



# PARIS-BREST-PARIS

IT'S ONE of the world's great cycling events. A non-stop ride of 1200 kilometres from Paris to the west coast at Brest, then returning to Paris. The Paris-Brest-Paris is held only once every four years. Three Australians completed the ride in 1983, and twelve in 1987. A contingent of 32 Australian riders went to France to ride the 1991 event in August the centenary of PBP, first held in 1891,

The Centenary PBP by ALETHEA MORISON

Four years ago I wrote a story, "Vigil at the Finish", which appeared in Cyclist's predecessor, PUSH ON. It was a bystander's account of that most demanding of Audax rides, Paris-Brest-Paris. In its centenary year, 3380 riders from around the world took part. This time I was one of them.

My interest in attempting PBP was first sparked when I met Aileen Martin at the finish of the 1987 event. Aileen, a Western Australian grandmother, had overcome a cracked pelvis, legacy of a spill a few weeks earlier, and diarrhoea throughout the event to become the first Australian woman to complete PBP. It didn't sound altogether a joyous experience but I envied her courage.

"Courage", of course, is the actual meaning of the Latin "audax".

The AUDAX CLUB Parisien and its chapters around the globe conduct long distance "touring" rides (randonnées), ranging from 200km to the 1200km PBP. Rides are completed within a time limit and

certain standards apply, such as the use of mudguards and lights. To qualify to take part in the quadrennial PBP, one must complete a "Super Randonneur" series (200, 300, 400 and 600km rides) earlier in the PBP year.

Over the years I'd tackled several 200km randonnées but had never advanced further. Despite Aileen's example, this might have remained the case had not Ann Armstrong, a friend from Canberra, decided she was ready for something longer and asked me to join her. The 300km ride we then did from Canberra towards Sydney, was literally a breeze, a powerful tailwind propelling us for the entire distance. Another welcome companion on this ride was our mentor. Bob Chorley. An outstanding Audax rider and great teacher, Bob passed on techniques and helped to buoy our spirits through this and subsequent randonnées.

Almost without realizing it, I found I'd done the 200, 300 and 400 qualifiers for PBP. Ann suffered an injury before our planned 600km randonnée and I was obliged to tackle it without her or Bob. They were still there in spirit, though, or at least in my imagination Ann's voice admonishing me to drink more and Bob's saying, "Change up a gear now and we'll do a little out of the saddle work. You won't be needing that little chain ring," referring to my 24-tooth granny, "none of this mixmaster stuff."

There was plenty more tangible company and fine support during the 600km ride around Grenfell in NSW.

On the first of the ride's two days, I rode with some of the strong contingent of Victorians planning to go to Paris and on the second with NSW rider, Stephen Poole, who went on to become the fastest Australian finisher at PBP. Now I'd qualified. The decision to go to Paris had already been made as I was accompanying my husband, Neil, who had decided long before to improve on his 1987 PBP ride. It seemed inevitable that I should enter as well.

At the end of May, three months before PBP, Neil and I set off on a US tour to increase our cycling strength. Often in the weeks that followed, I found myself attempting goals harder than ones I might have set myself, such as the ascent of 4,346 metre Mt Evans in Colorado on North America's highest "auto road". To find the reserves I needed though, I only had to chant, "Getting stronger for PBP."

As well, I was thrilled, with my new found determination, to keep pace with my spouse occasionally instead of lagging up to a kilometre behind. This and our shared goal helped make the US holiday our best-ever tour together.

Our riding tailed off more than a week before PBP. We rested in the lap of comfort with relatives in England and were knocked flat by the heavy, humid summer air of France when we arrived. I felt an overwhelming lassitude in the days just before the event. Doubts flooded my mind. Would I be able to finish and what kind of disgrace would it be to fail? I'd taken months off work to



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train for this and had no possible excuse for failure. The ride loomed like an exam the exam for everything I'd ever learnt about cycling.

The countdown began on Sunday, August 25 as we presented our bikes for inspection at the starting point in St Quentin-en-Yvelines near Paris. That night the Australians met for a kind of last supper. Many were from Victoria but other groups had come from NSW and Western Australia. The Victorians, most of whom had elected, from the 3 possible starting times, the one which gave them a full time allowance of 90 hours (10 pm, August 26th), projected a strong team or family image. Most intended to ride in groups or pairs, offering each other support. The NSW riders, who tend to be intensely competitive among themselves, were generally taking the start time which limited them to 84 hours (5am, 27th), A couple of Australians were to be in the 80 hour group (8pm, 26th). These included Gerry Tatrai, who had recently captured third in Race Across America.

