

# Conditions? What conditions?

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PBP, what can I say? The idea of doing 1200km with 10,000m of climb in less than 90 hours somehow caught my imagination. As a generalisation, I rode wet, I slept wet (10 hours in total) and I ate wet. It rained until I put my rain gear on and then it stopped until I took my rain gear off. Did I mention the hills?

The following description is at best recollections and impressions from a fatigued brain that was focused on just keeping my rhythm. The 9.30 pm start was at 10.40 pm which was expected by the old hands. It started to rain around the time we started out, the rain brought the wind. Riding out of Paris was surreal, the police controlled the traffic and gave us a non-stop trip out. Out of town it was dark and stretched out on the road there was a seemingly endless line of tail lights to follow over the rolling hills.

I had been told that the people in the areas we would travel through would be as involved in the PBP as the riders. This was an understatement. In the middle of nowhere, at cross roads and through the villages there were people out in the cold and rain shouting “bravo” and “bonne route” from the dark. Adults and children would stretch out and ‘high 5’ the riders as they passed. That was fun but on Tuesday one family almost dragged me off the bike in their enthusiasm when I cut across to the left hand side of the road to ‘high 5’ their little girl.

The route to the first checkpoint included some hills (how strange) which could be

difficult descending as the rain and dark limited visibility. At about 4.00 am I had my first scheduled sleep of about one-and-a-half hours. Woke at 5.30 am. It was cold and raining. The ride to the first checkpoint was slow, refer to previous statement about the rain and dark.

Rode throughout the first day stopping at numerous road-side stalls set up and run by families or just the children. They dispensed water, coffee and light snacks. Often this was gratis or for a coin. As the day wore on I came to the realisation that the rain would stop if I put my rain gear on but that made me too hot resulting in its removal and more rain. There were several controls during the day, where I had the brevet signed and the swipe card swiped. At one control it took me 15 minutes to find out where to do this—a common problem.

Highlight of the day was to see the fast guys coming back as I rode through Tinteniac on Tuesday night. In 2003 the fastest of the fast riders did it in a little over 44 hours. My time to complete PBP 2007 was twice that. As I rode through the town, the street up ahead got a sunrise type glow and then around the corner they came. The street was awash with light. Each

bike was lit up like a Christmas tree and as bright as a landing 747. They passed by like jets, swoosh, swoosh, swoosh...then the street was quiet and dark again, very surreal.

Around midnight I arrived at Loudéac. My 450 km target for the day done. I found the control, ate some food and found my drop bag by 2.00 pm. Set the alarm, jumped in the space blanket (cold and wet again) and woke about 5.00 am (a 3 hour sleep), still cold and wet. The fresh clothes stayed that way for about 3 seconds. Did I mention the extensive use of chamois cream? I rode out towards Brest, interestingly enough the first half of this section seemed more hilly than most.

I should mention the unbelievable scenery, the beautiful views out over the country side, the clear weather in Brest and the companionship I shared with the various groups I rode with as the day passed. Most people were only too willing to have a chat and pass the time of day discussing anything. Because of the differences in riders’ strengths and weakness these groups would form and fall apart depending the terrain. Climbers would disappear on the hills and speedsters would clear out on

### What did I take?

My bike was as light as possible. Michelin Krylion tyres because at home they had taken a beating without getting punctures. Lights were Cateye and Princeton with lithium batteries (very very light).

Under the seat there were two spare tubes, a spare tyre (you never know),

tyre change tools, two gas cylinders (one for each tube), chain breaker and links, plus the universal tool. Upfront my cold weather gear of arm and leg warmers and rain jacket, gel and windcheater gloves (gotta love them) plus I wore Skins the entire time.

Electrolytes/endurance supplements for

the bidon plus a recovery supplement to be taken before sleeping. Nurofen. A drop bag at Loudéac to top up the supplements and fresh clothes. A baguette fits nicely into a back pocket or down the shirt front. I ate at boulangeries, patisseries, tabacs and cafes to avoid the queues at controls.

anything relatively flat.

I got to Brest, then it hit me. Now I have to ride back! The 20 minute powernap turned into a one hour crash. I got lost in the rain and dark on the way back to Loudéac. This cost Bec Morton and me about two hours to get back on track. She was most gracious because I said I recognised the road, "it was wide with white stripes". Funny how fatigue makes road recognition so easy. I think she was glad to see the end of me. Made the ride out to Brest and back in a day. This was to the schedule as advised by Dave Minter, who has done the ride three times. Total distance covered now 775km. I got to sleep around 4.00 am.

An hour and a half sleep and back on the road. The previous day, out to Brest and back, I left my spare tyre in Loudéac and all day I was obsessed with the possibility of not finishing because I needed that tyre. The first thing into the storage pocket of my Camelback before I hit the road was that tyre. Does fatigue make me pessimistic? You bet it does.

