

Participant Watch

Back by popular demand. We've followed their plans and preparations for a year, but what happened to them in France? Thanks to Colin Anderson, Helen Lew Ton, Catherine Johnson, Ian Boehm, and Michael Boehm for sharing their experiences one more time.

Colin Anderson



How did you go?

I had plotted a finish of between 11 am and 3 pm Thursday, so a 2.52 pm finish minus 30-odd minutes waiting for a start was very satisfactory.

What went as expected?
What didn't go to plan?

I had real hassles with the rain sodden feet, and was forced to take an extended stop-over at Villaines on return section.

What were your highest and lowest moment on the PBP?

Lowest spot was sitting outside a pub somewhere in the early evening trying to rub some feeling back into my feet.

Highest spot, riding in assistance of an American I had met in my Boston ride of 2005, who was going through a **super bonk** period (at about 1150 km) and just needing a bit of extra goading!

Were there any surprises (nasty or pleasant)?

Pleasant surprises, the friendliness and general excitement of the French along various road points at any hour!

What are you glad you had with you? Why?

New Zealand Merino underclothing, and my Gore-Tex coat, plus a couple of shower caps from the Holiday Inn, to put over my helmet.

What do you know now that you wish you'd known then?

More about the route; my posted ride info all arrived three days after my NZ departure. My fault, should have relied on the email version.

When are you going to do it again?

Unsure, though I'm sure another challenge will pop up somewhere.

What now?

Rest recovery, New Zealand's most popular **fun** ride around Lake Taupo beckons again.

What went as expected?

What didn't go to plan?

The night time start (together with the wind and rain) was my undoing. After doing one night time ride of 400 km here in Australia I should have realised that this would be a problem. (When a flat 400 km with some, but not a lot of wind is slower than a hilly 400, there is something to be learned.)

By the time I got to Loudéac, my ride time average was low, I was just on top of my fatigue, there was little prospect of a decent sleep and the wind was bound to be stronger as the route approached Brest and the coast. Plus it was unlikely that my feet were ever going to be dry.

What were your highest and lowest moment on the PBP?

I was awe-struck when I saw the first of the 8 pm starters returning to Paris. I was in the middle of nowhere when I saw a big group of headlights. I suppose that there were about twenty riders. In about 28 hours they'd already covered the best part of 800 km!!

Were there any surprises (nasty or pleasant)?

The best surprise was how well the SNCF (French railways) coped with getting a million cyclists and their bikes back to Paris/Saint-Quentin from deepest, darkest Brittany. I can't see VicRail handling twenty cyclists let alone hundreds.

My French was good enough to handle the transaction at the station, but the man behind the counter was smart enough to have the price written up on a piece of A4 paper (much easier than trying to catch the numbers as they are spoken!)

Helen Lew Ton



How did you go?

Next question! I pulled out at Loudéac.

What are you glad you had with you? Why?

A pair of thongs. I put a pair in my bag at Loudéac because I didn't want to run the risk of picking up a fungal infection from the showers. Having them meant that I didn't have to spend the next 24 hours in cycling shoes or buy something else to wear.

What do you know now that you wish you'd known then?

If I am ever attempt another PBP I will have done at least a 1000km brevet and I will make sure that I can ride fast enough to start with the 84 hour group. No more 9.30 pm starts for me!

When are you going to do it again?

Maybe, maybe not.

What now?

Some time whizzing around a velodrome and the 2008 Alpine Classic.

Catherine Johnson



How did you go?

Gasping for air, nursing numb hands, limping on swollen excruciating feet, while valiantly protecting an excoriated derrière and cursing 'quaint' Parisian cobble stones; I finished with hours to spare (well at least two!) About 60 hours on the bike and about 28 hours to play!

What went as expected?

What didn't go to plan?

My only expectations were that I would finish and feel exhilarated and elated...but when I finished, I just felt an overwhelming sense of relief that it was over and it was time to move on.

What were your highest or lowest moments on the PBP?

I experienced many wonderful times and rode with some fantastic people, but my most memorable time was the last 50 km: it was a laugh from the moment I left the final checkpoint, with the vision of Bernard fussing and flapping around his flock, till I crossed the finish line. I predominantly rode this section with Bruce Dodds, Matt Bradbury, and a couple of "French Sunday cyclists" (who kept telling me I was a "grand cycliste féminin fantastique"—personally I looked and felt appalling—but they bolstered my ego and tickled my funny bone). Bruce and Matt both kept me laughing hysterically (not a difficult feat after only about 6 hours sleep in four nights) as Matt kept handing out little koalas to grateful children ("spreading the love") and making up ridiculous stories, while Bruce feigned ailments and designed new 'bon' expressions till I hit the pavement. Finally, arriving at the finishing arena was made extra special with the presence of Hannah and Phil, the Dodds support team and the other Australians all cheering madly.

Being greedy I experienced two lowest PBP moments; both emotional not physical.

The first was while waiting for Philip, I was informed that he had been ill and looked "very unwell". After his cardiac investigations last year I imagined the worst. After much angst and in true loving wife style I waited a while longer then left (nothing I could do for Phil, anyway). Just as I was finally leaving, Phil rocks in...so my departure was again delayed, but at least Phil was still in one piece.

