
A technical problem

Michael Gabadou

Michael was one of many riders in the PBP '07 who added "belly trouble" to the weather woes. Despite this, he was confident that he would finish...unless he had a technical problem.

Based on my qualifying rides, I thought about registering in the 84-hour start. The time was not the main objective for me, so I registered for the standard 90-hour start; I wanted to be able to enjoy the ride on sunny roads, stopping at stalls set up all along the way by the locals, cycling by warm summer nights, under a beautiful moonlight. Well! Little did I know then what the weather conditions would be like.

We arrived a week before the start in Paris, and I did only a couple of 70 or 80km rides during that week. I finalised my preparation, equipment and my riding schedule (all on a spreadsheet modified from Geoff Bray's one from 2003), which I based on a 85-hour finishing time, allowing for sleep each night, time to enjoy breaks on the road and with a safety margin for problems.

Monday 20th August, at last! The wait is over. I get to the start at 8.00pm. There is quite a crowd already. We get marshalled through the sports complex to the cycling track, already wearing long johns and long sleeve shirts. I feel very calm and do not feel the butterflies in the stomach I was expecting. Soon the rain jackets come out as the first few drops fall. I am in the third wave starting at 10.10 pm.

The first few kilometres require concentration with the wet road, slippery sewer plates and lines, tight corners, streets getting smaller as we get further onto country roads and villages. Some corners in small villages are pretty scary. At one point both the guy in front of me and I slip sideways on a sewer plate and are lucky not to fall. I heard later on that there had been a few bad falls. I get to the front of the group, right behind the escort motorbikes. It feels safer as you can see what is coming up.

Within 5km of the start my Polar computer starts switching on and off. Great! I had had the problem before but thought I had managed to fix it after a visit to the local

Polar distributor. The computer will go on working on and off till Carhaix, then will stop completely. I will have to do the whole PBP without any idea of distance or speed.

After 15 km, the motorbike escort leaves us and we find ourselves on small pitch dark country roads. I am quite surprised how quickly the peloton stretches out, and how soon we catch up the back of the previous starting group. The average speed is quite high, over 30 km/h. The adrenaline rush is still in force.

All is well despite the weather, and a bad case of the runs that will force me to frequent and urgent stops all the way back to Paris, despite going through a whole box of medication. Speaking French is extremely useful to find the local toilet... in time. Luckily I am not going for a time. I will need to watch out for dehydration as well.

I get to Villaines-la-Juhel at 7.15 am, or 45 minutes ahead of schedule. Like the man falling off a tall building I think, "so far so good". There is a big queue for the food, but speaking French I find quickly the way to the second and largest canteen across the road. Hot soup, hot chocolate, any hot food to warm up and dry out. Two days before the start, Amanda found some rubber slip-on shoes. They are great at these controls. So much easier and comfortable to walk in. And it feels so good to get out of those wet riding shoes.

I arrive under heavy shower in Fougères, at 11.45 am or more than one hour ahead of schedule. Completely soaked I take a longer break to dry out and warm up. Within five minutes back on the bike I am soaked again.

At Tinteniac I hear several French riders calling home on their mobile phones and advising of the time of the train they will be on, going back home. On the way to Tinteniac, I saw large groups riding back

towards Paris. Obviously, a lot of people have decided they had enough.

My left achilles is very sore, I am shivering uncontrollably, I can feel the first signs of a bad head cold coming through my throat and nose, and my belly is still in revolt. Stopping here is very tempting. I go to the medical center, but they do not hand out any medicine so they cannot help me. On the way out, I go past the technical assistance and ask whether they have good rain jacket. Fifteen minutes later, and quite a few euros lighter, I am wearing a new Gore-Tex rain jacket. Immediately, I start to warm up again. I am still soaked but am not shivering anymore.

After a two hour stop, I leave Tinteniac. It is still raining but, with my new jacket I feel I can cope with it. I now know I will finish the PBP...unless I have a technical problem. I find it strange that I have this absolute conviction when we are only one third through the ride and three days away from the end.

I get to Loudéac at 9.35 pm, 35 minutes behind schedule. I go and get a beautifully warm shower, change into a dry set of gear, have a hot meal and after 30 minutes queuing I get onto a comfortable mattress by midnight.

At 3.00 am, I am woken up and get ready. In the canteen, I meet Graham Jones and Dave Hart. They left Saint-Quentin in a later group, and seem to go faster. They are not quite ready, so I leave ahead of them, at 4.10 am. As I come out of the control some riders turn right towards Paris: whilst I had a shower and slept last night, they were on their way to Brest and back. They are now 325 km ahead of me!

For the first time since the start, I am able to ride without a rain jacket. I feel good, ride well and keep catching up on riders but am concerned I might burn out. I find a group of French riders going at a similar speed

and nestle myself behind their group. The leader has done the PBP many times since the 80s. He is now 60 and takes a group of “young” riders with him every four years. One unbreakable rule is that he demands to lead all the way. I guess this is his personal challenge. They are very disciplined and each one has his spot in the group. They let you follow them but not get among their eight-rider formation.

