

From Bike Path To Brest

by Don Watson

Where did it all start? The qualifying rides of 1995? No, way before them. The “dummy run” of the Super Randonneur series in 1994? No, way before that. The “Audax Alpine Classic” of 1992? Now we are getting close, but it was further back still....

Late in 1980, the company I work for offered free fitness tests, and when I received the results they said that unless I started some regular exercise, lost some weight etc, I could be ‘at risk’ a few years down the track.

It was then I remembered that old “Speedwell” in the shed. I had acquired it from my eldest son as a part trade on an old car I had. The bike had been unused for a few years but was soon in a rideable condition and I started using it a few mornings a week on the local bike path.

For Christmas 1990, my wife Pam suggested a new bike as her present to me. If only she had realised then what that suggestion would lead to I’m sure she would have kept her mouth tightly closed!

It was during my training for the first “Great NSW Bike Ride” in 1991 that I met Robert Tiong, on the local bike path, who later invited me to ride the Audax Alpine Classic in January 1992, my first Audax event and my first ride of more than 110km. Had I realised what that entailed I’m sure I would never had entered.

Just before the Alpine I had read Alethea Morrison’s article on the 1991 PBP in the Australian Cyclist Dec 91 -Jan 92 issue and that really fired me up.

My experience of that Alpine is a story on its own and bears some repeating as it too played a major part in my lead up to Audax riding in general and PBP ‘95 in particular.

The Alpine Classic to the uninitiated (and boy was I uninitiated) is, I believe the supreme example of an endurance event.

To those that don’t know the Alpine I should explain, it’s only 200km (only 200km, listen to him!) to be completed in 13½ hours but has over 3600m of climbing including two climbs of around 25km in length.

It turned out to be a very, very hot day and after a number of mistakes on my part, I was not making very good time when I started the last climb to the chalet on Mt Buffalo, late in the afternoon.

By this time I was, I thought, the last in the field although I did pass a few drop-outs on the way. My tired brain had done the sums and realised that at 8km/h it was going to take 3 hours to the top and then another 40km back to the finish.

As I recall, about a third of the way up Tim and Diana caught me up in a sweep car. They stopped to encourage me but having missed the food stop in Bright I was ready to give up. They said to keep trying, and proceeded to drive to the Chalet to bring back the cache of food I had waiting there (not quite according to Audax rules of course).

They passed me a few more times that afternoon and kept up my spirits. When I finally did finish I was 14 minutes outside the time limit and was rather disappointed not to receive the

medallion. However knowing I had finished encouraged me somewhat and that seemed the end of it.

Back home a week later I received a small package in the mail and when I opened it there was a lovely letter from the committee, and I quote, “we commend you for the determination and the true ‘Audax spirit’ which you displayed on the ride”

I don’t mind admitting that I actually cried. I really treasure that medallion, another step on the road to PBP ‘95.

Just over 2 weeks before PBP I joined a group of 15 others in 2 chalets in central Normandy. It proved to be an ideal location to finish my training.

The group was great, comprising Audax riders from all over Australia. Peter Donnan and Peter Moore proved to be great ride leaders. Both had completed PBP before and were trying to impart as much information to us first timers, as they could.

During the second week Phil Bellette and Sue Taylor arrived on a tandem, and it was their quiet relaxed manner that gave me, personally, the confidence that I could do it.

On the way from the hotel to the start I had a valve pull out of my front inner tube. It couldn’t have happened at a better time, although I was a bit worried that I was down to one spare, with another in the support car. As it turned out, my fears were unjustified as no one I knew had a puncture. It’s those good French roads. They may not be very good about bombs but they do have good roads!

The 10pm start was obviously the most popular and I was towards the back having been warned to watch out for the melee at the front. We had our brevet cards marked with a 1/2 hour delay which would only be allowable if we finished over 90 hours.

It was a great feeling to be finally on our way after those years of preparation. It was wonderful to be doing it.

To see the line of red lights stretching as far as the eye could see was a moving experience.

