

# PBP 2015 Ride Report

BY VICKIE TYER



Vickie Tyer at the start of PBP 2015.

—PHOTO CATHY SMITH

I named my front wheel *Faith* and my rear wheel *Determination*. Together we would win redemption against the course that almost conquered me in 2011.

Before I went to PBP, I heard stories about people doing PBP as their first 1200K. Why do people cross the pond to ride their first 1200K? Not me. I'm just like a Boy Scout—BE PREPARED. I set out and rode several 1200Ks before my first PBP in 2011. That spring, I was the picture of ready. Bring it on! But then tragedy struck my family and I was off the bike so much that I became the picture of unready. It took everything I had to drag my sorry slow aching body to Paris with little time to spare. I put on the fake happy face and graciously accepted congratulations, but inside I ached

with despair because I knew how poorly I had managed my ride and how close I came to the dreaded DNF on the biggest ride of my life.

This was not going to happen to me again. I was having another go at it.

I'm 61 years old, on a recumbent, and my bike is four pounds heavier. I go a lot slower up the hills. Did anyone tell you they got some hills in France? There is about 40,000 feet worth of climbing on the PBP course. I knew the deck was stacked against me, but I would not be denied. Preparation and riding smart would surely carry me to a victory I could be proud of.

The PBP start was like a hero's send off. Thousands of people lined the streets, cheering and clapping, yelling Bravo and Bon Courage! They made me feel like a million bucks. This doesn't

happen anywhere in the world but in France. What a magic moment. I felt like a rock star taking flight.

After the fanfare of the send-off, I settled into a ride of efficiency, through the French farmlands. I stopped only to get water and pee. I didn't eat much, but I drank Spiz. I had my nutrition routine down this time. I'd mix a little powder drink mix in the Spiz, alternating it with a caffeine mix; I call it Caffeine Kool-Aid. Every thirty miles, I'd indulge in a little junk food to change it up, but my sights were set on Villaines and drop bag #1.

I rode along, aggravated by my cranky derailleurs. Boy—did they both need an adjustment! I started hearing a clunking spinning noise. This wasn't going well. I figured out it was the idler, the wheel that the chain runs over. I needed a mechanic.

There wasn't a hope or a prayer of one until Villaines. Guess what they had there: a mechanic! I was thrilled. He adjusted both derailleurs and took a look at the idler. He pretty much said good luck with that idler, but to my surprise it became happy and silent along the way. I thought my front derailleur was happy, too, until I realized I couldn't get the chain to fall to the granny gear. Then, I wasn't very happy. I was facing big hills, on a bent, without a granny.

I tried to see a mechanic in Fougères, but the line was way too long. At my speed and on a bent, I didn't have a moment to spare. I set out to figure it out on my own—and I did! To get into my granny gear, I had to stop

pedaling, drop the bar end shifter, give a one half pedal stroke, then shake my handle bars vigorously and, presto, the chain would fall to the granny! So I rode to Loudeac, shaking my handlebars like a goof.

In Loudeac, drop bag #2, I wolfed down another cold can of ravioli from my drop bag, refilled my Spiz, got more junk food, reloaded batteries and got the hell out of Dodge. I rode with all haste—westward ho!

By this point, I was feeling old, fat and slow. At Loudeac, I was only averaging 12 mph. I'm not fast on the bike, so I have to be fast off the bike. I was at controls only long enough to get my card stamped, chug some water or a Coke, refill my bottles, grab a baguette and get out. I was in the bulge, so I couldn't waste time in the cafeteria, or take a shower or change clothes. I wore the same clothes for the whole ride. I changed my shorts once, that's all. I had to be efficient. I had to get to Brest!

I rode into the big hills and left the bulge behind me. I was almost to Carhaix, when it got dark. After another quick stop, I pushed into the dark night alone. Well, on PBP you are never really alone. A trail of red lights dotted the road ahead. The second night on a bike, it starts to get tough, so that's when you have to dig deep and ask yourself, how bad do you want this? The skies got foggy, and the night got chilly and lonely. I had to dig deeper. I was determined to see Brest before sunrise, no matter what. I kept drinking caffeine and pushing onward.