The stretch between Carhaix and Brest is dry but a head wind progressively strengthens. The climb to Roc Trevezel is long but not steep and is not a problem. At the entrance to Brest, as we cross the Pont Louppe, I take photos of the Pont de l'Iroise. The half way point is nearly there. A bit further, we pass the entrance signage to Brest and I stop to take a photo standing next to it. A couple of guys do the same and we all go through this photo procession.

The sun is even shining. I get to Brest at 12.20 pm, only 10 minutes behind schedule. Being at the half-way point feels good. I send a SMS to Amanda, “Put the kettle on, I am on my way home.” Only 600 km to go! Apart from my guts, the rest of the body feels strong. I still have no doubt I will finish... unless I get some mechanical problem. Time is unimportant to me. I want to enjoy the ride and the atmosphere on the road and

decide I will enjoy stops on the way back. In this regard, the bad weather has kept people away. I was told about crowds and stalls in the villages even in the middle of the night in 2003. Nothing like it this year. We can't blame them; who would stand on the side of the road looking at crazy cyclists riding four days and nights mostly in the rain? Well some do. Somewhere in a small village, I passed a spectator sitting in a lounge chair with a tarpaulin as blanket, under a steady rain. There are still a few stalls here and there offering hot coffee or tea and biscuits or cakes. Fantastic.

As I am leaving the control in Brest, I meet Dave Hart again who just arrived and is looking for Graham Jones whom he lost touch with on the way from Carhaix. Unfortunately, I would hear later that Graham eventually would have to pull out victim of a bad intestinal bug not allowing him to retain any food. So hard and unfair to do all this preparation and have to drop out because of a tummy bug.

I also run into Garry Armsworth and we ride most of the stage to Carhaix together. For the first time since we left Saint-Quentin, we are riding in shorts and short sleeves. The head wind we had this morning is now a tail wind and the climb up Roc Trevezel is easy. By the time we get to the top of Roc

Trevezel, big black clouds are rolling in. I get back into long johns and long sleeves, whilst Garry perseveres in shorts. On the long downhill from the Roc we try to keep up with a tandem bike, but even pushing at full speed they easily distance us. We get to Carhaix at 5.25 pm, or 15 minutes behind schedule.

The rain catches up with us on the way to Loudéac. I lose Garry on one of my “belly breaks” and get to Loudéac at 9.55 pm or 25 minutes ahead of schedule. Another hot shower, change of clothes, and hot meal and I am ready for bed just after midnight.

I wake up at 4.30 am and leave Loudéac by 5.30 am. I find it hard this morning. It is not so much the rain coming back in showers but I feel drained. Energy food and drinks don't help. I am not the only one. Every one is riding silently just keeping the motion going. On a small hill, an on-coming car appears in the distance ahead of us. A Japanese rider to my left has obviously not seen it. I call him and he instinctively moves to the left side of the road, straight in the path of the car. Quickly a couple of riders and I call him back and he realises his error and moves back to the right hand side of the road. It is quite amazing we don't see more accidents. Some riders have cut down on their sleep breaks and are getting so tired.

Loudéac, 2.52am: “The shot required a tripod and a two second exposure meaning that if the rider moved then he would blur across the screen. Eventually he paused perfectly for about five seconds, like all of sudden he forgot where he was, what he was doing and why he was standing there.”—G.B.



Photo: Gregg Bleakney (pdpphoto.com)



Problem: Clear break of the rear stay.

The craving for sleep is getting to some riders. I see a rider on the side of the road asleep sitting on the muddy grass against the wall of a farm house, still wearing his helmet, with helmet light still on, whilst the rain is pelting down on him.

As we go through Illifaut, the second secret control appears on the side of the road. Nice to have a short break. I take advantage of a nice warm soup. As I leave the control the rain starts again. A couple more “belly stops” slow me down. Seven kilometres from Tinteniac I stop in a café, and have a strong coffee, and a long baguette with lashes of butter and jam. I don’t know what the café owner puts in his coffee but I feel much better immediately. I zoom down to Tinteniac, getting there at 10.25am, 1 hour and 20 minutes behind schedule due to my stops totalling one full hour on the way. I register my time and get back on the road immediately.

The ride to Fougères is great. I feel strong, the tail wind helps me. The short rolling hills are perfect allowing good speed up on the pedals in the climbs and fast downhill. I keep on catching up and passing riders all the way.

I get to Villaines at 5.50pm, 25 minutes behind schedule. There is quite a crowd of spectators at the control. Whilst eating, I hear the commentator on the speaker phone announcing the rate at which riders were arriving. When I got there, he mentioned 200 riders every fifteen minutes. Then he indicated they had measured 600 every fifteen minutes in a village before Villaines. So this is how the kitchens can tune up to the flow of riders: they get a measure on the road before the control and adjust the output of the kitchen accordingly.

On the way out I meet Garry again as well as Howard Dove and Warren Page. We decide to ride together but through a misunderstanding we lose one another on the exit.

The ride to Mortagne is harder. I am getting tired, I get a couple of showers and the road is made up of long and steep hills one after the other. I stop in a café-restaurant in the evening and have a meal. They have set themselves up with a room for the riders to have dinner as well as a dormitory. An American rider, having finished his meal gets up to leave but just about collapses from fatigue. We convince him to have a

short nap but he is concerned not to wake up. I organise with the café owner to ensure he wakes him up 30 minutes later.