The second (which really happened first) was at a secret control checkpoint but I'll keep this low moment a mystery except to say a huge thank-you to Howard Duncan and his team.

Were there any surprises (nasty or pleasant)?

Surprises! I have a list:

- Atmosphere at the start was amazing!
- I kept meeting the same cyclists (Bruce, Matt, and Phil) at the checkpoints though we all rode at very different speeds; they enjoyed more unscheduled stops but I just kept plodding!
- The generosity and encouragement given by the supporters and the local French people was inspiring and very

much appreciated.

- My gears slipped badly in the rain (not conducive to easy, safe cycling) and I reported this to bike mechanics at every checkpoint; they each tinkered with the gears and claimed they had rectified the problem...only to have gears slipping again 10km later. Then I ran into Dave Minter at the 1003km checkpoint and he did something to the bike that left me with one fewer but stable gears, which made the last kilometres seem easy!

- I managed to ride and/or socialise with every one of the PBP starters from Queensland and Northern NSW while on the PBP route—not bad when there were 5000 starters and I'm talking about meeting a special 13 of them!

- The lack of support for people who have to pull out of the PBP is poor: cyclists were kicked out (without food) of dry halls into the rain in the middle of the night. Why not let them stay till daylight or supply a food option so they could continue riding at their own pace?

- I have worked in male urology wards but surprisingly, witnessed more men urinating in my 88 hours of the PBP then I have in my entire nursing career!

- Timing devices were not calibrated: cyclists who went through checkpoints at the same time were given different times!

- The web site was amazing. I received a 'congratulations you are half way there' phone call from Brisbane three minutes after I arrived in Brest—and had not registered I was there yet myself!

- Feet can swell and wrinkle beyond recognition after being wet for four days straight!

- I am extremely surprised that I am again responding to your questions!

What are you glad you had with you? Why?

Friends, toilet paper, medical bivvy bag (brilliant) and chamois cream.

What do you know now that you wish you'd known then?

Plenty! Heaps about cycling and preparation for long distance rides but mainly it has been reiterated to me that I can achieve anything I set my mind to with the support of my family and friends.

When are you going to do it again?

The first year the PBP is held after my Korsakoff's amnesia sets in.

What now?

I am going to stay home, drink wine/ champagne and grow fat and lazy...starting as soon as I get back from the gym!

Ian Boehm



How did you go?

I made it to 1100km, fell asleep on the bike and sailed into the roadside ditch. I head-butted the embankment on the far side and this caused some neck pain (see Ian's account of his accident in *Checkpoint* No. 33).

What went as expected?

The wet weather clothing regime got a good try-out and worked well. For the record it is as follows:

- Long sleeve jersey/short sleeve plus arm warmers
- Windproof outer shell, well ventilated and shower resistant
- Waterproof overbooties
- Leg warmers with lower end covering the top of the booties so water doesn't drain into the shoes.

Your garments get wet but provided you keep moving you stay warm.

What didn't go to plan?

The plot to by-pass the Mortagne contrôle on the way out failed comprehensively as a problem at 22km forced me to stand in the line at the controle for the mechanic. Then I had to find the cunningly hidden first-aid station so they could attend to an injured

German cyclist I knew. Thus I was at least two hours behind where I wanted to be for timing. This and the weather made eating into that deficit difficult.

What were your highest and lowest moment on the PBP?

I think the highest moment is the aftermath of the crash though the warmth I feel is more in reflection than any particular feeling of elation at the time.

The lowest moment would be when Michael and I parted company after Loudéac on the way back. He had injuries and decided to abandon and I elected to continue as not much was hurting. That said, some of the night riding in the rain was particularly unpleasant.

Were there any surprises (nasty or pleasant)?

It was a much less friendly event than the 2003 one. I put it down to the rain preoccupying riders and depressing their collective mood. Further, rain clothing anonymises riders so you have little idea of how you might address one of your fellows on the road so you are less likely to bother.

What are you glad you had with you?

I bought a Petzl head torch in France to replace the aged one that had failed. It is much brighter than the old one and was great have when I needed to get the bike going again at the 22 km mark.

What do you know now that you wish you'd known then?

I can't think of anything I'm kicking myself for.

When are you going to do it again?

Not any time before 2011. Ask me again in 2009

What now?

- Stay on the bike but not as frequently as in the past year.
- Failing to finish 1200km events is getting to be a habit I'm keen to break and the Great Southern Randonnée is on again next year.
- Do a 1000 to lock in a Woody award.
- I'd like to have a crack at one of the tasty 1200s in North America.
- Make a decision about PBP2011.

Michael Boehm



How did you go?

I had to withdraw after 800km with Achilles tendonitis. I've also got some numbness in my pinky fingers and reduced dexterity and strength in other fingers from nerve damage.

What went as expected?

What didn't go to plan?

