

Living the Dream. One Account of PBP

BY NIGEL GREENE

After five years of randonneuring, after a full season of training specifically for this ride, I thought I was ready for the 1230K Paris-Brest-Paris (PBP) bike ride. After all, according to my friend JB, who completed PBP twice before, PBP is “just a bike ride.” JB has been right about many things, but about this, he was just wrong.

PBP is more than a bike ride.

PBP is an entire region of France coming out to welcome and support a diverse collection of adventurers from around the world.

PBP is an arduous personal challenge whose origins reach back to the very birth of cycling.

PBP is a dream made real.

This brief account cannot capture the experience of 6000 participants

from 48 countries—no one account can. Telling the story of PBP is like recalling the details of a dream: some are strong and clear; others linger at the edge of recall, slipping away from easy description; and some may be lost in the haze of time. But this is a remarkable event so, with those shortcomings in mind, I shall try to share a sense of living the dream that is PBP.

Gathering at the velodrome

Randonneurs from around the world gather outside of the St. Quentin Velodrome in a kaleidoscopic mixture of colors and sounds. There are riders from Brazil, Greece, South Africa, Taiwan, Japan, Great Britain, Italia, Australia and Germany to name just a few of the countries

represented. The palpable excitement needs no translation.

Two friends, JB and Katie, riding a tandem they call “the Tandemnator,” will start at 17:15. I will depart at 17:30. Fifteen minutes is not an insurmountable lead so it’s possible that I may see them again.

A group of Americans coalesce around the “North Carolina boys”: Mike D., Luke H., Brian R., Captain Ende and Ian H. The tie-dye jersey that Ian wears seems perfect for his *laissez-faire* approach and joyful attitude.

I recognize Jenny O. from California from her Facebook posts. Although we’ve never met, I call out “Hello” as if I’d known her for years. She responds in kind. We are first timers and share the nervous excitement of what we are about to undertake.

At the starting line, the announcements blare from speakers in multiple languages over background music and the cheers of the crowd, culminating in a French countdown. *Trois, deux, un* and off we go. With a collective swoosh of tires, PBP 2015 is underway.

Riding out of St. Quentin

The course begins on a slight downhill. Children and adults line the street, applauding and cheering us on.

The afternoon sun is high above the horizon. We fly down a road lined with tall buttonwood trees that form a canopy of green leaves, their mottled trunks stately and picturesque, alongside golden fields under a French blue sky. I am awestruck by the beauty



The tandemnator in action.

—PHOTO NIGEL GREENE



and the spectacle. This is real. I am here.

My daughters wove a bracelet for me to wear during the ride—orange on one half, blue on the other. The colors happen to match the signs which point the way to Brest and then back to Paris. I take it as a sign. I ride on, my heart full with thoughts of my family and of the days to come.

We ride through a charm bracelet of small, quiet French towns linked by long and winding roads that border spacious golden fields. The towns and fields roll into the background as I make progress toward the next control.

First Night

In northwest France, in August, darkness comes late, the sunlight reluctantly trickling away like the last guests after a good party. At night, the riders become bright lines of reflected light, points of glowing red, white circles of light dancing on the blacktop, will-o-the-wisps floating in the dark.

The sheer number of spectators diminishes as we reach smaller towns, but, at every town along the route, people are there to greet us. Men. Women. Children. Old. Young. All day. All night. Cheering from street corners. Leaning out of bedroom windows. Sitting outside the town church and at cafes. Calling out words of encouragement as if they are waiting just for you. They call out, “Bon Courage!” “Bonne Route!” All along the way, local

townspeople stand vigil to bear witness to our passing.

Loudéac the first

The temperatures drop overnight. Dawn comes shrouded in cold fog. As the sun burns through in late morning, I stop for a cup of unbelievably delicious French café, served in demitasse tea party cups, along with a French pastry. I am fueled for the next control.

At about a third of the way through the course, Loudéac is a pivotal control. I plan to sleep before moving on to Brest. But first, I get in line and wait to buy food. As I sit to eat, my tired head bows over my plate.