After a few hours everyone settled into their own pace, and groups formed according to speed. The organisers had informed us that anyone who slept before 400km had a 98.5% chance of failing, based on previous events. So Loudiac at 441km was my target.

Richard McCarthy and I had set ourselves a number of 400km training rides prior to leaving Australia, all starting at 10pm and they really set us in good stead for the real thing. We knew what to expect over those first 24 hours. We had also practiced “power napping”.

I found the main problem with the controls was queuing for food. It was very necessary to eat, but so time consuming. I’m sure those riders with full support would have saved lots of time. The food was mainly very good and once I found the right combination, I was eating well. The puree went down very well. It was, I think, dehydrated potato. I saw Patrick Van Dyke in Fougères. He had fallen asleep on his bike about 330km out, and

had crashed into a ditch buckling his wheel and hurting his back. The ambulance brought him back to Fougères. He was very upset at not being able to complete the ride. He worked out later he was missing 25 minutes, and assumed he was unconscious for that time.



I arrived at Loudeac at 9:45pm, almost exactly to my schedule and had 3 hours uncomfortable sleep in the tent, but it was good to see Sharon and Des there helping everyone on their way. A wash down in the bucket, a change of clothes then I was back on the road in the early hours of Tuesday morning.

On the way to Brest early Tuesday afternoon, I was feeling very tired so decided to sleep in the dormitory there. There were about 300 camp beds set up with about ten of them taken. I paid my 5 francs and asked them to wake me in one hour.

I felt much refreshed after the sleep and rode out with Paul Ng who had also slept there. By this time the weather had changed and we were experiencing a nice steady tail wind.

It was at this time that I had the irritating notion that I was running late and started to force the pace. Paul later said he saw me disappearing up the hill out of Brest and couldn't keep up. At the time I wondered why he wasn't with me, he is normally a much stronger rider than me.

Just before dark on Wednesday night I started riding with a Canadian about my age. He had made a 5am start, so was 7 hours up on me. He seemed content to stay with me all night and when we reached Loudeac I decided not to sleep in the tent but power nap in the canteen after eating as I felt I was going so well, and that stage was thinking I could do a sub 80 hour ride. At dawn we reached Tintiniac, and after a food stop we set out together again. However my Canadian friend just powered away and left me behind, and I had the nasty feeling that he only wanted me for my dynamo in the dark. Could I have misjudged him? Thinking back now, I probably should have slept at Loudeac as most of the group I had left there passed me later and finished before me.

There were sleeping bodies everywhere, on the roadsides, in doorways, on footpaths. I even saw a couple warming themselves in front of a church floodlight. They turned out to be Phil and Sue on the tandem. I met at them quite a few controls,

travelled with them at times, and finished about 12 minutes behind them.

My sub 80 hours was starting to look sick by this time, as all I wanted to do was sleep. I had deliberately abstained from caffeine for some months before the ride in the hope it would give me a big lift later when I needed it. However when I did try some during the night I felt very crook, so didn't try it again. My irrational mind didn't think of Coke, which would have equally done the trick.

I can't actually remember where I slept last. It was probably Nogent le Roi. I know it was on a concrete floor, which didn't worry me in the slightest. It was pretty much a blur from then on and I found myself falling asleep on the bike, so I would stop for a nap.

The last 100km were very difficult and the slightest hill would see me in my granny gear grinding away.

I had sought medical treatment for a nasty sore on my bum at Fougères and at Montagne I had a full bum massage which really saved the day. I "dips me lid" to those Red Cross people. What a great job they did throughout the ride, and not just them but the whole French support team. What a mammoth task. Nogent was the last control before the finish. By this time I had my food intake sorted out, getting stuck into a great plate of puree with chicken and gravy, plus bread, a dessert and a big bowl of hot chocolate.

During my training rides in Australia I found difficulty eating once past about 300km, but particularly on PBP I broke through the barrier and was eating main meals at every control. My Canadian friend explained that on a ride like this you use more calories than you can eat and need a week or two to catch up. I was also using sports drink in my water for the whole event.