At 3.30 the morning of the start I ate my muesli like the last meal before execution. We rolled down to the "depart" and checked in smoothly. Because we had arrived early we were in the foremost and most eager group. At 5am it surged forward in a mighty wave which swept along the streets of St Quentin. Almost immediately I lost sight of my NSW friends and started to drop back, hoping to latch on to a group travelling at moderate speed. All, however, seemed to be in a frenzy. When the sun came up I was still in one huge, swift peloton, a rainbow-coloured, glittering serpent gliding through the French fields.

By 200km, the peloton had splintered several times, I felt utterly spent and welcomed a flat tyre which forced me off the road into the shade. A further respite came at the first control point, Villaines la Juhel, where I even saw Neil briefly. Then I plugged on, struggling with heat and hills. A few Australians rode with me that afternoon but soon left me behind, I had better luck with a group of three Spaniards. When I settled in behind them, there were some amused remarks about something that sounded like "companion" but which I suspect literally means "wheel sucker". However, when I began to feel embarrassed and moved off the wheel of one of them, he pointed, indicating I was welcome to stay. An American woman joined the party, giving me someone to talk to, and the Spaniards seemed quite tickled at having the company of a couple of the small number of women riders.

By late evening I was alone again but riding comfortably and confident of reaching my night's goal of Loudeac at 445km. I was helped by meeting at a secret control with an American I knew. He invited me to join his bunch, though he expressed doubt that I'd be able to stay with them. This fired me up nicely. As we barrelled along through the night, I stayed glued to the wheel in front. When my own turn came as leader I stretched out on the aero bars and was sure not to let the pace flag. The reward was "Fine ridin', lady!" as my replacement at the front moved past me.

At Loudeac, while the Americans continued towards Brest, I joined the queue for beds. In the line with me was Victorian, Peter Horsley whose

PBP bike had been stolen in London a couple of weeks earlier. He had replaced it with a slick-tyred Moulton mountain bike but was having difficulty in finding riding companions on the hilly course. Later on, he gave up pushing the pace and opted instead for plenty of sleep and sightseeing, ultimately finishing more rested and relaxed than anyone.

After three hours in bed, I gave up hoping a snorer next to me would choke to death and prepared for a fresh assault. I was pleased to find I was setting off at the same time as friend Russell Moore. Not at all to my surprise, Russell drew away from me as the morning progressed. Nevertheless, I approached Brest in good spirits hoping to see Neil, grab a couple of hours rest and still set a good time. As I arrived, though, Russell was just leaving with the news that Neil had gone 50 minutes before. The different routes for the course in and out of messy Brest meant that we hadn't even passed each other. When I saw how crowded the check point restaurant was, I decided to head for home to try for a meal here would be breaking the cardinal rule of not wasting time at controls.

Heading away from the port of Brest, its hazardous railway lines criss-crossing the streets and its swarming traffic, I stopped at the first supermarket to buy supplies. At the checkout an American rider with a huge bottle of Pepsi under his arms well as caffeine in various other forms, asked me if I'd seen any "No-Doz" pills!

My own inclination was to allow myself a short rest. A psychologist



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specialising in treatment of sporting people once told me of the importance of not forcing one's body to remain constantly in "sympathetic" (active mode) but ensuring it has sufficient time in "parasympathetic" mode, the state in which energy can be replenished. He had taught me to achieve this state quickly by way of meditation so, on a narrow strip of grass in the supermarket car park, I proceeded to meditate. Then began the second half of PBP.

From Brest, it is a long, long climb back to the Roc Trevezel, highest point on the PBP course, about 50km inland. The climbing and a strengthening headwind sank my spirits. At the top of the climb, I fell in behind a tandem which pulled me across the plateau. Then I was on my own again, battling the wind alone.

Shortly after Carhaix at 696km, I realized someone had tagged onto me. He sat behind for some way until I began to flag, then took the lead. Soon after, we caught up with a group and thanked each other politely for the help. Guy, a Frenchman from near Lourdes, had started seven hours before me. One of his companions had fallen ill, another was too slow and, Guy said, he had been losing interest in the ride until I showed up, like Baby Bear, going at a speed that was "just right".

Guy decided to make it his mission to get me home in good time and, for the rest of the ride, we had a marvellous time, alternating between riding alone and with a succession of French, English, Irish and American groups. It was a special delight of the event to be able to chat with people of other nationalities all sharing the

same interest and the same goal. Even where there was no common language, we still bowled along in groups, cooperating to beat the wind and avoid hazards, everyone at least able to understand the shouts of "Voiture!" (car) and "Camion!" (truck).