Despite the large number of riders, I have been riding alone. I did not want to ride someone else’s pace and no one seemed to be riding mine so I arrive at Loudéac on my own. As I sit and slowly eat, I feel a hand rest softly on my shoulder. Not a pat, not a tap, but the steady hand of reassurance that you would put on the shoulder of a friend who needed your support. When I look up, I meet the kind, concerned eyes of a gray haired volunteer whose face is lined with a lifetime of experience. He holds a pitcher of ice water. As he holds my shoulder, he quietly says, “de l’eau” and fills my glass then, in response to my “merci,” he simply says “bon courage.” My eyes swim at the thought of him reaching out to me in all the hubbub that swirls in the control and lifting

One roadside rest stop compliments of the people of Brittany.

—PHOTO NIGEL GREENE

away the fleeting burden of loneliness. I drink the cold water to wash away the lump in my throat.

The sleep stop at Loudéac is a comedy of errors. The sleep station has four people behind the table. Perhaps it is the language barrier or impatience brought on by fatigue but it seems that every decision requires extensive discussion and debate. This line takes a while.

A man takes my cot ticket and guides me into the “disco morgue” which accurately describes the large gymnasium at Loudéac. It is filled with canvas cots that are filled by bodies covered in white foam paper sheets. Lights, covered in green glass, dimly light the room. The hundreds of exhausted sleeping bodies, with all the accompanying, grunts, coughs, snores and rustlings, sound like livestock.

A sheet covered body is sleeping in my cot. The man with my ticket wakes the poor guy and tells him that he is in the wrong cot. The poor guy, still half asleep, goes wandering off. The man with my ticket offers me the still warm cot and used morgue sheet. *Viola!*

Too tired and too short of time to protest, I accept the used offering. I open my drop bag to discover it is not



Welcome to Villaines.

—PHOTO NIGEL GREENE

When I arrive at the control, to my surprise, I find Team Tandemnator: Katie and JB! After I check in, we talk a bit and decide to ride together for a while.

I am concerned about the climb back up the Roc'h; if I bonk there, my ride will be over. On the way out of town, I stop at a pizza delivery place and order a pizza. I tell them to ride on. I take my pizza for two across the street and eat the whole thing.

Katie and JB wait for me in the town of *Sizun*. Riding with them adds a new dimension to the ride. We share stories, laughs, and the experiences of the day. We “*bonjour*” the people of France, plan our meals together, climb the hills and then bomb down the other side. Despite the accumulating fatigue, growing saddle discomfort and repeated climbing, I am having a wonderful time.

We move on toward *Loudéac*. Katie and JB have alternate sleep plans there. I, on the other hand, return to the disco morgue.

Loudéac the second.

The second go at *Loudéac* is a little better. Yet another line, but, eventually, I get a cot. This time, I find my drop bag, and with ear plugs and a mask I get to sleep for about two full hours.

When I leave, I join a small group of mostly American riders, including

my bag. I persuade a volunteer to return it but I have no change of clothes. Conscious of the time being wasted, I decide to do the best I can. I put my thumbs in my ears and sleep with my head on my hands.

One hour and fifteen minutes later, I wake up. I slowly gather my wits and my possessions before leaving the control to enter the quiet of the night.

The kindness of strangers

Night in northern France is eerily quiet. I am on the verge of hallucinating from lack of sleep. Bodies accumulate alongside the road as people sleep in ditches and fields along the route.

A home appears in the darkness. The children pour hot coffee into small cups. *Maman* serves fresh bread. *Papa* directs. In the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere, a family opens their home to the riders of PBP. The people along the way restore our souls.

Sunrise on Roc'h Trevezel

I remember *Roc'h Trevezel* as an endless climb at the end of an endless night.

I remember climbing from one crucifixion scene to the next, each cross unique but appearing regularly along the road. Riding past these potent symbols of sacrifice and redemption, I realize that I am on a secular pilgrimage; I am one of many who have come from afar to visit a place that only exists for a moment, to share a transformational experience created by the faith, sacrifice and effort of many.

