

My 7th PBP Adventure

BY LOIS SPRINGSTEEN

Oh no! It's less than 65K to the finish and my ride seems to have gone up in smoke. I feel like a complete idiot. I'm lying on the ground in a wet, dark tunnel near Dreux with a broken wrist. PBP isn't supposed to end like this. Since my success of 2011, there's been some doubt in my mind. Could I do it again? Am I too old and too slow? Do I still have what it takes to go seven for seven? Things are looking pretty grim at the moment.

For me, PBP was not going to be easy. As I have gotten older, I've gotten slower so the margin for error is smaller. I train hard and the body sensations of feeling fit and strong are the same as ever, but my speed, high end heart rate, and night vision have all declined. Despite these changes, my legs felt good throughout the event due to the expert training plan that Coach John Hughes designed for me. The plan for PBP was to ride control to control while keeping a two-hour buffer against the closing times. Hopefully, I could grab

“A PBP participant must permanently believe that to quit is the worst thing that may occur.”

ROBERT LEPERTEL

ninety minutes of sleep on the second, third, and fourth nights. The ride went amazingly close to this plan because Bill Bryant (RUSA #7) and Johnny Bertrand (RUSA #2) made sure of that. Bill and Johnny were wonderful at getting me through those rough patches and keeping me on track to be successful. I'm so very fortunate to have had such wonderful help from these three guys. Total focus, total pros—all I had to do was eat and pedal, at least that was the plan.

Of course, things don't always go

according to plan. Qualifying for this PBP was difficult. I'd been sick for most of April and May and had to travel to Colorado in late June to earn my 600K brevet under very hot conditions. I'd finished in around thirty-eight hours but this certainly didn't bode well for having much sleep time during PBP. Still, Bill and I had a prescription that we felt would work. He'd meet me at

Me standing around at the “start holding pen.”

—PHOTO BY TIM SULLIVAN





every control, replenish my food and water and keep me moving on the lightest bike possible. We had a realistic concept of my ability going into the ride and felt that an official finish would be possible. If not, I'd try my best to settle for an "hors délai" finish (one that is over the time limit and without a finisher's medal).

As we made plans for our trip to France and pre-PBP tour, Johnny changed his vacation plans and graciously volunteered to help Bill with my support during PBP. I am the luckiest randonneuse in the world. How could I fail with Bill and Johnny on my team?

But why go back? It's hard to describe the wonderful feel of PBP. At times it is more a festival than a grueling challenge. Cheering crowds and street parties, bicycle art, impromptu roadside coffee/snack stands abound. There were six thousand cyclists on this special, quadrennial 1230K/90 hour pilgrimage with red taillights glowing as far as one could see during that first night. While I have not ridden many other 1200K randonnées, I will venture to say that this one is the most unique of all due to the sheer number of

participants. Even though I have become one of the oldest female riders, I still wanted to be part of it.

The Sunday night start was just as exciting as ever. I was in the wave that departed at 6:30 PM.

Johnny and/or Bill met me at each control and took me to the car for refueling (and a nap in the car as needed). Based on Bill's parking location, I sometimes went to the car first and then did the control check-in process after resupplying food and drink.

The weather at PBP was very good—the best in my experience since 1991, with the possible exception of 2003. I was surprised to see many riders napping on the roadside before dark on the first evening but perhaps they'd arrived in France very recently and were suffering from jet lag. Or, maybe they knew something I didn't know about sleeping during the event. No doubt they were speedy enough to make up whatever time they lost while napping during the ride. I planned to ride until at least Loudéac (440K) before doing any napping and pressed on according to my plan.

I don't like riding with a CamelBak,

Peg Miller, Lois Springsteen, and RUSA President, Mike Dayton climbing the Roc'h Trevezel.

—PHOTO JENNIE OH HATFIELD

but I used one on the first 140K leg so I could ride all the way to Mortagne-au-Perche without stopping. I did a good job emptying the water and food and arrived there feeling good. I took a short stop to drop off my CamelBak and replenish my food stash before heading off to the first timed control at Villaines-la-Juhel (220K). Waves of later, faster riders had passed me all night, but I was fine with that. I just did my own ride and felt strong and consistent though certainly not speedy.

Monday morning was foggy and cool so I was happy when the sun finally emerged. I found an impromptu coffee/pastry stand and took a quick stop at dawn. In Fougères at noon, I put on fresh shorts and jersey and ditched my warm clothing and spare taillight and batteries. A key part of our plan was to keep my bike as light as possible by not hauling extra clothes and this was working perfectly. I felt good to be one quarter of the way finished, but I

Me at the “Finish.”
—PHOTO BY BILL BRYANT

tried hard to resist thinking in those terms. I know to just take PBP control to control, to just keep moving forward steadily.

