

PARIS-BREST-PARIS

Keeping a low profile

After touring and competing in HPV (Human Powered Vehicle) racing in Switzerland, Ian Humphries tackled the ultimate cycling challenge, Paris-Brest-Paris, by recumbent.

The 14th 1200km tour (yes that's what they call it!) of Paris to Brest and back to Paris started at 9:45pm on the 23rd of August 1999. I thought that if maybe everything went well, I might be finished in under 70 hours, maybe???. The mantra to chant apparently is that "my body is not telling me to stop, just to eat more - keep eating, drinking and pedalling". I hoped that at least I would be able to finish PBP under the maximum time allowed of 90 hours. The organisers were expecting more than 240 cyclists or about 7% to fail to finish.

So I was again in Paris after an 11 hour trip from Interlaken, arriving the midnight before the bike scrutineering day, sleeping for a few hours on the floor of a bike storage room when Zach Kaplan and I found the hotel's reception closed. I wondered about my preparation. I assembled all the required lights and things necessary for the PBP scrutineers in the morning and road tested the trike in PBP mode on the 15km from the hotel to the St Quentin start. The Audax group is wonderfully unique in that they allow any type of vehicle on their randonnees as long as its propelled by solely human power, so recumbenteers could ride with the probably-somewhat-less-comfortable crowd on uprights. Scrutineering was passed and I tried to track down the other recumbent starters. There were about 30 various recumbents in the 1999 PBP, including bikes, trikes and tandems. I rode back that evening to the hotel to try to get a proper sleep.

The next day I was still wondering about my preparation. I wasn't sure how tired the recent touring, racing in Interlaken and the travel was going to leave me. I had two "breakfasts" again, still trying to build up my reserves.

I was still wondering on the PBP starting line whether I was going to make it. I was trying not to worry about the next 1200 kilometres. I relaxed myself by convincing myself that I'd already had a fantastic 3 weeks in Europe and I could go home happy after such a holiday. I had relaxed myself also, by eating as much as I could

in the few hours before the start. In fact I was still eating a French pastry when given the signal to begin pedalling.

The 1999 PBP began with great weather and temperatures, which were ideal. Starting at 9:45pm with the tandems and other recumbents was brilliant, and allowed me to avoid all the problems and crowding which I hear is a feature of the 10pm start. Surprisingly, but thankfully, on those first few real pedal strokes I sensed that my legs were in great condition. Phew! I changed my plans from starting very conservatively to just spinning along with whoever seemed to be setting a comfortable pace. The first night became an exhilarating and wonderful experience - whizzing through the streets and avenues of Paris, sensations heightened by the attention required to pick out the reflective arrows used to mark the route, alternatively drafting or leading a group of tandems and recumbents, with a string of red tail-lights weaving their way into the distance ahead, or a string of white lights behind. I felt great, nibbled occasionally from my pocket stash of whole dried bananas and survived the few expected early morning low spots at about 3am and 5am.

I was having a great time! I rode through that first night with a Dutch guy on a front and rear faired carbon low-racer SWB, and a few tandems. A few tandems were using 6 or 10 watt helmet mounted lights and these were great for those fast curvy downhills. Surprisingly, though, the English speaking tandem crews I saw were pretty untalkative - bordering on the sombre really, obviously still concerned with the distance ahead. I was happy, even though I'd never done any really serious night cycling before - I'd slept or rested most of the night on my 600km qualifier...but that first night and nightriding was definitely one of the highlights of PBP!

The Dutch guy, Henri, didn't speak much English so we didn't talk much. He just followed along behind our group. But he was just cruising it seems - I lost him after about 130km when I slowed slightly and

then stopped to check on my light's wiring (a loose connection in one was annoying me). But as he passed I realised why he was probably just following - his light was illuminating nothing much of the road he could see, I think, the beam being angled downwards and his front carbon fibre fairing probably obscuring that lighted part of the road. I didn't see him again, but later discovered he DNF'd. Bummer. Anyway my lights worked well from then on - I had a 5 C-cell battery pack powering a Lumotec 6 volt 2.4 watt lamp through a 6.2v zener diode and a remote operated Union dynamo powering a Union HS3 6 volt 2.4 watt headlight as "high beam". Approaching a turn or downhill I would pull the dynamo on. The system worked brilliantly. The Union headlight is superior to the Lumotec and I would have used two of them, had two fitted on the trike's derailleur post. The Lumotec lamp was designed so that the bulb could be instantly changed without tools though, which is an advantage. I used two 5-LED red rear lights. Duplication is good.