Then there it was: the big bridge over the bay. YEAH! I had made it half way. This time in Brest I would not be caught fighting the morning traffic and losing time, like in 2011. I would arrive ahead of the Tuesday morning rush and better yet, ahead of the bulge! I slept at the control, in a comfy real bed, with a pillow and a blanket, for two and a half glorious hours.

All too soon, it was time to get up and get rolling. Fighting off sleepiness and regaining some sense of alertness,

I climbed back on my bike and pushed out, east bound and down. The route makes a loop and splits before Brest and then comes back together on the return, before the big climb up over the Roc, the highest point of the route. The sun was shining, the skies were blue, as I topped over a small hill and there it was: "The Bulge" and I was hours ahead of it! My heart filled with emotion and all I could think was, this was my moment of REDEMPTION! I was doing this one right!

It was time to enjoy the wonder that is PBP, and the people of the French countryside. The people come out and set up their tables to and offer water, cakes, crepes, jam, coffee and more. But more than the food, they offered themselves, their love of anyone who rides a bicycle, anyone who rides the great randonnée. They offered their cheers, their clapping, their respect, their song and dance. They treated us like superstars. My ride back to Paris became a ride of celebration. How many times could I stop? Well I couldn't stop at every roadside stand, but I tried. One man gave me a Coke and reached into his pocket to pull out his PBP finisher's medal from 1987. One word: *magnificent*.

The French countryside was decorated with bicycles. The bicycles were like Christmas lights in the villages. In some villages, they were on every light pole. In others, they were across the store fronts, on the roofs, on the doors and on banners hung across the streets. It was like a celebration of the bicycle. There were novelty bikes, bikes of all sizes and all colors. Vive le velo!!!

At dawn on Wednesday, I pushed out of Fougères, slowly going up a long hill, alongside another randonneur. A very fashionably dressed local lady, with a big smile on her face, approached us from a side street. She rode out in front of us, with a big happy smile and a big wave, and then went spinning up the hill without any effort. Our jaws dropped in complete awe, then we looked at one another and at the same

time yelled, "electric assist"! The French love the bicycle.

Back in Villaines, the bike mechanic was able to adjust my derailleur, so I could get into my granny gear with ease. Oh, this was a lovely ride to Paris. I left Mortagne streaking downhill through the city, waving my jambon. Oh, this was a fun ride. But, alas the fun was winding down as I approached Dreux. Many people stopped in Dreux and waited for morning to continue on toward Paris. But not me. I wanted to see Paris as quickly as possible. I pushed out into the dark night again, for the last leg to the finish.

Sometimes I tell people to follow me on your next 1200K, because I find good weather or else it finds me. Last time at PBP, about 30 drops of rain fell on me. This time, I counted every drop that fell on me; one, two, three and then I was crossing the finish line, with a crowd of wonderful people cheering for little 'ole me. What a blast. What a sense of accomplishment. What redemption. What a ride. Words cannot describe it. You need to ride PBP at least once in your life.

Some people believe you can take the numbers and crunch them to figure out who will make it and become a PBP Ancienne (official PBP female veteran) and who will not make it. I say, you can take all those numbers and throw them out the window. Numbers can't measure how big your heart is, how much willpower you have, how much faith is in your soul, or how much luck you're going to have. It takes all these things to become a PBP Ancienne.

Don't let anyone tell you that simply riding a 200K, 300K, 400K and 600K will prepare you for PBP. Because it will not. You need to start now. Find domestic 1200s and go ride them. Get out your calendar and look at 2019. In the spring of 2019, ride several 400Ks, several 600Ks and a 1000K. Most important of all, learn time management and how to be fast off the bike. Then you will be ready for PBP. Then go, and RIDE LIKE A GIRL. 🚲