I had a chance to ride with Clyde Butt between Fougères and Tinténiac where we already started seeing the fast guys on the return. We enjoyed a Coke stop along the way but he got ahead of me when my front tire went soft. I had trouble getting enough air into the new tube with a CO₂ inflator that I'd never used before (rookie mistake) so I wobbled into Tinténiac. I never found the cause for the flat so I asked Bill to investigate it while I ate. He did his usual magic—performed a full inspection and added adequate air and I was soon on my way to the secret control at St. Nicholas de Pelem (where Bill and Johnny were not allowed to meet me) and then on to Loudéac.

Loudéac (449K) to Carhaix (525K) is always a difficult stretch in the dark for me. There's a fair bit of climbing and no fog lines or center lines on the road make it seem a bit creepy and scary. I also noticed that my Garmin had discharged somewhat during my sleep stop so my headlamp would occasionally dim down to give preference to charging my Garmin. This was somewhat disconcerting but I was too lazy to stop and set up my backup headlight. Riding slowly uphill with a dynamo headlamp also causes the headlamp to dim; I ride slowly because I can't see very well which causes my light to dim further, making it even more difficult to see. I still like this lighting setup but I should have just run my battery-powered Dinotte backup system as an additional light.

I was happy to arrive in Carhaix and take another quick stop with my crew and then head off to Brest on Tuesday morning. I'd also planned a pastry stop in Sizun along the way to Brest, a popular place to stop and refuel



on PBP. Lots of downhill on this stretch always makes me fear the climb back out of Brest, but many riders feel a burst of energy in Brest at the “hairpin.” This always amazes me, but it happened again, as usual. Halfway done! I put on fresh clothing in Brest and headed out to climb back to Carhaix. I was lucky to pass Peg Miller on the way out of town so she joined me for the long Roc'h Trevezel climb. We rode at talking pace and had a wonderful time—it felt like we had a tailwind, too, so the climbing was effortless. RUSA President, Mike Dayton, slowed to ride with us and pal Cap'n John Ende did as well. This was probably my favorite section of the ride. It seemed like we were back to Carhaix (703K) in no time.

Peg and I agreed to try and continue on together, but we somehow missed each other leaving the control. Fortunately, one of my favorite riding companions, Jim Bradbury, found me at the Carhaix departure and we made it almost all the way back to Loudéac

in daylight together. The sun set on Tuesday as we neared town and pal, Theresa Lynch, also cruised by, chatting with a French rider. Just to put things in perspective, the fastest rider at PBP was finishing the entire course about now.

After my second sleep stop in Loudéac (after 782K and over 48 hours of riding), I really couldn't find my rhythm and struggled to stay awake in the dark. It seemed like hundreds of riders flew past me like I was standing still. This was a difficult stage and I finally had to give in to the need to lie down on the roadside and take a short nap—I just wasn't able to make good progress despite eating well and adding caffeine pills. I have no idea how long I slept, but things seemed slightly better after that and I finally made it to the secret control followed by stops in Tinténiac and Fougères. In Fougères and 75% done, at midday on Wednesday, I put on my last set of clean clothes, dumped my warm

clothing and felt pretty positive. If I could press just a little bit harder (but not too much) I could make it to Villaines-la-Juhel and then finally to Mortagne-au-Perche with enough time for another much-needed sleep stop before the final push to Dreux and then to the finish. The home stretch seemed in view at this point.

At PBP, things can turn around fast. I arrived in Villaines-la-Juhel (1009K) an emotional basket-case. I really don't know what was wrong since I'd ridden fairly well on that last leg; all we could figure was that I was bonked. I felt overwhelmed by emotion and the ride just seemed too hard and too long to finish at that point. My excellent crew fed me everything in sight and successfully talked me off the ledge and I left feeling like an official finish was within my grasp, after all. I know from experience that the fourth night presents special difficulties for me so I wasn't out of the woods yet.

I got to Mortagne-au-Perche after taking a short break in La Hutte (to sit at a bus stop for a few minutes) and I grabbed a Coke at Saint-Rémy-du-Val. Ian Hands cruised in while I was there. The sun set again on the final approach to Mortagne-au-Perche and I made it in at 11 PM in time for one last sleep. I napped for ninety minutes and even woke up before my alarm went off, so it seemed like I'd hit this final sleep cycle just right.

