

# Audax BA: Midnight Century, 160km

Saturday, 4 November, 23:59

I've heard it called the 'flagship event' of Audax Queensland, so if you only do one ride a year, it should be the Midnight Century. That's the line. Two weeks out I'm yet to be convinced by any rider I know. The middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere; how good can breakfast be? But it's the first event of the new season, and I can't think of a reason not to ride.

As a child I spent a lot of time in Fernvale, Esk, and surrounds. I remember unlit gritty dirt roads and kangaroos. If we were on the road at night we were going home or going pig hunting. I don't remember ever seeing a cyclist. This means that in the lead up, I'm worried about lights. I have excellent lights, but I'm convinced I don't have enough. I buy more lights. Now with almost 200 hours' worth, I'm still nervous. Part of my brain doesn't accept that the sun will come up eventually and I don't need 300 lumens beaming for eight hours.

It's been a long time since I "pulled an all-nighter", so I have the earliest dinner imaginable and go to bed at 5pm on a Saturday afternoon so I can pretend I'm riding at a normal time. It's weird. I wake up and go through my normal pre-ride routine. I eat oats for breakfast. I apply SPF50+ sunscreen. I have no idea why. It's 10pm.

We arrive early. The bakery is closed.

Simon and Vaughan have established a very professional base camp. Riders collect their brevet card from under a lit awning in the car park, and it looks like Simon has permanently moved in to the picnic shed.

I meet some seasoned Audax riders for the first time, and I chat again with riders I've ridden with before. James has ridden in from Brisbane, and he's slightly perplexed to realise the ride isn't 200km, so he'll end up 40km short for the day and arrive home an hour earlier than expected. Brian says that the trick with this course is not to ride too fast, otherwise you'll miss sunrise over Wivenhoe Dam. I assure him I don't think that will be a problem.

Vaughan works his way through twenty-three lighting checks, and we start to gather in the car park. We're a sea of fluorescent yellow and orange; and the diversity of reflective garments is incredible. We could guide a ship into port. A few riders mention how lucky we are to have a full moon. But we still haven't seen the moon. It's overcast, and it's warm.

11:59pm and we're off.

It feels just like any other ride. I'm up the back out of the way, but I find a good pace and settle in with riders in front and behind. The road is well lit as we head out of Fernvale, and it's easy to become relaxed. Within about five kilometres the riders have started to space out more, and as we make a left turn down an unlit road I realise what we're up against. A single red taillight disappears ahead, and a few lights glint behind me. The most gentle grey moonlight whispers through the ironbarks, and I hear several different species of frog, and a bird. The three riders from behind pass me, and I stare at their distinctive high-vis for a while. The two in front with an H and an Y, and the third rider with his triangle. There are a few gentle rises, but the road surface is gorgeous and I quickly learn that if I take some more road the downhills feel safe.

The rest of Pine Mountain Road is fairly uneventful. I've adapted to the darkness quickly, and can comfortably predict the road ahead. I'm out of shape, so I feel sluggish and hot, and wonder how far behind everyone I am. The roundabout catches me off guard and I make my first wrong turn of the evening, thinking that 'left' meant 'left' and not 'third exit, straight through'. I remind myself to trust my instincts before the map.

It's strange to be riding through a town. I catch a few red traffic lights and enjoy the irony. One driver seems more interested in me than his green light, so I manage a good sprint out of Brassall. Karrabin offers an abandoned bicycle in good condition beside the train station, a bloke slumping his way down the road, wearing only one thong, and the creepiest bronze statues you could imagine installed in a dimly lit playground.

The town is gently pulled away behind me and I reach a stretch where it's just darkness. There's nothing but frogs. I look behind me, and a strip of lights stretches out Northward. It's amazing. I try to take a picture, but the lens can't focus on anything, and it's just a blur. All I see is a blur now anyway, with dew and grime on my glasses, so I enjoy it for what it is. Ahead of me, to the North-West, there must be a hill. There are three small freckles of light on the side, and the crest, and the side.

I'm starting to enjoy the ride now. My legs warm up and I find my rhythm. I'm all alone on the road and I can feel the land stretching out beside me. I find the power in my legs, and I feel like I could ride like this forever. An imperial century is not enough. I remember why I love this.



A strip of lights stretches out Northward

Soon enough I'm back in Fernvale, and having my first breakfast. The bakery is still closed.

