bike. Needless to say, I was very happy to roll into Mortagne at around 4.30 am. With only 140 km left to go, I now felt certain that I would make the full distance within the time limit.

I was eating my “dinner” when Warren (another Sydneysider who had started in the 84 hour category) came up and told me that he, Howard and Dave Hart were getting some food and heading off, having had a good few hours sleep. So, I got to spend a little time with Howard again before I went off to sleep for an hour. I originally met Dave on my 400 qualifier in November last year and had done several rides with him since. After I commented that I had ridden nearly the entire ride on my own, he offered to wait in the cafeteria while I had a sleep and ride the rest of the way with me. I don’t think I was very good company as I rode the

entire last day in a daze. Dave very patiently stayed with me as I pedalled along slowly. It showered on and off for the last section into Paris.

Dave and I took our jackets off for the last few kilometres as we hadn’t had much opportunity to show off our Aussie shirts during the ride. Riding through the streets I tried to conjure up some excitement about finishing, but I was simply too exhausted. I parked the bike and staggered into the final checkpoint, clocking a time of 88 hours and 55 minutes. As I was leaving I chatted briefly to Kerri-Ann and Michael, but I didn’t hang

around to get my drink, swap jerseys, buy photos or anything. I wish I had, but having had a total of 6 hours and 35 minutes of sleep during the ride, I was literally falling down with exhaustion.

So, PBP 2007 might not have been the most enjoyable ride I’ve done, but I’m certainly very glad that I pushed myself both mentally and physically, to complete it. Given the weather conditions and the relatively high dropout rate, I definitely feel that I have earned the title of PBP Ancienne!

The fastest 5000 ever?

Tom Nankivell

When he rolled back into Paris last August, Tom Nankivell became not only a PBP ancien but also qualified for the Randonneur 5000 Award, barely seven months after his first Audax ride.

As “macho masochistic meathead mentality manifestations of masculinity” go, cycling the 1200-odd kilometres from Paris to Brest and back seemed sufficiently pointless to me to appeal greatly. PBP first entered my consciousness in January. I had previously heard rumours of the existence of a mad breed of “Audacious” cyclists who just pedal and pedal and pedal, all day and all night, and then all day again. I had also done plenty of multi-day touring over the years, and had even ridden over 200 km in a day. But 1200 km in 90 hours! How was that humanly possible?

Undeterred by common sense, I started out with the attitude that I didn’t know that I couldn’t do PBP, and would proceed as if I could do it...unless and until my body told me otherwise. My first Audax event—150 km through the Brindabella Mountains near Canberra—was a hoot: well organised, a reasonable pace, and lots of new friends to make. I found that rides of up to 200 km in the ACT drew a good crowd, but numbers dwindled to a hard core of six or so after that. Luckily, they were a great six!

In planning my PBP campaign, I opted not only for the necessary Super Series but also to test myself on the Riverina Romp 1000, held in late May (see Kerri-Ann Smith’s report in *Checkpoint* No. 32, Winter 2007). I also entered the Victorian Opperman (with

Rowan Burns and Richard Nevin, in team RoToRi), and did lots of other ACT rides in between.

As well as time on the bike, my weekly training schedule included several sessions at the gym, plus Pilates, stretching and massage. I also delved into the sports science literature and picked the brains of several experienced endurance cyclists. There was lots to learn, and lots to practice: optimum bike set-up; carbo loading and replenishment; proper training and recovery protocols and pre-event tapering; how to fix a flat when it’s wet and dark; late night starts; the science of circadian rhythms and the art of the power nap. (Plus, of course, after reading the ads in *Checkpoint*, I had to try out all the claimed benefits of the mystical Crème Randonneur.) I also started conceiving a new custom titanium velopedede, purpose-designed for ultra-long distance riding.

I steadily intensified my training and lengthened my distances over the first half of the year. The 200 km and 300 km rides turned out to be physically tiring but surprisingly manageable. However, on rides of 400 km or more, I had to learn to deal with sleep deprivation and the discomforts and niggles that inevitably come from so long in the saddle. The Riverina 1000, in particular, was a major struggle—tough

terrain and conditions, terrible saddle sores, limbs increasingly pleading for amputation, and the body’s and mind’s desperation for sleep. But the physical strength, knowledge and self-belief gained from these events meant that, when I lined up on that hot August night in Paris, it was with a quiet confidence and resolve.

In the event, “my” PBP had its fair share of hardships, hazardous moments, and fatigue-induced haziness, and the odd frustrating though comical episode such as having to ride 10 km in the wrong direction to retrieve a forgotten brevet card! But although the wet and windy conditions meant that 2007’s event may not have been the most pleasant PBP ever, I still largely enjoyed the atmosphere and experience.

Over the period of my PBP campaign, I clocked up over five thousand breveted kilometres and of course did many more in training. As to whether the time I took to qualify for a Randonneur 5000 Award is the shortest ever, I neither know nor really care.

But I would like to record my thanks to in particular to Wayne Crook, Michael Hanslip, Barry Moore and my fellow self-flagellators in ACT Audax, and Audax Australia more broadly, for helping me with my new addiction!

Checkpoint

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