Guy and I hesitated at Loudeac (773km) where we arrived about 11pm on the second night. Finally, we decided to brave the 85km to the next check point, Tinteniac. A couple of Americans soon joined us and, as the night wore on, the band of riders grew, all elated that the wind had dropped and that more than two-thirds of the ride now lay behind us. Then we all took a wrong turning in the dark. After sweeping up a road that narrowed into the tiniest little laneway, the whole peloton had to stop and clumsily turn itself around.

At Tinteniac, we slept until dawn, then hit the road for the final day. The wind was worse than ever but the camaraderie of the riders was wonderful, as was the locals' enthusiasm in villages through which we passed. People stood on the street corners or sat in pavement cafes, applauding and shouting, "Bravo messieurs!" with the occasional "Madame" thrown in for my benefit. Children stood by the roadside or jogged along beside us offering water, biscuits and sweets, or just holding out their hands for us to slap in greeting as we passed. By the end of the ride they must have been more sore than we were!

Best of all, after darkness fell, there were people out directing us along the often intricate routes through villages. They even loomed up like spectres at intersections seemingly in

the middle of nowhere where we could so easily have missed a turn in the dark. In the dead of night, as we neared journey's end, an anonymous motorist crawled along behind us, evidently just to help illuminate the road ahead.

Travelling with a Frenchman opened my eyes to a new style of Audax riding. For me a guiding principle is never, except in emergency, to stop between controls. The French though, succumb to the temptation of the occasional wine, beer or "panaches" (shandies) at the ubiquitous bars. Halfway through the final day I found myself in a bar, summoning up my best French to satisfy the curiosity of the proprietress about the three Australian women, taking part in PBP. She asked me our ages which I thought were all close, between about 30 and 35. I suspect she didn't believe me and who could blame her? Close to 1000km of riding had aged, us all. When I met anyone I knew that last day, I saw an extra 10 years carved in their faces.

Just after the 1000km mark, things came a bit unstuck for us. Guy began constantly pouring water on his feet, grimacing in agony and muttering, "J'ai mal, j'ai mal." At times he even wrenched off his shoes and rode in bare feet. Suddenly I felt a shooting pain in my right knee and found I couldn't exert any force with it. This prevented me standing out of the saddle on hills, so my bottom also became sore.

We limped up what seemed a huge climb to the final control at Mortagne au Perche (1077km) and presented ourselves at the infirmary. Massage and magic lotions produced



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miraculous results. We pressed on in darkness at about 10pm, feeling fine, though the delay had dashed my hopes of a sub-70 hour time. The goal now was to finish in under 72 hours by reaching St Quentin before 5am.

On we rode with mad cries of “C’est gagné!” (“It’s won!” or perhaps “It’s in the bag”) and “A Paris, a Paris!” The moon seemed to light the road and lead us forward. At times we fell in with other groups but found the pace too slow and that any slackening of speed encouraged drowsiness. So we tore ahead and reached the outskirts of St Quentin where, at 4am, I was panicked after another wrong turn took us three km off course. Luckily Guy kept his head and led the way back.

Finally we reached the finish and, after a celebratory drink, beer for Guy and, lemonade for me, made our way to the gymnasium where massages and mattresses were on offer. After my massage, I spotted Neil asleep nearby and crawled up beside him. Awakened after three hours of sleep, he mustered as much enthusiasm as he could for my early return but, when my narrative threatened to take as long as the ride itself, was reduced to repeating, “Good, now have a shower and go to sleep.”

A little later I was back watching the finishers, incapable of sleep though so tired I was becoming hysterical. When I heard an American say he’d handled the event with “power napping”, I giggled until I cried. Mine weren’t the only tears. The last Australian to finish was also shedding a few as he came in. There was no lack of laughter either. A

Victorian group came in laughing with Phil, a tame Canadian who’d joined them. They formed up straight away for photos to immortalise the jovial bunch.

We Australians were very proud of our selves as a group. We heard that about 540 riders pulled out but only one of the Australians abandoned the ride. Of course, the Aussie women Victorians Ann Stacpoole and Sue Taylor, and I had a 100% success rate! For me, Ann Armstrong was there in a way as well.

## My bicycle

What sort of bicycle works best for Parish-Brest-Paris? Almost any machine can be used as there is no restriction on design except that it must be propelled solely by muscular effort of a rider. In practice, lightness and aerodynamics are watchwords. Though there was a sprinkling of tandems, trikes and even tandem trikes (because you can suffer more, one rider explained), most riders used a racing bicycle with the lightest, skinniest tyres available. Many carried virtually nothing other than puncture repair equipment with them. A very few took copious quantities of gear in panniers.

