

Rocky Mountain 1200 km

July 23 - 27, 2008

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*"We're living in a strange time, working for a strange goal,
we're turning flesh and body into soul."*

The Waterboys Strange Boat lyrics

As defined on www.rusa.org, *"Friendly camaraderie, not competition, is the hallmark of randonneuring."* Then again, brevets are timed events; and as a side effect it is fair game to pursue a good time not only socially but also literally. The weaker and slower riders like myself are obviously not suspected of competing and sometimes can be heard hollering (breathlessly) "It's not a race!". But this time, I did prepare myself very seriously, both physically and mentally. Physically, I found myself stronger and faster than last year. Mentally, I spent hours estimating average speeds per section and times off the bike on controls, to calculate the corresponding finishing times. I had sent copies of my schedules to family and friends, so they could compare when my check-in times at controls were posted on the "live-ish" rider tracking web site. I definitely wanted to come back not only with the label "Finisher", but also with a (by my standards) respectable time. This was my personal ambition and the fuel of my motivation; and I didn't mind the contradiction with randonneuring ideals - and the conflict with my history of dilly-dallying at controls (talking too much!) and of being notoriously low in power output on the road. After all, I am still a beginner in the randonneuring scene: I never finished a 1200km distance before!



About 80 riders started hesitatingly on Wednesday evening at 10pm in the 90-hour group; a little over 20 riders would start six hours later in the 84-hour group. Temperatures were mild, but in the last minutes before the start, I had put on an additional jersey anyway for the anticipated chill later in the night. Two miles after the start, a red light at the junction with Highway 5 dashed my hopes of drafting the first group of fast riders during the first hours on mostly flat terrain. Oh well, "it's not a race." With favorable winds, we in the second group still made good time until the first stop in Barriere (km 62) where we could

refill the bottles at a 24-hour station. By now I mellowed out a little, already; and when my little group, dutifully asking "Everything alright?" passed a rider standing on the roadside and he replied "Actually, no ...", and the others pretended not to hear him, I didn't mind stopping and trying to help (his lighting system caused trouble). The truth is I appreciated the opportunity to stop and rest the legs without guilt.

I reached the first control in Clearwater (km 123) just minutes before 3am, in the good company of riders I recognized as being stronger than myself. The rider tracking data show that the field was already well stretched out at this point: the fastest had arrived nearly an hour before me, whereas the slowest allowed themselves six hours for this first segment. I was perfectly happy to be right in the middle, slightly ahead of my personal schedule.

The following segment to the Blue River control (km 229) brought serious chill in the early morning hours, and the first noteworthy climb up to Messiter Summit. While I was riding with a temporary companion, it also brought the sighting of a young bear on the left side of the road, barely 100 ft ahead of us: quite a thrill for a greenhorn like myself! Of course, the bear dashed off into the woods as soon as he noticed us. I arrived at the Husky station for breakfast as planned: barely 10 hours for 229km, with quite some climbing already! But now I felt my legs and really needed a solid breakfast. I had budgeted 45 minutes for it; but the lone waitress at the Husky restaurant was not prepared for the storm of randonneurs on that day, and I had to let pass nearly twice as much time before I was ready to continue. In exchange, I felt well recovered and confidently pushed on towards Valemount (km 320). This was a beautiful segment; I liked the warm sun and the increasing altitude with more and more views into higher mountains. Less than 15h30 after the start, I arrived at the control. Taking into account the long stop at Blue River and the acquired elevation, this was a pretty good double century for me. Of course, the fastest riders of the 90-hour group had arrived there over two and a half hours earlier; but about 25 riders (not counting those in the fast 84-hour group) were still behind me, and that was good enough for my ego at that point.

I didn't mean to extend my stay at the Valemount control; but when a girl (presumably a high-school senior) asked if I agreed to be interviewed for the (mumble-mumble) TV channel, I couldn't resist. After all, this has never happened to me before, and is unlikely to happen again! Then I got into chatting with a nice lady who prepared me for the upcoming views of Mt. Robson. It was hard to leave - and I recalled how my friends are always making fun of me because I'm talking too much. I was barely back in my pedaling rhythm when I had to stop again to take a picture of the sign at the Fraser River: "World's Greatest Salmon River". I love salmon ...



All this to say that the mellowing out continued, just when I had to face more serious climbing. But I found my optimal pace and maintained it - although with increased modesty.

