

PARIS-BREST-PARIS

Life in the Fast Lane

Oliver Portway shares his experiences on Paris-Brest-Paris.

Lining up at 8:00pm on 23 August 1999 I was far more relaxed than my first PBP in '95. I was far better prepared, and knew what to expect in the first few hours of the mania of the 80h group. Despite this and my vigilance against overlapping wheels I still managed to be the victim of a sudden move by a rider in front of me on a corner, his back wheel leaning onto my front wheel and bringing me down. My worst fears of a crash at the start of PBP were realised as I battled with my right foot unclipped and sliding on the road, I slid down onto the bitumen then tumbled over the handle bars as my foot went into the front wheel. Damn, how could this have happened, visions of 4 years training wasted in one cruel blow flashed through my mind. The emotional roller coaster began at the 12.5 km point as my computer, minus dislodged wheel magnet, reminded me for the rest of the ride.

However, all was not lost. The bike wasn't damaged other than buckled wheels and twisted handlebars and levers. I got straight up and on the bike before ascertaining the damage, then waiting for an opportune time to stop and straighten the bars and levers then rejoin the peloton several hundred riders back. I steadily regained my position and was ready for the first serious climb out of Longy au Perche and made the cut of the lead group which was reduced to about 100 riders. Made it through Mortagne au Perche and was out 2nd. The next challenge was to get through Villaines la Juhel without getting dropped as I had in '95. I actually got out 1st and was able to relax a bit as the group reformed, which renewed my morale deflated by the crash. The group now settled down and the riding was at a steady rate. The controls were the hardest part as everyone attacked to get in 1st, then the group would reform after each control, losing a few riders each time.

A mix up with directions resulted in missing my support crew at Tintiniac and Loudeac which mean't I had to scrounge water and food (not enough) and was in a severely depleted state after the hills when I reached Carhaix. I was most relieved to see Gerri there and allay my fears of a car crash or mechanical troubles. By now the group was down to about 30 and I was confident of reaching Brest in the group, my next mini-goal. After Brest the attacks started and I got the feeling that this is where the serious part of the ride began. The extra effort of chasing the group for 5km (I stopped just long enough to change clothes and check my injuries) and chasing the attacks, started to take its toll and the injuries started to hamper me.

The injuries weren't serious, a nasty graze on my right butt and a bruised calf from the pedal slamming into it. The later unfortunately plagued me throughout the ride and by Loudeac on the return was excruciatingly painful and forced me to stop to massage it and lose contact with the lead group, by then down to 20-25 riders only. This was around midnight on Tuesday night and the rest of that night was a black hole of sleep deprivation, hallucinations and depression at being dropped from the group. I had intended riding through with no sleep but with low morale fatigue took over and I had to succumb to 2 x 10 minute "power naps" on the side of the road before reaching Fougeres at dawn on Wednesday.



I knew from previous experience that things would come good on the last day. I had a 1 hour stop while a violent thunderstorm passed and I indulged in the three s's and a sit down meal for the first time, what luxury. To finish in my goal of 48 hours I only had 12 hours to ride the final 300km, a daunting prospect at any time. Initially I was with a Yank and a Frenchman, John & Raymond. They were going slower than I wanted but we stuck together through Villaines la Juhel. Once we got into the hills approaching Mortagne au Perche I said farewell and easily rode away from them. I passed straight through with out stopping as I was well behind schedule. I had five and a half hours to make it back by 8:00pm and decided to "go for it".

In the mid-afternoon heat I battled sleepiness on the hills out of Mortagne once waking up on the grass on the side of the road. To overcome mental fatigue I increased the intensity of my riding as physically I was feeling good. Once out of the hills and on the rolling roads north of Chartres I really started to fly (I knew this stretch like the back of my hand from staying the week before in Chartres and training daily on the route). I passed 9 riders before Nogent le Roi and was in and out of the control in 3 minutes. I still thought that 48 hour was possible (deluded with fatigue I think). I had decided not to take the detour for the road works just after the control as I knew it added about 7 km but when I got to the intersection and the route markers indicated to take the detour I couldn't bring myself to go off the marked route. To be penalised over following the main road was a risk I didn't want to take at that late stage.

I continued to push hard right up until 8:00pm when I still had about 20km to go. Then I hit the wall big time and had to slow down. I started to worry about not making 49 hour 21 minutes which was Oppy's 1931 time and was my main goal. The route appeared to be different from the last route directions sent out and appeared to follow the initial route published, which was the same as '95. I started to get confused and worry about getting lost and wasting precious

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Print Post Approved PP327687/00033

Year 2000 - Issue No. 1

Checkpoint

Journal of the Audax Club of Australia Inc.

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