Near the top of Roc'h Trevezel, a beautiful sunrise reveals the world.

Brest

From Roc'h Trevezel, the course descends in rolling climbs to the bay of Brest. Brest is the halfway point and is both a physical and mental milestone. The closer I get, the better I feel.



Controle dining.

—PHOTO NIGEL GREENE



Jenny O. They ride at a pace in my comfort zone and, glad for the company, I ride with them to *Tinténiac*. The control reminds me of a refugee camp for cyclists. People sleep on mats on floors, with heads on tables, anywhere and everywhere. Exhaustion is taking its toll.

Eat. Sleep. Ride.

After *Tinténiac*, I feel even stronger. I am saddle sore and have numbness in my left pinkie, but on the bike, I am in my element. My life becomes eat, sleep, ride, repeat. On less than three hours sleep in over 60 hours, I am thriving in this primal state of being.

As I fall into the rhythm of the ride, I begin to rely more on the support of local people. They appear out of the darkness to provide water when needed, to provide coffee when needed, to cheer us on. They celebrate our journey and uplift our failing spirits.

I will always remember *Villaines la Juhel*. I was riding with Ian Hands. This was his second time at PBP. As we made the final turn into the town, Ian said, “Get ready to feel like a pro.”

We turn into a tunnel of cheering fans. Hundreds of people greet us. Loudspeakers. Bands. Cheering kids. Applause. Ian high-fives kids along the way. They greet us like returning heroes, like prodigal sons. It takes my breath away.

At *Villaines*, I re-connect with Team Tandemnator. At about this point, it becomes clear that we do not have

enough time for any significant sleep. We are bumping up against closing times. The rest of the ride will test us.

The next control is *Mortagne-au-Perche*. There we make a frank assessment of our situation. There is no time for any real sleep but I am hoping for another hour and all of us are desperate for at least five minutes. After eating, we crawl under the table and sleep for a few precious minutes on the cafeteria floor.

Dreux

I remember riding solo to *Dreux*, but I honestly don’t recall how that came about. I arrive in *Dreux* at 5:42 and plan to leave at 7:00. With a half hour of sleep, I am ready to roll at 7:00. Outside, a soft steady rain falls. I take it as a good sign. Rainy days have been good to me. Then, just as I am about to leave, in come JB and Katie! They made it! I am elated. I can also see the exhaustion on their faces.

After some back and forth, I decide to delay my departure and leave with them at 7:30. We start out together, climbing the hill that that leads out of *Dreux*. I remember coming to the realization that I can not help them to finish any more than they can help me. We just have to pedal our bikes and finish the ride. The difference between success and failure would come down to desire.

I remember thinking of my wife and kids who would be at the finish, about how much I want to see them

Roadside crucifix.

—PHOTO NIGEL GREENE

and to have them see me finish this thing that I started years ago. My voice breaks with emotion when I tell Katie and JB that they have everything they need to finish and I will be leaving to see my family. As I pull away, the last thing I hear is JB cheering me on. The rain washes away a tear.

Arrivée

On this, the last day of PBP, I feel strongest of all. My left pinkie is numb. Saddle sores make sitting difficult. I have no odometer because the computer was lost on the course. But, despite all that, I feel supercharged. Perhaps everyone else in their sleep deprived state is moving at a crawl, or perhaps, just perhaps, under cool overcast skies, with a light rain falling, with just forty miles to go, the conditions are just right for me to give full rein to the spirit of the ride. Whatever the reason, every pedal stroke over the last 65 kilometers is an act of thankfulness. Thankfulness for the people along the route. Thankfulness for the friends I made over the last five years. Thankfulness for my wonderful wife and fantastic kids. Thankfulness for this opportunity to ride—fast, strong and joyful—across the final stage of Paris-Brest-Paris.

Je suis un randonneur. Je suis un ancien. 🚲