I stopped at the first feeding station at 141km to refuel, remembering the "mantra"...though food wasn't really that appealing at whatever time it was. I ate some plain pasta and forced down some rice and pedalled off on my comfy lounge. Soon after that though I had again to stop to replace a snapped rear derailleur cable, the 2nd to fray on the trike in fewer than 3000km - an obvious problem with the SRAM Plasma derailleur. Luckily that and one flat-tyre from the valve hole slicing the valve stem were the only problems I had in total.

The ride so far hadn't really seemed all that hilly - certainly less so than I was lead to believe. My legs were having no trouble with them anyway. The atmosphere and support of the locals was great - the trike and I always got a good cheer ...this was as good as I was told it would be. There was also much interest in the Greenspeed at the controls, which were approximately every 80km, and en route. Maybe, if there's a next time, I'll be able to speak a little more French and answer ALL the questions I

was unable to this time round. A lot of people asked how many teeth my big chain-ring had. 67! The people were lovely and friendly!

The weather was still looking ok and it was easy to stay well fed. I found food I liked from the wide array on offer at the controls. The support was great. The kilometres passed easily. I was approaching Carhaix (520km) and still none of the solo upright riders who started 15 minutes behind the "Velo Speciales" had passed me. I was riding with and passing cyclists who had started at the 8pm start. I arrived at Carhaix, not long after sunset, and was surprised to see one of the Lightning fully faired 'bents still there. It was Andreas Wiegand. The Lightning crew had abandoned him after a mechanical problem had delayed him. He wasn't too pleased. We chatted for a while. I refuelled. I was trying to decide whether I should go on. The first night had been quite warm and even though it was a bit cloudy out near the coast I left the Carhaix control and headed for the halfway point of Brest sometime after 11pm. I wasn't sure I was doing the right thing, but I felt a pressure pushing me onto Brest. I couldn't stop just yet. I was keen to get onto the homeward half of the ride. I rode off slowly alone. At some point I teamed up with David Bundrick, from the US on his Rans V-rex SWB and a small group of uprights. Riding with a group at night made things easier. Still, that leg into Brest seemed to take an eternity as the route twisted and turned and climbed and fell an incalculable number of times...

Eventually, I arrived at Brest with this little group at 3am, after 29hrs 15min. I was in good company – David had done two similar 1200km's (Boston-Montreal-Boston's) in the US/Canada. I think we were the first unfaired 'bent riders there. It had been a little easier than expected so far. We both had a short sleep of 15minutes or so on the control hall's floor – never get too comfortable! I was very very happy to have 60 hours left for the return journey, and felt I was well past half way even though I was heading back into unknown territory (my longest ride had only been a 600km). I planned to just cruise back to Paris then and enjoy the ride! David disappeared from Brest. I hung around, ate some more, had a fantastically refreshing shower (highly recommended!) to remove the previous day's sunscreen and grime and wandered around wondering whether I should wait for sunrise, so I could actually see what Brest looked like in the daylight. So I spent 2.5hours at Brest and only had