There are a couple of other riders, so I stay longer than normal, even though noone has much to talk about yet. The first loop was more difficult than I expected, and I've worked through two bottles of water already, so I refill them and head out. I'm glad I reviewed the cue sheet, because my Garmin has no idea how to manage the overlapping course.

As I pass through Lowood, the turn cues from my Garmin cease. In 94km, turn right. This presents an unexpected challenge in the dark.

At 3am I round a corner and start to head out of town. We run out of street lights again, and the trees are close to the road. I don't hear birds any more, and don't even hear frogs. The silence is heavy above and around me. On my right, a loud call breaks through. I'm glad that I know it's a peacock. It doesn't call again, and I don't slow down.

I haven't seen another cyclist in a while now, and I seem to be heading West a lot longer than I expected. So I start to ponder whether the map is completely wrong and I'm just cycling further and further away from civilisation. There's an old adage for travellers that says if you haven't found the right campsite, you simply haven't walked far enough. I finally catch a slight dogleg of a turn and it feels right, but I still have no idea where I am. In the middle of the night out here, time and distance are strange things.

About 3:15am I hear a woof to my right, and I glance over my shoulder to see a bean-bag of a dog piled in an open driveway. This dog is excited to see me, and this dog is not behind a fence. It has a good grip on the dirt and is quickly on the road. I manage to find a sprint in my legs, and I am out of there. I check my shoulder once to see if there really is a dog, and I can hear its breath. I don't look back again, I just hope to ride it out. At some point I realise I'm in the clear, but with every dog from here on out I check the fenceline and the gate.

Another corner and I'm passed by an old farm ute with a big cabin and rounded fenders, like something from a 1950s film. A few minutes later, and it rattles past again.

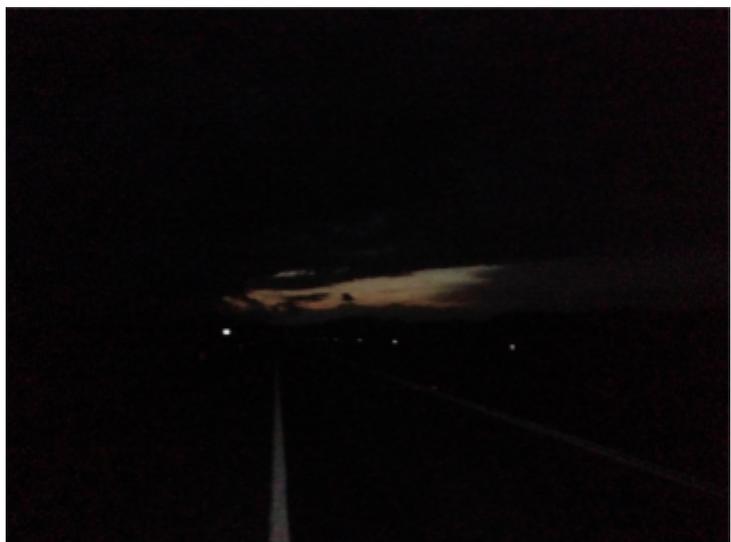
It's not long before I start to consider the likelihood of being picked off the road by a psychopath. These things do happen, but logically it's irrational to think like this, because, do they really happen? Yes they do happen, and they have to happen to someone, and I don't even know where I am. If I make it home alive I could title my ride, 'Silence of the SRAM'? I consider plots from a variety of horror films, and think about a plausible storyline involving someone who preys on lone randonneurs, and then I wonder what the hell I'm doing. This isn't helping. I'm simultaneously impressed with and (still) nervous about my lights.

I guess I must have pulled myself together at some point, because now I'm annoyed that I'm ahead of schedule. It's 3:45am and I've ridden about 90km, so Wivenhoe Dam can't be far away. Sure enough, I reach the spillway just before 4am. Brian warned me about this.

I wait for ten minutes, but the dawn fails to emerge. Every car that approaches slows down, and I haven't seen another cyclist since Fernvale, so I need to keep moving.

It's my first time riding over the spillway and I imagine it must offer an incredible sunrise. But not today. Today it's dark and muggy, and there are a lot of bugs. Massive swarms of bugs. I can't ride too fast because of the bugs, but I can't slow down because of the bugs. They're huge. I wish I knew what they were.

