

PARIS-BREST-PARIS

Impressions

by Steven Milch



Photo's (anti-clockwise): at the gymnasium in St Quentin; Aussie support en route; Steve in the parking lot at the gymnasium; the spectacular sight of riders gearing up for the night start, Aussies in foreground.



After an 18 month build-up, including the drama of a crash 2 weeks prior to commencement, queuing for the start of the 1999 Paris-Brest-Paris was a nervous time for me. Being a first-timer and nursing a knee injury, I was experiencing a degree of self doubt. There were so many accomplished cyclists. Would they all race off and leave me at the back of the pack? Would they succeed where I failed?

So, while others calmly chatted and joked as we awaited the starter's horn, I was standing alone in silent nervousness. My nervousness was probably only matched by my excitement, an excitement generated by being part of such a large gathering of cyclists from all over the globe, all brought together by the challenge of PBP.

Finally, the horn went and it wasn't long till I had the answer to my first question (it would be almost 4 days before I had the answer to my second). Yes, they would race off and leave me alone. Anxious to avoid crashing or going out at an uncomfortably quick pace, I stuck to my usual 22km/h and quickly slid to the back of my group of 500.

Being at the back had it's advantages though. Navigation was easy and, from time to time, as we headed across the gently rolling landscape I witnessed the spectacle of thousands of tail lights snaking along the road and well into the distance.

Within an hour or so my group was out of sight but it was only a matter of minutes until the following group caught me. Happily, from then on, there was scarcely a time during the ride when I could not see a rider either in front or behind. This was one of the uplifting aspects of PBP, particularly when accustomed to the often solo experience of Audax riding in Australia.

As one not particularly fond of night riding, the novelty of the start soon wore off and I found myself willing the night to end. Eventually, night gave way to a hot yet pleasant day and I began to really immerse myself in the PBP experience.

It is worth noting that, on the first night, locating water can prove difficult, so take 3 bidons, even if it means discarding one as soon as it is empty. A second lesson, is that one should be prepared to waste time queuing during PBP. Alternatively, if you are aiming for a good time, don't rely on checkpoints for food. The queue for food at Mortagne, early on the first morning, was very long and after spending 15 minutes in a line that didn't move, I decided to ride on and rely on my chocolate and muesli bars until I found a more convenient food stop.

Throughout the ride there were times when one would feel down. Counterbalancing these times, however, are times when you feel strong and positive. It is difficult to pinpoint what leads to the shift from one state to another. It may be a nice downhill section, the sun bursting through the clouds or a tailwind. More than these things, however, was the benefit of seeing many friendly and familiar faces along the way, whether they were the villagers standing alongside the road and shouting encouragement, the officials at the checkpoints or other riders. It was particularly nice to chat with fellow riders who were progressing at your speed, share a joke with them and to know that they were feeling much the same as you were.

The nights, although not my favourite time to ride, were often quite magical with a full moon and nice temperature making the cycling pleasant. At other times, the temperature dropped sharply, such that I had my Goretex jacket and beanie on for warmth (and this following a hot day!).

Past midnight, however, I found the riding difficult as my body, and senses, would begin to shut down. With the world beyond the small area illuminated by your bike lights largely invisible, my eyes would begin to play tricks on me and navigating, particularly on the roads without any line markings, became difficult. At times I felt a little claustrophobic also. Overall, I found the night riding required considerable concentration, a difficult task given the lack of sleep. In an effort to address this, I would improve my 2 Cateye setup by also using a helmet light.

In the middle of the second night, near Loudeac, some lights appeared in the distance and began to approach quite quickly. They were not steady, like those of a car or truck, rather they were moving around and not necessarily holding a straight line. It soon became clear that these were the leaders – a group of 3 riders, riding at around 30kp/h, passing through Loudeac on the return leg. While their passage was a reminder of how far I still had to go, it was also inspiring to see others with the finish in their sights. I simply thought ‘if they can get so far, so can I’.

The roads used for PBP were generally good and traffic was rare. On one occasion, however, the approach, at speed, of 3 consecutive semi-trailers on a relatively narrow road led to a blast of wind that nearly knocked me over!

I encountered relatively few problems en route. Strict and regular bike maintenance prior to PBP paid off, with a single flat tyre being the only mechanical problem experienced. Further, the knee about which I was so worried, provided little discomfort and actually improved the longer the ride progressed.

The most spectacular part of PBP for me was the ride into Brest. It was a beautiful afternoon and came after the most scenic (though hilly) stretch of the route. As we approached the checkpoint, the course took us over a

pedestrian/bike bridge spanning the huge harbour of Brest. It was a truly awesome sight to look out over the harbour and a wonderful feeling to know that every revolution of the pedals and wheels from here on would be taking us closer to home.



Having stayed in a comfortable hotel room at Loudeac for a few hours on the way out and on the way back (I highly recommend this approach – but book about a year before PBP) the question was where to stay on the last night? The answer came when, on the fourth night, I came upon an intersection that was midway between checkpoints and was being manned by both PBP officials and some already sleeping cyclists. Since it was around midnight, I too joined those riders in resting on the concrete pavement for a couple of hours. It may not have been the best place I’ve slept (in fact, it may have been the worst) but the rest was magnificent. When I awoke, I felt better able to ride into the last day.

On that final day, everything ached and it became a struggle to propel the bike forward at anything more than 18kp/h. However, as I got closer to Paris things began to change. The aches vanished, my spirit rose and I began to ride faster, particularly with the local bike club and a motorcycle escort leading me into Paris.

This stretch was amazing. Riding along at around 30kp/h, I felt that I could continue for another 100km. I didn’t, however, and instead rode around the final roundabout with an incredible feeling of exhilaration. I had achieved my goal of finishing the 1999 PBP inside 90 hours (89.25 hours to be exact). For me it was a personal victory in a high calibre, truly multinational event.



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