
Pay-Bay-Pay

It's not about the bike

by Dave Minter
(A Cycling Aussie in King Arthur's Court)



Paris-Brest-Paris (PBP to the 4000 that entered it this time) was first held in 1891 as the ultimate race for the new-fangled safety bicycle. Originally, it only occurred once a decade, because the race was considered so hard.

Hard-riding tourists (randonneurs) soon joined in, the fastest almost matching

the racers. After World War II, the racers lost interest but the popularity amongst tourists to become an 'ancien du PBP' grew and the ride became quadrennial. Read more history at <http://www.rusa.org/pbphistory.html>

I'm not totally sure but PBP is probably one of the more challenging rides that a

normal, 'non-racer' cyclist can do. Riding 1200+ km in less than 90 hours, including all stops for food and sleep, will always be a noticeable effort. Every PBP around 15% of starters fail to finish, despite some significant qualification requirements and huge amounts of determination. Regarding determination, one Aussie finished in 1999, despite acquiring a broken pelvis during the event. As Trevor couldn't walk, a couple of mates rode with him to the finish and carried him into each checkpoint, despite their risk of DNFing due to menacingly close time limits.

Sure, PBP isn't as nasty as the Tour de France or the Race Across America or even slashing yourself to death with a broken beer bottle (for Monty Python Old Yorkshiremen aficionados) but why would anybody do anything so demanding? PBP is such great fun! Do a search on the internet and you'll find loads of writers more eloquent than me. My need to ride this event was born from years of reading PBP stories, so beware!

The last time PBP was held, in 1999, this year resulted in a long flight from Australia and a slightly too focused, sub-70 hour ride. PBP was the best time I'd ever had on a bike but with a tiny niggle. At the finish, I wished I had spent a little more time chatting with riders and sitting in cafes and bars, soaking up the ambiance of this great event.

Unlike '99, 2003 saw me working in Britain. This let me occupy my leisure time by chasing various events that didn't exist in Australia. Riding with the Veteran-Cycle Club (historical bikes), the Folding Society (folding bikes) and Moultoncers (Moulton bikes, of course) had shown me some enjoyable alternative approaches to cycling.

Whilst collecting a few Audax UK brevets, I met quite a few 'tough nuts'. These are the sort of blokes who ride huge distances every year and/or climb a silly number of hills, sometimes on fixed wheel machines and usually in typically British weather. Realising in short order that I was way out of my depth, I was still intrigued by their relaxed approach to tough rides.

The kicker was meeting Drew. He had completed the 1999 PBP on an original 1903 Dursley Pederson, despite the loss of two of his three hub gears fairly early on. I'd seen the bike before the start but had thought it was a modern replica. There was certainly room to have more fun during PBP!

Why not do PBP 2003 a little slower and

combine some other interests? The fictional 'Audacious' story certainly captured the unique world of PBP, populated by several familiar Aussies. My 1965 Moulton Stowaway had done some short V-CC and Origami rides but hadn't been used much recently. It splits in half for easier transport (almost a folding bike), is older than I am (thus must be at least a little historic) and has a Sachs Duomatic hub (two gears would stop me riding too fast). It certainly couldn't hurt to have dual suspension on a long ride. I'd even be following the unwritten rule that the British ride 'odd' bikes at PBP. It was only slightly worrying that nobody seemed to have finished PBP on an old Moulton before. The main downside I could find was that Paul (with half a dozen of them) likes to call the small-wheeled Moultons 'fairy cycles'. I suppose the phrase means something to other Brits.

Some equipment changes were required (basically everywhere I touched the bike) to approximate my usual riding position.

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These changes certainly reduced the historical angle but I couldn't ride 12km, let alone 1200km, on the original saddle!

There didn't seem to be much opportunity to ride the Moulton before Paris, mainly because of an extended bike rebuild. In fact, I qualified on my '99 PBP bike (a 700C S&S coupled Frezoni) and only rode the Moulton about 600km in the fortnight before PBP. That included a couple of 200km brevets, so I had a good idea of how it felt on a longish ride. The second was a hot day in the Peak District a fortnight before PBP and felt a little tough. I crossed the path of a Cyclists Touring Club group about halfway round and they seemed a bit doubtful about my little bike completing PBP, or perhaps just it's rider. Never mind, everything seemed to work OK and the gearing seemed almost reasonable (53" and 71" for those interested). She'll be right, mate!

The ride went virtually perfectly, although I'm sure the French found some more hills in the last four years. With a little vin rouge every day, great weather, no physical

problems and some wonderful riding companions, how could it be better?

My head is filled with a jumble of terrific memories. The anticipation before the start. Seeing so many different answers to the various problems imposed by riding 1200km in under 90 hours. Racing through the first night amidst a swarm of bike lights, drawing strength from hundreds of locals cheering out encouragement. Catching riders on hills and drafting smooth-as-silk bunches for a welcome rest. Slapping 'high-fives' with small children along the way. Helping a tired rider reach the next checkpoint. Passing through villages decorated with flower-covered bikes. Drafting tandems at ludicrous speeds off Roc Trevezel twice in one day. Chatting with interesting riders from all over the world about every subject under the sun. Watching fixed-wheelers try to rev their kneecaps off on the downhills. Enjoying crepes, chocolate and coffee freely given by people proud and happy to help you finish their event. Sharing congratulations and

commiserations with friends and strangers. Hearing tales of the road and spinning some of my own. Realising that if I let myself smile too much on that last day, I'd cry.

With four years till the next one, how can I wait?

For those who think it's about the bike:

The only hassle was finding five broken spokes in the rear wheel at around the 1000km mark (a lovely samba rhythm was developing). Who'd have thought they'd cause problems after nearly 40 years? Prudence suggested a more restrained ride to the finish and only one more spoke died before finishing at a sensible hour Friday morning. The week post-PBP was spent touring Loire valley chateaus. Riding 80km a day, with Susan on her Brompton five-speed folding bike, was very enjoyable, of course, and three course lunches with vin rouge featured heavily.

Remember Drew?

This year he successfully piloted a triplet around PBP!