By necessity, I used my Jim Lemon touring machine with some of the accoutrements as the front rack and fork-mounted bidons stripped off, and strapped a rack-pack to my rear Blackburn carrier for food, clothing, batteries and wet weather gear.

I used 700C wheels with aero Mavic rims and narrow Kevlar-belted clinchers, Scott aero clip-on bars, battery lights to save generator drag, Suntour Accu-Shift bar-con shifters

for convenience and comfort, and a cheap Sella Italia anatomic saddle because I have found nothing better for my bottom to rest on. (This doesn’t imply it’s a comfortable saddle, just nothing else seems superior!) Other equipment included the mandatory mudguards (Esge), Campagnolo Record pedals with Specialized touring shoes (I like to be able to walk, too), Campagnolo Record brakes with Shimano Ultegra short-reach aero levers (no cables to tangle with when on the aero bars) and back-up lights including one of the marvellous VistaLites on the rear.

## Australian PBP finishers, 1991

**Women:** Alethea Morison (NSW), Ann Stacpoole (Vic), Sue Taylor (Vic)

**Men:** Dermott Avon (Vic), Phil Bellette (Vic), Andrew Bray (Vic), Malcolm Clark (Vic), Peter Donnan (Vic), Gilbert Droz (NSW), Colin Farmer (WA), Paul Farren (Vic), Ronnie Hopper (NSW), Peter Horsley (Vic), Neil Irvine (NSW), Michael Kater (Vic), Keith Lowe (Vic), Thomas Maslin (Vic), Derek McKean (Vic), Peter Moore (Vic), Russell Moore (NSW), Kevin Norris (WA), Carl Olsen (NSW), Kevin Pascoe (NSW), Stephen Poole (NSW), Peter Reddan (NSW), Phil Rowley (Vic), Lindsay Rose (Vic), Mark Sorrell (Vic), Gerald Tatrai (NSW), Steve Vesel (NSW), Keith Whiteley (Vic).

[Ian Pollard (SA) entered through Audax UK.]

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Before PBP—Hotel Adacio Saint Quentin-en-Yvelines  
Malcolm Clarke, Peter & Gilbert Moore,  
Anne & Michael, Andrew Bray, Peter Doonan, Marion

PBP OPENING CEREMONY FRANCE 1991  
Derek McKean, Lindsay Rose, Paul Farren, Mark Sorrell,  
Ann & Michael Kater, Neil Irvine, Dermot Avon,  
Thomas, Peter Moore



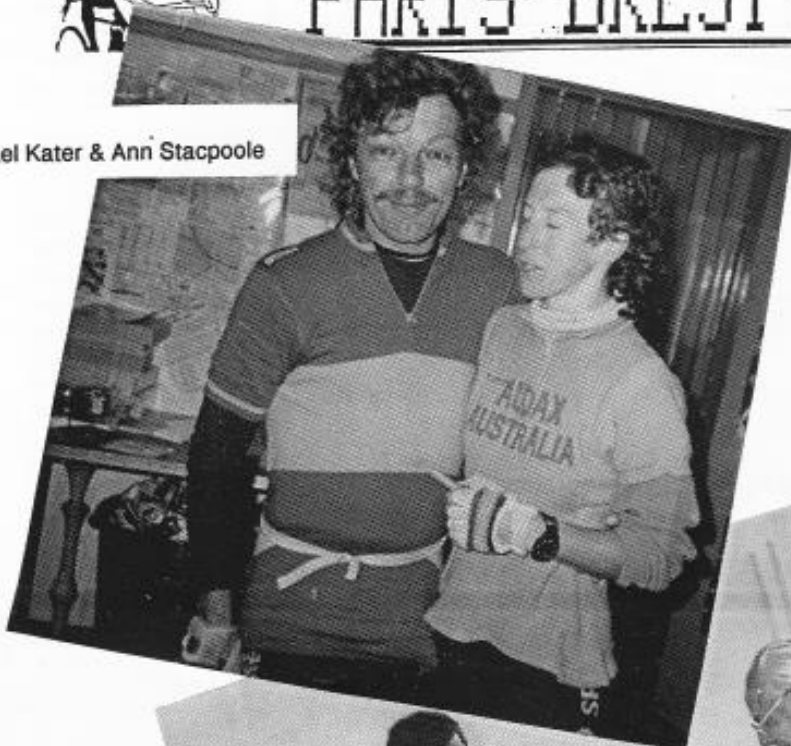
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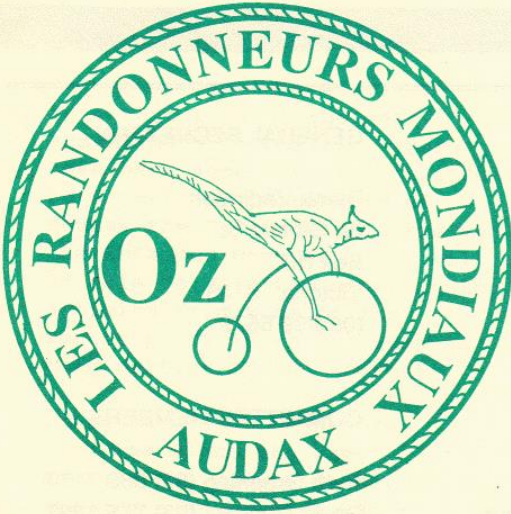
Michael Kater & Ann Stacpoole