The weather was somewhat unexpected. It rained every night and on and off during the days. I found other riders to be pretty unresponsive to attempts at conversation. The week prior to PBP and the forecasts for it indicated rain, but before I left Melbourne I was expecting beautiful weather.

What were your highest and lowest moment on the PBP?

The highest point was when it dawned on me that after 18 months of training, qualifiers, hype, anxiety and preparation that I was actually riding the PBP. My lowest moment was when I accepted that my ankle was only going to get worse and that finishing was not possible.

Were there any surprises (nasty or pleasant)?

A flat tyre on my front wheel going down a hill on the first night.

I was pleasantly surprised by the families on the side of the ride clapping you on or offering you coffee at 4 in the morning. That was absolutely fantastic and I wish Australians were so supportive.

Another pleasant surprise was how little discomfort I had while on my bike. When putting together my commuter a couple of months ago I was looking for a saddle.

Dad had an old Avocet in his garage that I used and discovered that it was really comfortable. I hadn't used it on my road bike but I took it to France and it made all the difference.

What are you glad you had with you? Why?

Wet weather gear. Without it I wouldn't have made it through the first night. Over the course of the ride, I found the rain to be merely an annoyance. Provided that I kept moving, I had no problem keeping warm.

What do you know now that you wish you'd known then?

Nothing that I can think of. I liked the fact that I didn't know what to expect. It kept it interesting and challenging which is exactly what I wanted. That said I think I'll be better prepared, strategy-wise, for next time.

When are you going to do it again?

2011. I had a great time this year, despite the injury and I definitely want to beat it next time.

What now?

Try and stop this Achilles problem for good. You may remember that I had tendon problems on a qualifying 600. That was in my left foot, this time was in my right. I guess I'm glad that it's not exactly recurrent, but it is still pretty concerning.

I'm going to go mountain biking again which was something I had to put on hold in the lead-up to PBP and I really miss.

I'll try "Around the Bay" on a fixie and plot out a ride from one end of the Americas to the other in 2009.

PBP volunteers

Michael Gabadou

The organisation at each control was amazing. Hardly any queues and I never saw any of the food in short supply. The volunteers were so enthusiastic, friendly and helpful. They were there in the middle of the day or the night, smiling and serving us really nice food. The variety was quite amazing: pasta, rice, chicken, paella, ham, steaks, roast beef, beautiful soups, breads, croissants, hot chocolate, coffee, tea, all sort of drinks, rice pudding, cakes...at any time of the day or night. Absolutely amazing! A huge thank you to all of them.

How lucky can you be?

Martin Haynes

You can train all you want, be as fit as you are able, but to complete a 1200km ride like PBP you still need a bit of luck. You may suffer from a sore throat, sore knee or other problems arising from a prolonged ride. Your bike might breakdown. The weather might turn against you. A lot of things are out of your control, but sometimes you have a bit of luck...

Prior to the ride I had the bike serviced before leaving Australia, anything that was not 100%, was replaced. New tubes, tyres, chain, sprockets, rear cluster.

Lib and I left Australia mid-June to ride in France, so we did a few kilometres prior to PBP. Before PBP at Versailles the bike was checked again, the rear wheel was causing some concern so I pinched Lib's rear wheel. We have the same bikes so this was straight forward. And Lib did know about it.

The ride started, along with the rain. Everything was going well until the 527km mark. I know this, as the computer was stuck on this number for the remainder of the ride. As I was approaching the control at Carhaix-Plouguer, with no more than 200m to go, the pedals started spinning around with no resistance, the rear wheel was not responding. I quickly concluded that something was amiss!

I started walking the short distance to the control wondering if this was not the end of my PBP. People were lined along the final section towards the control, clapping the cyclists, as they saw me walking they continued to clap but dropped their heads as I passed. No doubt thinking that bugger is finished.

I heard a voice call out and looked up to see Lisa and James Turner on the side of the road next to their car. Lisa asked what the problem was, and I just kicked the pedal and let it spin around, James quickly diagnosed the problem as a broken freewheel spring. Lisa quickly offered James' rear wheel that

was in the back of their car along with his bike. This sounded too good to be true. His bike was fitted with a 10-speed Shimano gear and mine was 10-speed Campagnolo. We did not know if this would be compatible, so off to the bike mechanic at the control to see what he could do. He said we could try, so he quickly fitted the new wheel made a few adjustments and pronounced the operation a success.

James gave me his phone number to contact him at the end with strict instructions to return the wheel to the Holiday Inn at the end on Saturday as they were leaving soon after.

I continued the ride with the "new" wheel and had no further problems.

The odds of having the problem outside a control, having someone I knew handy, having a spare wheel that was compatible and with similar gear ratios. I wonder what the odds are of this.

I can only ponder what might have happened. I could have been caught many kilometres from the control, in that case I would have been out of time if I could have got a replacement wheel. I am told the mechanic would have been able to get a replacement wheel, I do not know as he was extremely busy when I had dealings with him.

I am very grateful to both Lisa and James for their help in getting me through PBP. It was an unforgettable experience to complete my first PBP.

Checkpoint

The endurance cyclist's magazine

No. 34 Summer 2007/08



The Simpson Desert
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