As a result of some very good marketing, and the popularity of events such as the Argus, the 94.7, and the Amashovashova, many people have the idea that ±100km is a long and tough distance. When discussion turns to 200km - blood turns to water and the strongest knees start to tremble. And 300km or longer seems totally out of the question for any sane person. Hardy! This is not to say that any of these are a ride in the park. However, the invariable response of first-timers, even those of the “I’ll never do anything like that again” brigade if you give them a little time, is great satisfaction and assurance I can do better next time”, or “when’s the next one?”. Well, alright, almost invariably!

Get your head right
All this is simply to emphasise how important mindset is in preparing for any event, let alone a longer distance cycling event. If you could afford a sports psychologist or a coach this is the basis of what they would tell you; plus of course, inputs on training and diet. So here’s a tip that helped me through Paris-Brest-Paris (PBP). I overheard it on the bus on the way from London to Paris in the form of a throwaway line in a conversation. “Pain passes, quitting is forever!” It was subsequently attributed to Lance (you know who) and he should know! You will need experience to come to value this and the trick is simply to go the extra kilometres or half hour, or hour. Set a goal and be committed to it. Short term goals become longer term accomplishments. Audax is a great provider for this mindset if you stick to the basics of not having personal back-up. Then the motivation is to finish because in the long term that’s usually easier than finding your own way home.

And the body follows - not!
Now, an illusion, which has to go when tackling a longer distance for the first time is this: 200km is just 2X100km and 300km is 3X100km! Not so. The longer the ride, the exponentially greater the demands on the body and mental set. Mental fatigue and physical tiredness build up, and there’s a cross-over difficulty too. Mental tiredness is often mistaken for physical tiredness - they are not the same. How often have you come home exhausted from sitting at your desk all day in the office and found yourself a few hours later partying, or jumping the sauna to be first to the prime at the top of the hill? However, what causes tiredness of either sort is a very individual thing, so you need to find out what works for you and where your limits are. In other words there is no substitute for experience. Some people like to chat and some are the strong silent types. The wrong company, in spite of the comfort of someone’s back wheel, can be exhausting. Beware of I-pods and walkmans - don’t even think about them! Another ‘beware’ is personal back up. The majority of the non-finishers in PBP packed in because of their own backup systems - just too easy - too tempting. Remember: “pain passes, quitting is forever!” Thanks Lance!

Certainly you need to get the burms on saddles bit right. In non-metric speak you do need to get the miles in. Remember Fausto Coppi’s “Ride your bike, ride your bike, ride your bike” advice when asked about training? But you don’t need to ride 300km in training: a longish ride of 100/120km each week supported by two or three 50/60km rides during the week for about six weeks before the event should suffice to see you through a 300km.

During an Audax event, Control Points break the ride up and allow time and space to recharge your batteries and ease the muscles - but don’t waste time. On a 300 make time for a nourishing meal: probably fast food, which is OK and saves time. You have between 10 and 20 hours to complete the ride, although you must maintain an average of between 15 and 30kph between controls. Lighting will be necessary with a 6.00am start, and it must be good enough to show the way. Also the wearing of a reflective vest is mandatory.

During the ride: snack on jelly babies (they are great), fruit cake (which must be moist), raisins, potatoes (yum, yum). Midrand Country Cyclists Audax riders have made something of a ritual on the potato thing, but they say it works for them, and it works for me. It might even work for you! Other on the bike snacks include rice pudding, nuts, apple slice. Start snacking early.

Calendar of events held under the regulations of Audax Randonneurs of South Africa (North). Affiliated to Audax Club Parisien / Randonneurs Mondiaux

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Hydration: don’t drink sports drinks exclusively. Drink some water as well - your body needs it. Remember though that your stomach can absorb only 800cc/hour, so don’t over-hydrate. As far as possible, even on hot days, keep the body covered. Exposing the skin to the air accelerates loss of

By Edward Thomlinson
moisture. Don't depend solely on Controls for rest and nourishment. Break the long distance down into short-term goals, say 6X50 or 10X30. During PBP (don't show this to any of your nutritionist friends and I hope there aren't any reading this!). I stopped a few times for a very welcome beer and discovered later that this is a popular beverage on PBP! What you feel like eating is probably your body telling you what it needs - listen to it.

Clothing: Wearing a T-shirt next to the skin may be great for keeping you cool in the summer heat, but it will keep you cooler in autumn and freezing in the winter! Chilling out may be cool but not on a 300km Audax in the winter or early spring. Your energy stocks will be rapidly depleted and your motivation will take a dive. Not really cool is it? Synthetic wickables are ideal next to the skin and wool is every bit as good. I rode with a long-sleeved vest throughout PBP. This serves three purposes - it acts like a second skin in the event of a fall, it doesn't chill on you, and it keeps your arms covered and protected from the sun - not very macho, but very practical. There is a fourth point: after a couple of days riding in other riders don't wobble into you in the bunch!

On a 300km Audax, a rain jacket/windbreaker is essential, particularly if there is some wind chill. You'll be out riding for enough hours for the weather to change significantly. Don't dream about keeping dry, keeping warm is what matters. A windproof outer keeps the warmth in, rather like a wetsuit. A good quality jacket - remember, quality is remembered long after the price is forgotten - will also keep the rain out for a while but keeping warm is the critical thing. Leg warmers can be useful too but I found after a couple of hours that the non-slip elasticised tops were chafing my skin so there was a trade-off between warmth and comfort. Full leg garments are better, even if they are cumbersome.

The head is the greatest source of heat loss and that includes the neck, so wear something under the helmet. A neckerchief keeps the sun off (especially if you have thin or no hair) and retains body heat in the cool. (NB: wearing something under the helmet is not recommended by helmet manufacturers, so it may take some trial and error to get your helmet right). Lather on the sun block, to all areas exposed to the sun whether covered or not.

After the ride, relax, share your experiences, this is part of the learning process. Whatever your physical condition on completion you will be on a high, and need to unwind. But don't leave your bike or gear lying around out of sight, as your concentration is diminished. I once put my bike in the car and drove off without the wheels - the bike's that is! My helmet, gloves and sunglasses are possibly still lying around at the finish of the last PBP. Get a carer, or try to help one another to keep track of your possessions.

Oh! One more thing, don't tell lies about never doing it again, wait for at least two weeks! This is an essential part of your preparation for your next Audax.