The last twenty kilometres on pitch dark roads, with steep winding hills and fast sharp corners are quite nerve wracking. I know that I am probably going faster than I should in the downhill, but I am tired and want to get to the end of the stage. The event is so well organised and the road in such good quality that it is a reasonable risk. Eventually I arrive in Mortagne five minutes before midnight, one hour and twenty five minutes behind schedule. I get some food at the canteen, take photos of all those exhausted bodies all over the tables, chairs and floor and then go to bed to get three hours of sleep. Only 140km to go tomorrow. No worries.

The ride out of Mortagne is similar to what we went through last night, steep and winding hills one after the other, on pitch dark roads. Eventually it flattens out. Going through La Ferté-Vidame I catch up on a group of riders. One of them moves slowly to the left side of the road. As I pass him, I have a strange feeling and call him; he shudders and moves back away from the

edge—he was asleep and heading straight for the ditch.

Eventually I arrive in Dreux at 8:25 am. The atmosphere is so much more relaxed. The end is in sight. Everyone here knows they have done it or are so close it cannot escape them. I meet with Garry again and we leave together in shorts and short sleeves for only the second time since the start. It is a bit cool but we are all determined to finish off taking advantage of the soft sun shining on us.

I lose Garry once more at another “belly stop”. Going through the Rambouillet Forest, I stop to take a photo of riders in this beautiful surrounding. Two riders come around the corner and I take a couple of shots, then realise it was Howard and Warren again. Amazing to take a random shot and get them.

We ride together. They left on the 84 hour start and compared to me they have had to cut down on much of their sleep, showers, etc. They are quite tired and sore, and they are just aiming finish in less than 80 hours if possible. I am glad I did not start with them; with my gut problems I would have struggled on my own at the limit of the time allowance, would have had to cut down on sleep like them and not been able to stop in cafés, side road stalls and enjoy the atmosphere.

Just before Montfort l’Amaury, a rider announces that we have just gone through 1200km. Only 27km to go! In Montfort, I go over a speed hump and hear a big noise, my bike goes sideways as I feel the back wheel blocking and skidding. Luckily I was not going fast. If I had this would have been a pretty ugly tumble. Howard and Warren pass me not realising what happened. From the noise I first think I blew a tyre. I check and everything seems okay. I restart and hear a loud klong on every revolution of the pedals. I then think I might have broken the crank, but check it and it is fine. I pedal again and then realise the rear frame is snapped right through just short of the derailleur. My heart sinks. Strange that all along since my near abandon in Tinteniac I felt that only a mechanical problem could stop me from finishing. After a few seconds I think, “I could walk to the end from here.” As I check my bike Björn Blässe and an English rider come out of the corner shop, then a bit later Barry Moore stops and enquires about what is happening. We open our bags, go through the contents and brainstorm ideas of how to resolve this problem. Eventually,



Solution: Solid repair that will allow the bike to finish the ride.

with two cone spanners and zip ties Barry had and an Allen key and black tape I had, I manage to strengthen the back triangle. Great spirit of support and help from Björn, Barry and the English rider, whose name I don't know.

I cycle slowly, able to use the three front rings and the lowest two rear speeds. Although the bike feels a bit wobbly it holds up well. I ride very slowly, making sure I don't stress the bike on hills or in accelerations. On the ring road of Saint-Quentin, a short but heavy shower forces me to get my rain jacket back on for a short while. The rain will be with us till the end! At last the finish line appears and I see Amanda and my parents. I stop to give Amanda a big hug. It is 1:34 pm. I lost about one and a half hours with this breakage but finish within the time (87 hours, 24 minutes). I am elated to finish but my emotion is not as high as I expected. I have probably left some of the adrenaline on the last 25km of the ride. It seems the emotion is higher on Amanda's and my parents' side. They followed the ride, the bad weather and my control times with only a few phone calls from me to know what was happening. The last couple of hours, since I rang Dad to let him know I

was delayed by the stay breakage, were very strenuous for them. Much harder for them than for me.

It is over. I have done it. Definitely, my biggest personal sporting achievement. At the same time I know I am unlikely to do it again. What more challenge could the PBP throw at me? Rain, hail, wind, belly upset, mechanical break—I got it all. I spend a good hour talking with other riders and looking for Canadian riders to swap shirt with.

Amanda tells me of the mad and continuous exchange of SMS she had with our friends in Sydney, Geoff in particular, who was following my progress on internet and emailing comments to our riding group stage after stage. It is quite moving to realise the number of family and friends who were following my ride.

It has been a long eight months since the first qualification ride. The PBP is a long effort over all these months, not just the 90 hours of the ride: a long effort for me but also a lot of patience and understanding from Amanda. Without her support over those months I couldn't have achieved this.

Checkpoint

The endurance cyclist's magazine

No. 34 Summer 2007/08



The Simpson Desert
A Bicycle Challenge

Paris-Brest-Paris
Tales of endurance

My First Brevet
Remember yours?