AFTER PBP



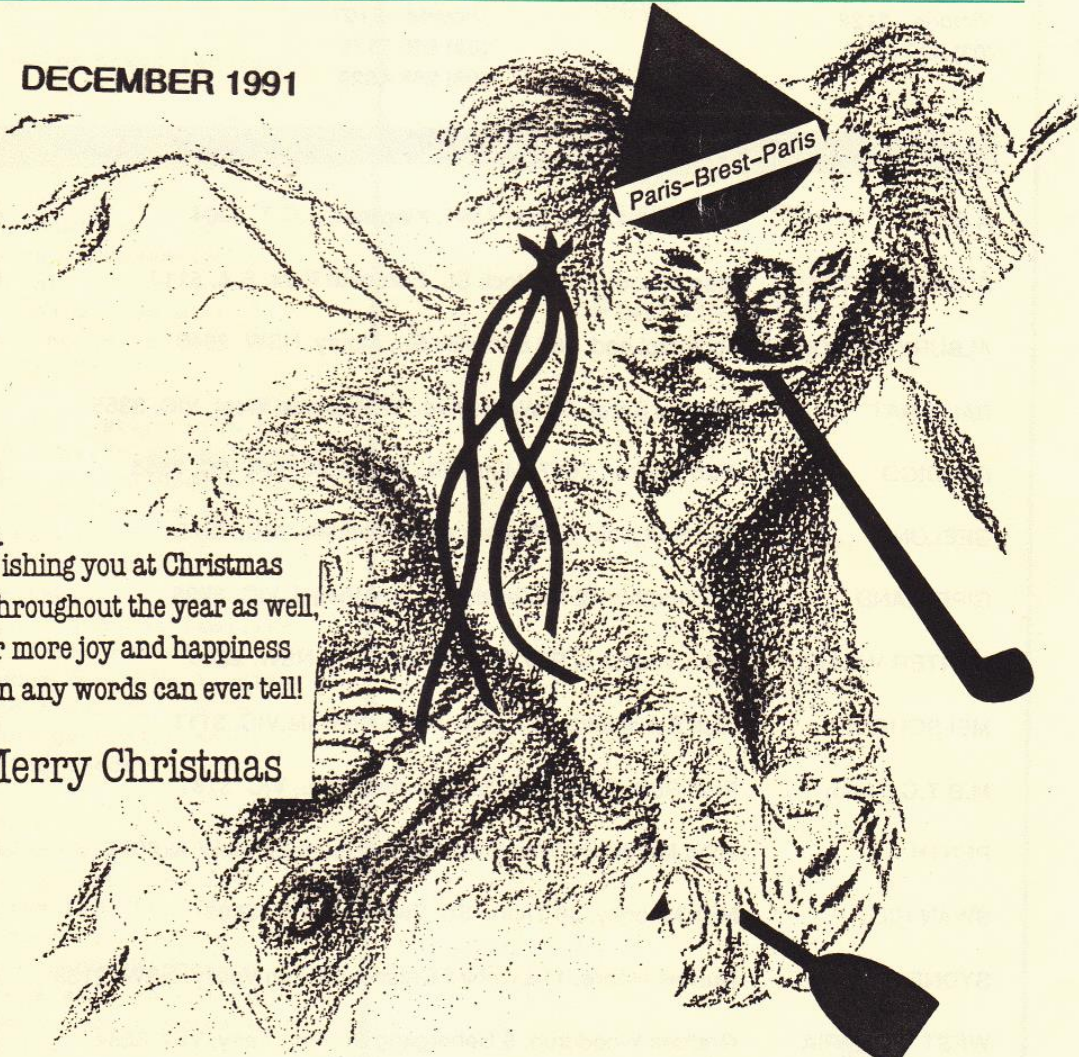
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DECEMBER 1991



Wishing you at Christmas  
and throughout the year as well  
Far more joy and happiness  
Than any words can ever tell!

Merry Christmas

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