15minutes sleep! I'd do a few things differently next time! Anyway, I was still a bit hyped and keen to get underway, so I left to ride back just before sunrise. I didn't see David at the next control at Carhaix (684km), but eventually saw him again at Tinteniac (845km). I was feeling great and flying along. We rode the next stage or so together again. With less than 300km to go I thought I'd almost be back in time for morning tea, and was still feeling full of energy. I was being accompanied by a few, minor, fun and interesting fatigue induced peripheral hallucinations though! The route felt again like it was circling around on itself. Then around midnight the sleep bug did bite. I took a caffeine pill to try to get myself to the next control. It seemed to have no effect. I'd found my sleep deprivation limit. I had to stop to nap a few times on the trike on the roadside, and was really happy to find a café. I ordered coffee, ate two croissants and fell asleep sitting at one of the tables. I made it from there to the Villaines la Juhel control (985km) and considered sleeping there, but just being off the trike was sufficiently refreshing for me to think I could go on. I soon needed another nap though, and so had another longish sleep of 40 minutes on the trike, in a quiet forest just after sunrise, and then 2 or 3 more short naps before Nogent Le Roi (1147km). I think I could have finished the last stage from there but worrying about dozing off in the traffic into Paris, I had another sleep under a shady tree in a park in a tiny village. I set off feeling good again and powered into Paris...

So that was it. I finished in 69 hours 17min, with 55hours 16min rolling time on the computer. I think 8th of the 60 plus Australian's to finish. Sleep totalled about 4 hours. Lots of people had less! The sleep deprivation stuff was interesting - I'd probably schedule one or two proper sleeps next time rather than "power napping" as by the time I found quiet enough places to nap my road speed had dropped significantly. Or else I could avoid the "sleepies" somehow by riding fast enough to avoid a third night altogether. I'd get only two nights if I started with the group at 5am but I liked the 9:45pm start with the other recumbents too much to miss that.

At the finish the legs felt only slightly tired, the mind definitely was a bit fatigued, and the event was just a hazy recollection of moments. The memories take a while to dig out of the haze but are now treasured. The Greenspeed road racer was excellent and PBP was, indeed, a great experience. I

flukily timed everything except leaving Brest so that I got to see the whole route in daylight either on the way out or way in. I was very happy to finish well, and again, overall I thought it was quite a bit easier than I'd expected. I owe a lot of that good time to the comfort, aerodynamic efficiency and performance of the new trike.

What did I do wrong? Not much I guess. The only thing I could have hoped for is a bit more sleep before the start. I could have also checked that derailleur cable before the ride. At worst I can complain that I was a little disappointed because my original PBP plans had included building another sleek and beautiful two wheeled recumbent for myself, and completing PBP on one of my own creations. That was the original reason I started building recumbents and I had already completed the 2, 3, 4 and 600km qualifying rides on my self-built recumbent bikes. I was sidetracked from this by Ian Sims' enthusiasm. He convinced me that a Greenspeed trike would make a fantastic choice for PBP. We discussed the options, design and he offered me a good deal on a new prototype model road racer. After a few rides on the new model trike I thought perhaps it was the best choice for PBP. I had let Ian Sims design and build me the best, most comfortable, always stable and fun to ride long-distance HPV in the world. I guess there wasn't any real harm in that. Apologies if that sounds like an advertisement for Greenspeed, but I do like the trike. I still have plans one day to build myself the perfect two-wheeled kilometre-eating cousin of the Greenspeed though...

My PBP gear, ridden, worn and carried: Greenspeed GLR road race trike. Netti knicks, Netti short sleeved top, Netti leg and arm warmers. Reflective vest. Spare Netti long sleeved top, spare socks, thermal polypropylene long sleeved top, rain-jacket and rain-pants. Fleece gloves. Remote operated Union dynamo + Union HS3 6v2.4w light, Lumotec 6v2.4w light and alkaline 5xC-cell battery + "back-up" 5xAAA-cell alkaline battery pack (used on third night). 5(extra) spare AA-alkaline batteries. Luggage: Underseat "roll top drybag" containing clothes. Small "bum-bag" looped behind seat with brevet card, wallet and tools etc. 4 spare front tubes, 2 spare rear tubes, all with Presta valves. Spare derailleur cable (I bought another at a control). Topeak 16 function multi tool, 2 tyre levers, miniature Swiss army knife/scissors, spare bulbs, one front and one rear spare tyre. Gaffa tape. Sunscreen, money, credit card, and wallet.

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