Suddenly, a rider passed me on the uphill with a friendly word, at more than twice my speed, effortlessly spinning the cranks at a cadence that suggested a sewing machine: Ken Bonner! He had gained six hours on me in about 350km. I knew at that moment that he was out to set a new record on this course. And just by looking at him while he disappeared in the distance, I felt motivated and refreshed.

Soon after that, Mount Robson appeared in all his splendor, and I had to stop for pictures again. But it was good to also wash off some sweat from the face. The climbing was never steep, but in the following, I underestimated the overall distance to the Yellowhead Pass (1131m). And just as I had read in ride reports from previous editions, the eventual "descent" to Jasper over about 30 kilometers was sprinkled with numerous uphills. I was riding alone on this stretch and motivated myself by pursuing the goal of arriving in Jasper before 8pm. I signed in at 7:59pm, ahead of my schedule and proud of how well I had gone through the first 443km. I am not so proud about how I stayed in Jasper much longer than what my schedule said. I indulged into a lengthy trip to the shower facilities, some non-critical tinkering with the bike, a relaxed dinner, and finally allowed myself more sleep than planned. After a slow breakfast, I left at around 2:30am only. - Next time I will do better, I promise!

The 87km ride to Beauty Creek in those early morning hours was chilly, but very beautiful. During the first two hours or so, I enjoyed the company of Henrik and Hamid. But when we passed Laurent Chambard who rode alone, I decided to switch alliances (and languages). We had never met before, but it felt immediately as if we knew each other already. I found it very rewarding to ride and talk with somebody of his mindset and experience, and didn't mind at all that it was a tad slower than my previous rhythm. I understood it when he said that on a 1200, an extra hour spent riding very moderately often gets paid back later! Still, when the uphill got longer and more frequent, he repeatedly suggested I ride off at my own pace. Just when I was ready to yield, Martin Haynes passed us and so I hooked up to an Australian rear wheel. We had quite a fine conversation as well, first because Martin is a wonderful fellow, and second because I had ridden my first 600km brevet in Australia, in December 2005. And so we rode together into the eponymous Beauty Creek control, shortly

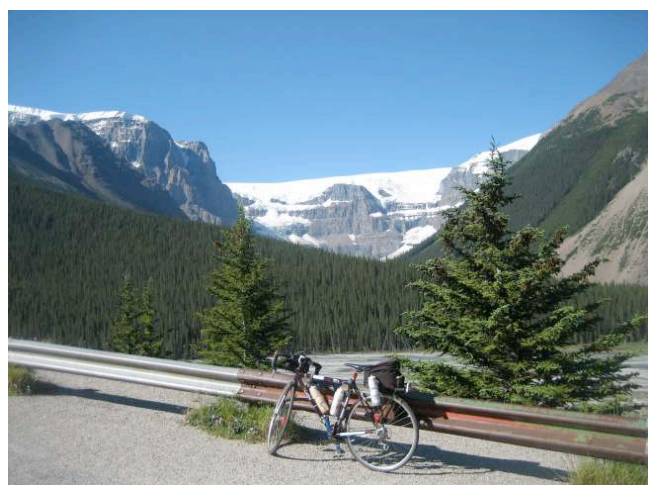


before 8am, to a memorable breakfast - quite possibly the breakfast of a lifetime! It was as if the beauty of the scenery (already overwhelming during the last miles) permeated everything and everybody, generating kindness and generosity. A big Thank You! retroactively to the volunteers there who prepared us the most delicious breakfast on individual order while we were crowding the benches around the narrow table in the cabin. A most precious moment!

Martin Haynes, ever so gently disciplined, prepared himself to get back on the road and

looked at me with a silent question mark. But I couldn't. I had to stay just five or ten (or fifteen) minutes longer at this magic place.