Thursday and well into the trip back to Paris. Weather was intermittent rain and cross winds. Occasionally cold but always wet either from rain or perspiration and hills and more hills. By midday I started to meet a lot of fellow Aussies on the road and at the controls. I rode with Katherine for a while but we were both having gear selection problems. She was stuck on the middle front chain ring of her triple. I could only get the lower three and the top three gears on the rear cluster and I just screwed the front adjuster out until I could change up to the big ring on the front again. That was in spite of oiling the chain trying to clean the chain and derailleurs each day.

I had a great time talking to people. All were happy and "doin' OK". Funny that seemed to be a trait of all those on the road. I talked to an Italian guy who had spent time outback in the N.T and W.A. I rode with a Russian lady who is organising a 1000 km ride from St Petersburg (temperatures below zero after dark, no thanks). I rode with an old guy (older than me anyway) from the United States, he was doing the 84 hour run but he was going backwards. I had a good session on the road with a Belgium guy who worked with me to get a little time back from the clock. Did I mention that we all seemed to smell of chamois cream?

Thursday afternoon I tried unsuccessfully in three consecutive villages to buy a plate

of chips, finally I had a really, really good omelette. I rode on through the night to Mortagne-au-Perche with a couple of Aussies. Thanks 'Doggie' for feeding me in the middle of nowhere, at another time I'd be your slave for life. We had to be there before 5.30 am Friday. I was going OK until I lost it about 20km out. I didn't know if I was on a flat or in the hills or which way was up. I wore my brakes out descending into that town. I talked myself around the corners. It took over two hours when it should have taken much less than an hour. I finally got to sleep about 3.00 am, set the alarm for 6.00 am but slept an extra hour. Up at 7.00 am for a total of about 10 hours sleep total for the ride and 3½ hours to do the 80 km to the next control. Did I mention the hills?

Clearing showers and overcast sky was a refreshing change that went virtually unnoticed Friday morning. The French youth cycling squad were riding Friday and they sang as they passed the group I was in as we were going up a hill. A bit demoralising.

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Finally some flat terrain, pity about the headwind. An hour out from the last control and at about 20 km to go I caught up to an Italian group who were riding at a speed that would let me get to the next control with time (say five minutes) to spare. Why do Italians insist in talking incessantly when they cycle? We arrived at the last control with five minutes to spare, where I had last night's dinner/Friday's breakfast and lunch with some fellow Aussies. We all headed out to Paris but when the Italians passed us I hung on behind them again. Speaking for myself, if I passed someone it was OK to hook on behind me but it's not cool to catch up and sit behind someone, especially if you don't say "Hi".

About 30km out (as I remember) from the finish there was a hill. It is about 7% or 8% for about 400 metres before a short flat. On the flat I heard a bell ringing. Following the road around to the left there was a sharp incline. About 400 meters at what I guess-timated to be at least 13%. At the top of that incline about 50 people stood and clapped and cheered as you passed by. On the way up that hill I was passed by an American

Randonneur on a single speed. He informed me he was not crazy as it was a free-wheeler not a fixed-wheeler.

Fifteen kilometres from the finish and there was a sign stating that fact. Ten kilometres out there was another sign. It seemed an eternity to reach the 5km sign. It was as though the route was designed to take us through every traffic light in the greater Paris area. Finally 5km to go and the narrow streets became roads with Friday afternoon traffic and consequently even more traffic lights. The sound of a large group of riders releasing one cleat echoes in city streets as do the moans as chaffed backsides and other parts of the body are twisted in that undertaking. I'm not sure which was louder. And as a group there was the 'refreshing' aroma of chamois cream and road grime.

Finally onto Avenue 1st March and into the stadium to the thunderous applause and cheers of the crowd waiting to welcome the riders back. One "victory lap", park the bike, get the brevet signed one last time, get the swipe card swiped one last time and then get grabbed by a Swede who wanted an Aussie jersey. His fitted me, I was informed it was washed, mine (after two days on the road) sat on the table looking at its new owner. A glass of champers and another of wine. Swap my other jersey for a German item and then back to the motel for a bath. Did I mention the smell? Not that I noticed it. Downstairs for a beer and that plate of chips before crashing. Does fatigue make me obsessive? You bet.

Conditions? What conditions? I had a great time. I practised riding at night on back-roads, I practised in the cold and wet, I climbed hills and I got to experience all that again in the PBP.

I have to say that PBP could not happen without the wonderful volunteers and the comprehensive support available at the controls, 'merci beaucoup'. The people who live on the route between Paris and Brest own the PBP and readily accepted us foreigners into their domain 'merci tout beaucoup'.

Oops almost forgot, people like Leigh Kilpatrick, Ray Watts and Dave Minter gave me some good advice which was, stop at things that look interesting because they will be. Enjoy the ride, engage with the people at the stalls, on the side of the road and at the controls, and beer contains carbs...a must for endurance.