At 1 AM, I bundled up for the descent out of Mortagne-au-Perche and long night ride to Dreux. My neck muscles were beginning to fail and my hands were feeling weak. Descending on the drops was getting hard now. I was actually happy when the climbing in the forest began. I even had to stop and stow my warm clothing as the nighttime temperature was quite nice. Johnny and Bill had suggested a pastry stop in Senonches but the route managed to skirt the edge of town and miss the bakery. It seemed like a really long haul to Dreux from there. I tried to stop at a roadside café for a cup of

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coffee and a quick snack only to learn, when I got to the front of the line, that they were out of coffee. This next section was very slow. Farther along the route, Bill was starting to be concerned that I'd slipped past him in Dreux because I was definitely overdue based on his estimate of my speed.

Finally, the sky showed an inkling of dawn coming. Unfortunately it started to rain, too. It actually felt refreshing in a way and kept me more alert than I'd felt in a while. The rain became steadier and steadier, then heavier and heavier until I finally stopped to put on my rain jacket. I was completely out of food, feeling hungry but glad the rain was keeping me awake. Since I wear glasses it was hard to see and the roads felt slippery.

As I approached Dreux around dawn of Thursday (the penultimate control) I noticed a small tunnel coming up. What a perfect spot to stop and clean my eyeglasses and readjust my clothing for the final ride to the control. I pulled into the tunnel, started moving to the right to stop when, boom! I'm on the ground. I hadn't seen a curb. I landed forcefully on my right wrist and bumped my helmet on the ground. I immediately felt a sharp pain in my already mangled right wrist and feared that I'd broken it again. I lay on the ground for a moment, as several riders passed by without giving me

a thought. I took inventory before standing up and vowing to press on. I was mad at myself for falling—what else could go wrong? As I started to ride, a fellow in front of me slipped on the painted center line and also went down. I stopped to ask if he was OK. He didn't respond to me but I assume it was because he did not speak English. It took him a while to get up (I feared he'd broken his collarbone), but he eventually stood up and began riding so I was relieved that he seemed OK.

A short time later, I made it to the control where Bill and Johnny were waiting. I explained that I'd crashed, Bill gave my bike a quick check and declared it to be fine. He brushed the mud off of me while Johnny filled my feed bag, and fed me a pain au chocolat that I could barely swallow. I was sure it wouldn't stay down but tried to swallow it anyway. Bill assessed my wrist with a

me at "Brest".

—PHOTO BY BLACK GROUP BIKE



worried look on his face. He shrugged and gave me a long searching look as if to say he was in doubt about the wisdom of continuing but it was my call. I said, "I can ride," so he hurriedly sent me to the control to get signed in and said, "Don't stop for anything." I'd really eaten into my time cushion on that last stretch so "Don't stop for anything" became my new mantra. Bill also knew I'd have a useful surge of post-crash adrenaline to help me ride faster for a while and didn't want me to squander it.

Things weren't going so well but once I got out of town and on the country roads it was clear that I had time to finish. It also became clear that my wrist was likely broken. I couldn't put any weight on it so I had to break the "Don't stop for anything" rule a few times to grab a drink of water but I wasn't able to even try to eat at this point. It was all I could do not to throw up, though my stomach was empty. So, are we having fun yet? I rode and gagged, lifting my hand off the bars for any kind of bump in the road. I tried

to put the fleeting thoughts of having to change a puncture out of my mind since I'm quite sure I wouldn't have been able to do it. Amazingly, though, I'm sure that I can finish within the time limit now if I just keep pedaling slowly.

The final stretch didn't seem very triumphant as I walked the steep climb near Gambaiseull. I couldn't risk trying to stand with my throbbing wrist despite the fact that my legs were still pretty good. The final miles to the Velodrome finish were spent trying to work out my stomach issues so I wouldn't embarrass myself by vomiting as I crossed the finish line, but I finished! I heard the chip reader beep as I crossed the line and immediately saw Bill standing there to greet me with a big smile. We did it again!

It's hard to describe the feeling of accomplishment of finishing a single PBP. To be a seven-time finisher is especially sweet. These rides never really go without a hitch, which might be one of the reasons I keep returning. The perfect ride of consistent energy

and no mistakes always seems to elude me. No matter how hard I try not to have it happen, there always seems to be some sort of drama. This is a long and hard ride, at least for me. I don't have any special athletic talent, but PBP somehow feels like a ride I can do. The final stats show that I was only about forty minutes slower than in 2011 which was essentially the same time as 1991 and that I spent four hours less time stopped during this event so I'm sure I got more sleep than in 2011. I attribute the success to my crew and, of course, Coach John Hughes for helping me train smart despite my lack of free time. I also learned after the ride, whether I like it or not, I was the oldest American female finisher this year.

During the rough patches in the ride (and even beforehand), I decided I probably would not do PBP again. Now that I am feeling the relief and pride of my success, I just can't seem to rule it out in the future. Nothing ventured, nothing gained I suppose. Or maybe I just have rocks in my head. 🚲

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