I was going to ride the most grandiose 147km of my life from Beauty Creek to Lake Louise (km 677) mostly all alone and take it all in by myself: the sequence of Sunwapta Pass (2034m, km 554), Saskatchewan River Crossing (less than 1400m, km 597) and the climb to Bow Summit (2065m, km 634). The scenery was so overwhelming and the conditions so ideal that I was barely aware of actually riding the bicycle. The climbs made me slow down, of course; but I was well prepared for them and enjoyed them - I know, hard to believe. If only I was not so torn between the goal of making a good time and the desire to extend my stay in this



environment! I stopped repeatedly to "smell the flowers", enjoy the views and take photos; and I wasn't inclined to keep my rest stop at the Saskatchewan River Crossing Lodge as short as others did. And so I arrived at Lake Louise well after 5pm only. I was pleasantly surprised to be 54th out of the 102 participants at this point, which made me ignore that I was nearly an hour behind my schedule. Also, this day clearly was the highlight of the whole trip and was well worth an extra hour. Besides, I might be able to recover some of the time on the long descents to Golden (around 850m, km 816) - after all, I am known for not wasting any time on downhills!



But now the plot thickens.

On the way from Lake Louise to Castle Rock Junction, the young Brazilian rider Henrique Caldas hooked up with me. He was at least as talkative as myself, and because I had close Brazilian and Portuguese friends when I was a student in France, it was easy to connect with him. At less than half my age, he was however much more powerful than I on the unexpectedly steep (although not very long) climbs on this section; and even though I enjoyed "pushing it" for a while, I soon came to my senses and told him that I needed to save my legs for the remaining 500+ kilometers, and that he should please take off and not worry about me. But he declined and insisted on staying with me, no matter what.

By the time we went over the Kicking Horse Pass and started the long descent, it was completely dark. We were now on the Trans-Canada Highway where traffic was heavy and somewhat intimidating. Unfortunately, the shoulder was not devoid of potholes and other hazards. But I still felt sufficiently fresh and confident in my lights (and eager to make up some time) that I let build up more speed than Henrique could handle. I lost him several

times and had to wait for him. He told me he was "chicken" on downhills; also, his lights were not completely up to the task. After a particularly gnarly stretch, I found myself alone again and came to a complete stop - no Henrique. Other riders approached, stopped and asked if I needed anything. They reported having seen my presumed companion fix a flat, about half a mile back. Well, I guess I should ride back up then and look after him!

Still hard for me to come to terms with this decision. It was clear that this meant I would now stay with him at least until Golden, and that I would definitely abandon my goal of pursuing my best possible finishing time. On the other hand, adjusting to Henrique's cautiousness on the risky descents might just save my life (he actually punctured while hitting a pothole, and was now even more scared of crashing). And then there was this contradiction in me between recognizing that staying with him at least for the rest of the night was the right thing to do, and my spontaneous aversion against the idea of patronizing

him and - worse - the potential consequence of being complimented later for any "noble attitude" whatsoever. I hated these contradictions; and I still wanted to finish the ride in a good time.

The remaining 70km to Golden turned into a long, hard slog. Instead of taking advantage of downhill, we were annoyed by them. The impetus to drive the bike forward on flats or the intermittent uphill was gone. Henrique suffered from debilitating saddle sores, had trouble eating and drinking, and developed mild hallucinations and other sleepiness symptoms. At some point, I urged him to sing. He came up with quite a colorful song (not suitable for a non-Brazilian public), which promptly blew away any sleepiness in both of us. We rested often, didn't worry about time, and checked in at the Golden control at 2:12am. It took us about 5 hours to cover 70km during which the altitude decreased by 800m!

I admired Henrique for keeping the sleep stop (including shower, dinner and breakfast) remarkably short; I believe we left around 6am towards Rogers Pass. Both of us felt well recovered and in good spirits. By the time we tackled the last more difficult miles of the pass (some 80km since Golden, around 11am), Henrique easily floated ahead and I was unable to follow. But we rested generously at the top. After all, this was the last major difficulty of the whole 1200!

In daylight and on much better road surfaces, the downhill towards Revelstoke was safe and satisfying, although a pesky headwind kept us slowing down. This irritated me enough to ride harder again, even at the price of leaving Henrique behind. On one of the downhills, a bump threw my third water bottle out of its improvised holder on the rear rack. I didn't want to stop and turn around for it - I wouldn't need it any more! Clearly, I still had issues with the time lost the evening before and rode on, the hands in the drops and the head down. Henrique would see me again at the Revelstoke control, where I would need more time anyway to dress for the expected higher temperatures during the last 250km.

When Henrique arrived at the control (at 2:51pm, barely 25 minutes after me), another rider who had observed what was going on - and who must have heard me earlier - pointed at me and shouted across the road "It's not a race, eh?". I was embarrassed. Consequently, I didn't say anything when Henrique suggested we stay longer and get some more substantial rest. Besides, he had stopped to pick up my lost water bottle and now handed it over to me ...



