

# WHO RIDES AUDAX?

By Eddie Thomlinson

There are basically two types of people in this world, those who divide people into two categories and those who don't! From this it follows that there are basically two types of people who ride Audax events: (1) those who will try anything once, just to see what it's like and whether they can do it, and they sometimes graduate to, (2) the dedicated long distance 'cyclo-touriste'. And that's where the classification grinds to a halt.

It grinds to a halt for the same reason that Paris-Brest-Paris is a mini cycle trade show; a virtual encyclopedia of Human Powered Vehicles. For some reason, individuality is highly prized in the Audax fraternity. Physically, the range of riders spans all shapes and sizes, gender, ability, handicaps, age, and fitness. Ultimately it comes down to mindset. In 1999 I watched a hand-powered HPV, chain driven, set off in PBP. Another competitor had to monitor his heart rate continuously because he was riding under strict doctor's orders. You see 18 to 77 year olds starting and, mostly, finishing. Some eccentrics (English, it must be said) ride fixed wheel, with mudguards, and fully laden panniers complete with tent, sleeping bag and kitchen sink! South Africans have not been shy to contribute their own flavour. In 2004 a chap called Louis Smit followed the Tour de France and then successfully completed PBP completely self-contained without a word of French – and not too much English either! There are even

four wheeled tandem recumbents and the list goes on and on. It is individuality writ large!


## So, what's the magic?

Willpower, ambition, stubbornness 'finish at all costs', 'this thing is not going to beat me', 'this time I'm going to beat 7 hours for a 200, or get inside 13.30hrs', 'I'll show them', or by contrast 'it's a ride in the park', 'another day out in the country with friends', 'another opportunity to get away from it all and be by myself'. 'It's only 200/300/400/600 (tick appropriate box) and there's (respectively) 13.30/20.00/27.00/40.00 hours in which to finish. It's a piece of old takkie!'

## The epitome of self-reliance

So what can we say about 'who rides Audax'? In 1952 there were two groups independently climbing the notorious north face of the Eiger in the Alps, one French and one German. In the valley below observing was the Austrian Heinrich Harrer of "Seven Years in Tibet" fame and who had been part of the first ascent of the Nordwand/Mordwand i.e. North Face/Death Face: eight climbers out of the ten on the first three attempts had been killed, the other two retreated.

The two parties on the face merged when the weather broke and successfully summited after what became an epic. The three parties each wrote up their version of the climb independently. If you were

to read them you would be forgiven for thinking that you were reading about three different events. So it is with any endeavour, long distance cycling included. What it says about yourself is priceless knowledge, what it says to others about you is for their entertainment. This is the meaning of self-reliance, individuality and forms the basis of any true endeavour, even, it must be said, Long Distance Audax. 

**Cyclo-touriste:** a cyclist who combines the elements of long distance cycling with the competitive drive, together with a huge degree of self-reliance. Witness the early Tours de France when the competitors were entirely self-supporting. One competitor who repaired his bike in a local blacksmith's was disqualified because he had someone pump the bellows of the forge for him.

**Competition:** that which accommodates competitiveness which embraces overall position, personal bests, individual duels or simply finishing to say "I've done it!" Contrast this to today's scenario. Nobody carries spares, tools, puncture repair kits, pumps, and tubes (how do you repair a puncture?) Instead we have back-up cars with wheels, spare bikes and 'padkos on the hoof'. There are 'domestiques', tame water carriers cum pacers protecting the 'stars' who nevertheless still have to push the pedals themselves. (Wicked thought: but for how much longer?)