Riding back into Fernvale and I'm desperate to catch a glimpse of the sunrise. I spend half my time looking at the road, and half glancing off to the horizon. I concede that it may well be the most pathetic sunrise



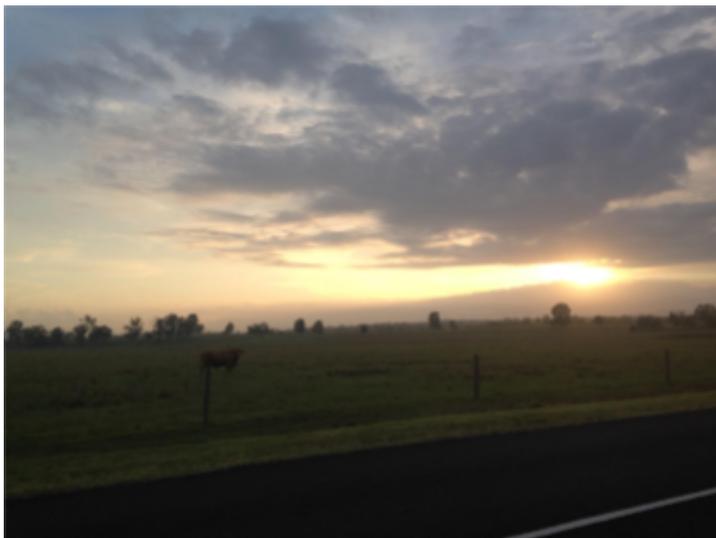
An unremarkable sunrise over Wivenhoe Dam

ever. There's another loop ahead, but I start to feel like the ride is almost over. The second loop was certainly much easier than the first, and I still have a full bottle of water remaining.

There are a few more riders at the Checkpoint this time. The bakery has lights on, but isn't officially open.

Mark seems quite relaxed, considering he doesn't have the map on his GPS. He's still there when I leave, and I think he may have settled in for a cup of tea.

It feels like a whole new ride as the countryside starts to wake up, and I'm overwhelmed with finches. Oh my God, finches. Sharp flashes of colour seem like there's a different finch for every section of long grass. Their sound offers such enthusiasm for the day ahead. A rabbit scampers off up a side road, and together with another rabbit, hunkers down in the middle of the path. I stop, my heart pounding, and they take a moment then quickly bound away.



Cows love watching cyclists

Still there are more finches. Blue and grey fantails as well. Pale-headed rosellas appear in pairs, and I watch their unique bobbing flight and glide. Where there aren't finches there are galahs, and sometimes cockatoos or corellas. Somewhere near Marburg there's a strip of trees filled with hundreds of egrets. The countryside is so green. I catch the tail of a kangaroo crossing the road, and I'm surprised I haven't seen more. I begin to calculate the kilometres ahead and my arrival time. I'm pretty sure we'll be 2km short at the

end. I've spent almost an hour just taking photos, so I need to keep moving. I give myself a deadline, but about 10km out of town I see the bats. Thousands of bats. Every dark thing in the trees that could be a leaf, is a bat. They're worth the wait just to take it all in.

Rounding the final stretch home I can look down at the winding path of the river. A river that thirty years ago I used to think went on forever. I remember the feel of the pebbles, and ache to hear the water. I had no idea there was a road up here.

I'm back in Fernvale for the last time, and navigating my way through Sunday-morning market-goers. Pedestrians cross the road whenever they feel like it, and at any moment another car will pull out in front of me.

159.1km. Vaughan and Simon have seen me and give a wave. I think somebody claps, which I take in good spirit. I still have one foot in the pedal, and my hand lingers over my Garmin... Is it worth a lap of the park?

The commemorative Midnight Century patch is a thrill. No idea what to do with it, but I'm chuffed all the same. My arms and legs are filthy and covered in bugs. Like the grille of a car, I imagine bugs splattered right across my face. I love this part too.

Simon takes breakfast orders, and he knows how to perfectly cook an egg. The rest of the morning is small talk as the final riders come home. Everyone is in fine spirits, and everyone has had a great ride. We agree that it wasn't much of a sunrise after all, and apparently I'm the only one who was chased by The Dog. John returns in a change of clothes, and looks suspiciously refreshed like he's had a shower. Kym looks as delighted now as he did when we rolled out. Brian has some seriously impressive helmet hair. A small contingent breaks off to inspect the fit-out of Peter's van...

Simon is handing out bananas and bags of bread rolls to whomever will take them, as he contemplates how to repack everything into his car. The bakery is open and it's busy. I loved the ride, even the bits I didn't love, so I already know I'll be back next year. But right now, it's time to snaffle some pies and go home.



My arms and legs are filthy and covered in dead bugs