The next control in Enderby was 113 km away. I looked at it as a simple "formality control", because barely 22km further we would be in Salmon Arm, our last overnight stop. I had in mind to arrive there before midnight; but Henrique didn't believe in it. He already knew better, and it would be worse than he feared. In his own words (on www.audaxbrasil.com.br/artigos/henriquecaldas.htm):

"Revelstoke – Enderby (km 1077) – It was like a torture for me. I was very weak during the last 40 km (...) We got there at 10:45 pm and I have to thank Joseph that he waited for me. He knew I couldn't do it alone."

We needed to stay and rest at the Enderby control until well after midnight. Once again, Henrique recovered exceptionally well during that time. We continued and reached Salmon Arm on Sunday morning around 2am, with Henrique having a clear head and I being the one who missed a couple of

crucial turns during the last miles, despite my pedantic preparation with various Google maps depicting the supposedly memorized route. Henrique who suffered more and more seriously from the damaged skin on his bottom even wanted to push through to the finish now (we had talked about this on Saturday morning). But I convinced him that under the given circumstances, waiting for daylight would be the smarter option. And finally, I expressed my honest admiration for his bravery (after having made fun of him, earlier). Reluctantly, I started to recognize that I was benefitting from his companionship.

The atmosphere at the Salmon Arm control was very special, again. On one hand, many of the riders were marked by the distance; on the other hand, with only about 110 fairly easy kilometers remaining, we "smelled the barn" and anticipated the euphoria of finishing. I was happy to see Laurent Chambard again (remember him?) who obviously knows how to complete a 1200km ride (his fourth) even without adequate preparation.

Around 6am, we set out for the last segment. Henrique was still a little reserved about my projection of a finishing time before noon, but played the game nonetheless. We rode together, on and off, with several other riders. The road surface was good and clean and the shoulder was wide. Only the increasing traffic made so much noise that it was hard to keep a conversation going, and we stayed silent. Once again, we were incredibly lucky with the weather: a layer of clouds shielded us from the sun (it could have been very hot otherwise), and the predicted headwind on this last stretch was barely noticeable. My legs felt surprisingly



fresh, only the upper body started slumping down to the left. When I noticed it I pushed back by bending the right elbow more and the left one less.

I really didn't do it on purpose; but with about 30 km to go, I found myself ahead and, what with the traffic noise and the lack of conversation, had lost sight of Henrique. By now, it seemed completely natural to me that we finish together: we had become a team. But also, for some very obscure reason, I didn't want to finish this ride with legs all too fresh. I wanted to get some punishment for some guilt I was unable to articulate. Besides, we had met several other riders over the last hours, and there really was no difficulty left on this

route - Henrique was safe! And so I started "hammering" it in, alone. Henrique arrived only 15 minutes later, at 11:35am.

At the finish, we all got a beer (actually, I got two because I am a Bavarian); and Henrique and I celebrated together. He should be very proud of being only the 5th Brazilian ever to finish a 1200km brevet! I recall repeating several times "This feels good!" - without clarifying whether I referred to my accomplishment or the swallowing of the beer.



Wearing Henrique's gift: a Brazilian bandana!

Everybody was upbeat, relaxed and cheerful at the post-ride dinner party on Sunday evening. On Monday morning, by serendipity, four of us met for breakfast at the Denny's next to the hotel, and it was all different. It took a full night's sleep to let the experience sink in and realize that this ride was much more than an athletic achievement. It had stirred up and eliminated some crud from the deeper layers of our subconsciousness. The prolonged physical effort had rattled the rust off the pipes; the altitude air had blown through and cleaned us. And the beauty of the vistas had made us fragile and receptive to everything that's good and beautiful in this world. The Rocky Mountain 1200 has made us better. We have turned some flesh and body into soul.

Photo credits:

I found the first photo from the start in Norm Walter's collection

www.flickr.com/photos/bcrandonneurs/2733892257/in/set-72157606548723618

Photos 6 and 9 were taken by Stephen Hinde:

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and

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The remaining pictures are my own (<http://gallery.mac.com/velocio1#100189>) or Henrique's (<http://picasaweb.google.com/hvcaldas/RockyMountains1200Canada>).