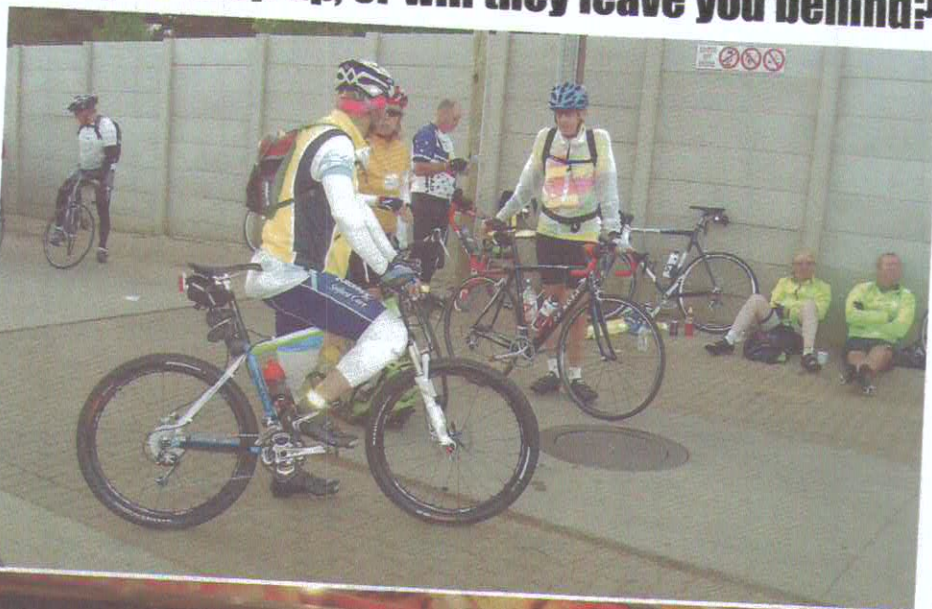


Audax Randonneurs: nature or nurture

By Eddie Thomlinson

will you keep up, or will they leave you behind?



THE AUDAX Randonneurs is described as the long distance cycling association; but what is a long distance? The short and accurate answer is: a long distance is whatever you think comprises a long distance! It could be a ride down to the local shop, from Cairo to Cape Town or even a circumnavigation of the globe, by whatever route. So how does an association fit into this concept?

Three types of cyclists

It is said that some people are born to cycle; some people arrive there by chance or accident; and some are forced into it. Stephen Roche, the Irishman who won the Tour de France, the Giro d'Italia and the World Road Race Championships in the same year, claimed that the best preparation

for professional cycling lay in Youth Hostelling with your friends.

Jacques Anquetil, five times Tour de France winner and the first man to win all three Grand Tours – French, Italian, Spanish – claimed he hated cycling and did it only for the money!

The South African, Bridget Blonde on a Bike Ringdahl claims: "Pedalling has been natural to me since the tender age of three. Cycling is practical, fun, it gets you to the corner cafe, across countries and continents, keeps you fit and is by far the most efficient and environmentally friendly transport option around, being virtually carbon neutral..." Bridget is now the co-ordinator of the WESSA/WWF Eco-Schools Programme.

Anne Mustoe, once the headmistress of a prestigious girls' school and a well-known

public figure, spotted a lone cyclist in the Great Thar Desert in India through a bus window. She was 51 at the time, and it took her 4 years to quit her job and get on the road in 1983. Her first expedition was a global circumnavigation; and at that stage she couldn't even fix a puncture! (Maybe that's not such a big deal... I know plenty of cyclists who after years of riding still can't fix a puncture!) Her second expedition was the 'other way round'. She eventually died while on expedition in Syria 22 years after starting out – still with her original bike!

Beryl Burton from England and Jeannie Longo from France once reigned supreme in the women's cycle racing world. Between them, they garnered an uncountable collection of titles and records on road, track and even off-road. Beryl smashed the British 12-hour Time Trial record, covering an amazing 277.25 miles, nearly 450km, on her way to winning one of her 25 consecutive British Best All Rounder titles. During her record-breaking ride, she caught a rider who was on his way to breaking the then current 12-hour record. Passing him and feeling sorry for him, she offered him a liquorice-all-sort. To his credit, he accepted it! Beryl's record stood for two years until a male rider broke it... It is still the women's record! She started racing at the instigation of her husband, himself a successful competitor, who saw her potential. Her daughter also became an accomplished racing cyclist. On an occasion she beat her mother, who then accused her of sitting on her back wheel before out-sprinting her to the finish line. Apparently they did not speak to each other for quite some time after that!

Don't beat them, join them!

Cyclists by birth, accident or force: how would you describe these riders? Which category or categories would you fit into? It is at this stage that 'association' begins to take on a particular meaning. Many of the world's great cycling journeys were the product of ultra-individuals – consider Anne Mustoe or even Thomas Stevens. He was an Englishman who cycled around the world, from California to California, starting out in 1884 and finishing in 1887... on a Penny Farthing! He covered terrain where there were simply no roads, and obviously no back up; certainly no television crews recording simulations of the stressful situations and also no Twitter to keep him in contact with people outside his immediate environment.

While many of us armchair travellers would like to emulate the tourist/adventure challengers such as Bridget Ringdahl and Anne Mustoe; or beat Nicole Cook in the sprint for the Olympic gold medal, we lack the incentive, motivation or courage to take that most difficult of all steps; the first one.

On the way to her title... [Burton] caught the rider who was on his way to breaking the then current 12-hour record. Passing him and feeling sorry for him, she offered him a liquorice-all-sort!

Who doesn't want to test the limits? We have been doing it since we learned to assuage that ache in the tummy with a comforting nipple by bawling at the top of our developing voices. So if somehow we can test the limits, extend our horizons, boost our self-esteem with a little bit of outside help so some of the uncertainty around routes, accommodation, costs, travel etc. are removed, why not? The go-it-aloners are way up there, literally on their own, a breed apart and rightly the subjects of our envy and admiration; but if we can't reach the sun we can at least get our bums off the armchairs and some air under our cleats. Associations of whatever form are a means towards this end, and Audax, the long distance cycling association, is such a catalyst.



Gillian Critcher, Michelle Gahan and Marika Sillo with their 2010 Audax awards

Our heroines

In the months ahead, we will share the stories of three ladies who have taken this step and are on their way to participating in the 'Comrades' of long distance cycling marathons, the longest running organised bicycle event in the world, the ultra Paris-Brest-Paris (PBP) Randonnée – 1 200km in 90 hours.

Two of them had never ridden anything longer than 150km before 2010, and one of them was recently awarded the South

African Randonneur of the Year trophy. The other one was inspired to 'give it a go' after reading an article about PBP in *Ride* magazine. The third one, who has previously participated in long distance cycling is nevertheless still recovering from an horrific motor car accident and is second to none in terms of a relentless resolve to put the effects fully and finally behind her. In which of the categories would you place them – cyclists by birth, accident or force? [ride](#)

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