

Bon Courage: 2015 Paris Brest Paris Ride

BY THERESA FURNARI & GARDNER DUVALL

Among the many endearing cheers from the French citizens was, “Bon Courage.” It was my favorite, for it accurately stated what it took for the two of us to successfully complete Paris-Brest-Paris 2015. This year there were 6094 registered PBP riders, 6% of whom were women, from 66 different countries.

Our route to PBP began under a bright sunny sky, when we arrived in Paris on Thursday morning, August 13. Home for the next two weeks would be a 5th-floor walk-up apartment in the Montmartre section of the city. Bike check was scheduled for Saturday, so we spent the next day and a half exploring parts of the city and various restaurants. On Friday, although Gardner was unsuccessful in finding a bike shop to do a minor repair, the ride took us to the Arc de Triomphe, the Champs-Elysees and the Gardens of Tuileries. It was so fun and a dream come true, to ride through the city on our bikes. On Saturday, we packed our bikes, as if we were riding PBP, and rode the eighteen miles to the National Velodrome in St. Quentin-en-Yvelines. On route to the velodrome, we were able to ride through the Gardens of Versailles and see the Chateau of Louis the XIV. The opulence and immensity of the grounds suggested some reason for the French citizens’ opposition to the government in 1789.

At the velodrome, we waited in line for the safety bike check and sought some bike maintenance after I learned my front derailleur had been bent in

transit. We met up with other riders on Saturday and took a number of pictures. Although it would take the patient bike mechanics several tries to make the derailleur adjustments, I was set to go by the beginning of the ride on Sunday.

Sunday was another beautiful day and because our start time was not until 7:00 p.m., we had all day to sit and worry about PBP. Instead, we met Scott, a friend of Gardner’s, for lunch. The best way to pass the time was with

friends, eating wonderful food and talking about something other than PBP. After walking Scott to the train station, we packed up our bikes, and headed for the Velodrome for the start of the ride. Our group went off at 7:00pm, but not without a small incident. A few minutes before the start, Gardner’s bottom bracket came loose. All the contents of the Relevate bag came out to get the tools buried at the bottom, tighten up the bottom bracket and then repack everything in time to be off as scheduled.

The start of the ride was unforgettable. The streets were lined with residents, wishing us “bon voyage,” “va vous,” and “bon courage.” It was emotionally uplifting to experience this outpouring of support. Moreover, once the fans saw that I am a woman, the cheers were more vocal and more personal. PBP is still primarily a man’s



THERESA FURNARI.
—PHOTO GARDNER DUVALL



Gardner Duvall, Theresa Furnari and Mike Wali.

—PHOTO GARDNER DUVAL

sport, so seeing women participate in the activity is welcomed warmly and loudly.

Motivated by this outpouring of support, a cool night, and surrounded by other riders and a beautiful countryside, the eighty-seven miles to Mortagne were fast and easy. Then, under the cover of night, we rode to Villaines, and the next day, we cycled through Fougeres, Tinteniac and Quedillac. In the towns, we were often greeted by children, seeking high fives as we rode past. Throughout the route, there were residents of all ages, regardless of the time of day, wishing us well, giving directions and offering food and coffee. Although we are both coffee drinkers, we don't recall ever drinking as much coffee as we did during this ride.

A little behind our planned pace, we arrived in Loudeac (287 miles) about twenty-four hours after we started, feeling good and with time to get some food, rest and a shower, before our planned departure at 1:00am. However, we were unable to locate our hotel for a few hours, as I had left the voucher back in Paris. Finally, with the help of a friend, we located our rather primitive hotel room. We had planned to charge our lights in the room, but that was impossible as

the room had no functioning electrical outlets. We learned this after Gardner attempted to plug in a power strip only to blow out the lights for the entire apartment building. With so much going wrong, we did not get to bed until 11:30pm.

Our alarm failed to sound at 12:45am and we woke up at 1:30am in a panic. Packing up as quickly as possible, we left the hotel and wandered around the city for a few minutes to find the start area, before finally getting back on route at 2:05am. Needing to travel the forty-nine miles to Carhaix before the closing time of 7:33am, we maintained a steady pace and arrived in Carhaix in four hours. Still running too close to the closing times of the controls, and under the impression that we had to be in Brest before forty hours or 11:00am, we ate a quick breakfast

and left. It was during this leg that we experienced the biggest climb on the route, the Roc Trevezel, a 2.5-mile uphill. It was hard, but nothing we had not experienced before; all of that hill training had been worth it, after all. The view from the top was beautiful and the downhill was long and steady. As a result, we arrived in Brest at 10:43am. Here we learned that our actual closing time was 2:23pm, so we took a well-deserved break, enjoyed a pizza and chocolate mousse.

The leg from Brest to Loudeac was memorable, but also difficult. The long downhill leading into Brest became a long uphill and we were getting tired. It was during this leg that we began to take part in the PBP custom of ditch naps. A variety of rest stops were used; we saw one rider, for example, curled up in a telephone booth. During one of our naps, a group of Irish riders passed by singing a traditional song.

Local residents continued to cheer us on, even though we were now days into the event. There were quite a few memorable moments, such as when a little girl of about ten, frantically rode her small bike toward us from a side road. When she reached us, she leapt onto a stone wall to cheer us on. In another place, the patients from a rehabilitation home were all seated on the road to cheer us on. In another

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Gardner Duvall and Theresa Furnari.

—PHOTO GARDNER DUVALL

location, an amputee sat alone cheering us on with a strong voice. Making good use of our DC Randonneur pins, we gave them out to all of these people and others along the way. When Gardner gave one to the amputee, he offered to roll his wheelchair into his house to get us some coffee, but Gardner politely

begged off to keep up our pace.

Although we had slowed, in part caused by a strain in Theresa's right Achilles tendon, we arrived back in Loudeac at about 11:30pm, having completed four hundred and eighty-four miles. After a quick meal, shower and an hour and a half of sleep, we

departed for the final leg at 3:11am. We were behind our planned schedule, but we hoped to make up time. We pushed hard to Tinteniach, arriving a few hours before the closing time. There, we had breakfast and took a short nap. The leg to Fougeres was fun, as it was in the daylight and we were able to see the immense fortress there. Gardner bought a grilled sausage and beer in a neighborhood shop. Feeling a bit more comfortable with our pace, we stopped and had wonderful crepes at La Tanière, in exchange for the promise to send a postcard from Maryland. Theresa received her first "French" kiss (on both cheeks), from a five-year-old child, as we chatted with his mother and enjoyed another cup of coffee. We arrived in Villaines to a hero's welcome and were treated to table service by the children of the town. We felt embarrassed by such an outpouring of support and it motivated us to continue on. We rolled into Mortagne at 12:00am.

We had eighty-eight miles left and they proved to be the hardest. On the ride into Dreux, Theresa's left thigh cramped and Gardner's injured toe (he had dropped something on it the week before the ride) was swollen and painful. We were out of Ibuprofen, and to top it off, we lost each other for a while.

In Dreux, it was raining. After finding each other, we had breakfast and chatted with friends. We were determined to finish, so we left quickly and cycled in the rain for the last thirty-nine miles. Mental determination and courage kept us going and made us push ourselves as hard as we could. The scenery was pretty, but we were extremely glad to end the 767-mile ride at 11:38am (88 hours, 38 minutes).

"Bon courage" to all who take part in this most unforgettable event, in the future. 🚲

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