The last 60km from Nogent to the finish at St Quentin seemed to go on forever, arriving there before noon having taken 85 hours 40 minutes.

What a great feeling to get there and to be signed in and finished, having been dubbed by one Australian as the "weak link" in the NSW contingent in earlier qualifying rides I felt justly proud of my achievement, (*too right - Ed*)

There was a small group of Australians there to meet me and I appreciated their effort in returning to meet me considering some of them had finished more than 20 hours before, and my Australian training partner 10 hours earlier.

Well the main question I have been asked is would I do it again. My reply so far has been "No", but who knows what four years may bring.

There were a lot of people that helped me greatly in my quest to complete PBP some of whom I have not mentioned, including Bryan Ferguson my constant riding partner who was not able to take part in PBP. But the most long-suffering of them all was my darling wife Pam, who allowed me to neglect her, our home and our garden during the long hours of training. Thanks darling.

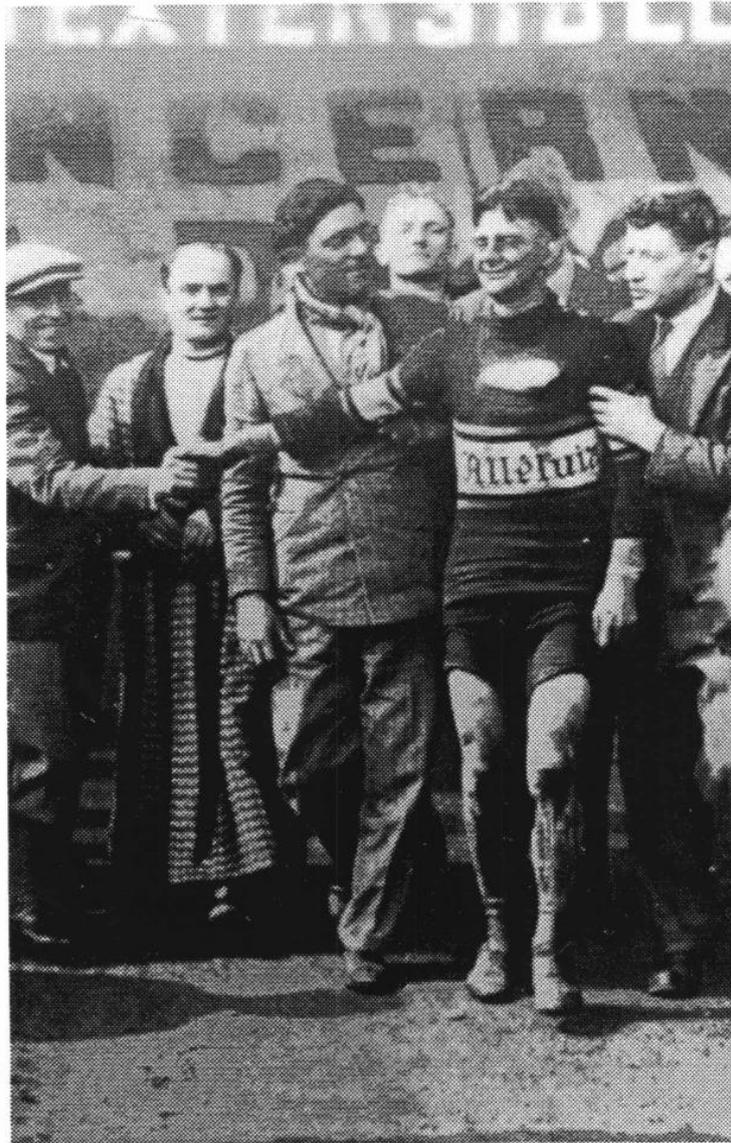
To those aspiring Audax riders who are thinking about doing PBP 1999, I say, do it. It's an event of a lifetime. You won't regret your decision.



Checkpoint

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