

Riding Your First Brevets

BY BILL BRYANT

For the recreational cyclist, doing a hundred-mile "century" in one day is rightly seen as quite a sporting accomplishment. Depending on the hills along the course, not to mention the weather, six to eight hours is a respectable time to cover the distance. Being out on the open road in the fresh air, and temporarily free of the pressures of our daily lives, it's a fine way to test your strength and endurance while having a good time with cycling friends old and new. All in all, it is usually a rewarding day on the bike, and for most riders it will be enough. But there are some over-achievers who wonder what it would be like to keep riding longer. What if you followed a road that stretched onward much farther? How far could your ride "all in one go"? If you're this type of person, welcome to randonneuring!

In cycling, to go on a *randonnée* means the *randonneur* goes out on a long ramble or tour. Doing a sanctioned brevet is best described as fast touring with time limits. There are randonneuring brevets of 200, 300, 400, 600, 1000, and 1200 kilometers, but for now we'll look at the four shortest events since they are what the majority of randonneurs ride most often. First, just what does *brevet* mean? The word has several meanings in French including "certificate" or "diploma". In cycling, to do a brevet means one has successfully ridden a demanding event over a certified course within a specified time window, and a special certificate has been awarded.

Randonneuring in *audax* groups with a strictly controlled pace began in France in 1904, and the Audax Club Parisien was born that year. After World War I, things changed with many riders wanting more freedom to ride their own speed. The club switched to the current format of free-paced, or *allure libre* events in 1921. Here each rider is free to choose his or her own pace so long as it stays inside the allowable time limits for each brevet. Even

12

The Basics of Randonneuring

Individuals might be riding hard relative to their ability and striving for a "personal best", while other entrants will just ride more moderately to enjoy a long day on the bike with their pals. In any case, true randonneuring is not about one's eventual place on the finishing sheet—being on the finishing sheet is far more important. Not giving up is valued much more in this culture than is riding a brevet swiftly. The familiar sporting approach of "win or quit" works well in racing, but it is not a good style to bring to randonneuring. At the least, unlike racing with its support cars following the *peloton*, quitting on a brevet usually means somehow finding a way to get yourself back to the start/finish—which might be a very long distance away! Also remember that in randonneuring, there are no individual "make up rides" even if you need one to qualify for a 1200k event. If you should have to quit on some vital brevet, you'll then need to find another event elsewhere of the same distance to resume your qualifying campaign. So, "racing" to the finish is not always smart in a must-finish situation. Better to ride sensibly and make the finish line in one piece, even if it is a little slower than you think you could have done by pushing harder. In time, experience will let you ride faster on brevets if that is what you desire to do.

Indeed, more often than not one will see some of the participants slow down a bit to enjoy the company of other randonneurs since the long distances go by better in a group than riding alone. The rules of the Audax Club Parisien and Randonneurs USA clearly state that brevets are not competitive contests and that during the event each rider is considered to be on a personal ride. New randonneurs should also know that all ride results are sent to the ACP in Paris for registration in alphabetical order, not by the arrival time at the finishing line—when did you ever hear of a race doing that? The subsequent publication of brevet results is alphabetical also. Furthermore, unlike racers, brevet participants must follow the highway laws and obey traffic signals. All the randonneurs and randonneuses who arrive inside the official finishing time period earn exactly the same reward, a handsome commemorative brevet medal (which can be purchased by RUSA members

14

The Basics of Randonneuring

assistance from anyone, except perhaps one's fellow randonneurs. With a few successful brevets under your belt, you'll no doubt come to appreciate this ethos of self-sufficiency; your athletic accomplishment is all the more meaningful since you earned it "the hard way".

Doing a brevet always involves some paperwork, such as signing in at the various checkpoints, or "controls", along the way. Your brevet card is signed and stamped, which proves you have covered the distance so far. Take note of the all-important opening and closing times: You cannot sign in before the opening time, nor can you arrive after the closing time. In the former case, you must wait patiently until the control opens. In the latter case, then your ride is over. This might seem cruel, especially to those accustomed to doing less formal century or double century rides, but that is the way randonneuring is. One's brevet is a hard-won award that proves you successfully met the rigid time expectations without any special considerations or support, and this hasn't changed since 1921. (With a generous minimum pace of about 15 kph for the closing times, the typical century rider will be able to finish most brevets in good fashion if he trains adequately and doesn't get lost or waste time at the rest stops.) Note, however, that the minimum brevet pace does not vary and applies to all routes; the amount of climbing is not a consideration. So, on unusually hilly brevets you might find the minimum pace is not all that comfortable.

At the end of a successful ride, your completed brevet card is handed back to the organizer. In time, your individual brevet number is issued by the Audax Club Parisien in France and this sticker is applied to your card and returned to you by mail some months later by the ride organizer. (If you are a member of RUSA, your brevet results are also officially recorded at RUSA HQ and posted on the RUSA Web site, as well as in RUSA's year-end results publication.) Along with being entered into the ACP's hallowed *Grand Livre* with every other successful free-pace brevet since 1921, your personal accomplishment also counts toward a year-long competition between nations in the Randonneurs Mondiaux to acknowledge the

16

The Basics of Randonneuring

warm clothes in case the weather turns worse than predicted, not to mention the usual cycling food and drink to keep you moving. Even if you're 100% sure you can do the distance in daylight, install a small battery-powered headlight (such as the Cateye "Micro") and an LED taillight in case some unexpected problem slows you down. Don't let the lack of emergency lighting keep you from riding an hour in the dark. You should also pack some reflective ankle bands for insurance too. The time limit for a 200-kilometer brevet is 13.5 hours and you may need to use every minute to finish despite your best planning and preparation. Part of the adventure of randonneuring is that things don't always go according to plan. Finishing despite some unexpected setbacks creates a big part of the satisfaction of earning a brevet medal.

No matter how far you must drive or cycle to the start of the brevet, try hard to avoid any last-minute rushing. Having your cycling clothes and other things arranged the evening before the ride is essential to getting a good night's rest. Don't leave anything to be done early the next morning except dressing, eating breakfast, and traveling to the event location. Arriving at the start with time to spare will be an important ingredient for a successful day on the bike. You may have to change a flat tire on your car or bike, or get back on track after getting lost, and these things will gobble up valuable time and energy. (Remember, randonneuring events always start at the published time, whether you are ready or not. If you are late, you'll simply have to ride faster to reach the next checkpoint before it closes.)

Once at the brevet, sign in and pick up your all-important brevet card and route sheet. Hopefully there will be an event map too (if not, the organizer will have alerted you about this prior to the ride.) While doing some stretching exercises, spend some time looking over the route sheet and map to familiarize yourself with the day's journey. Take special note of each control point's location. Stopping there is obligatory if you want to earn your brevet. The event organizer, no doubt a fine and patient person, will show no mercy later on to anyone who got lost and didn't

18

though it still uses the word *audax* in its name, the Audax Club Parisien continues to coordinate and oversee all the free-pace brevets in the 25 nations of the Randonneurs Mondiaux. (Since the split in 1921, traditional fixed-pace brevets have been organized by the Union des Audax Français.)

Back in the sport's infancy, one's brevet was earned by riding 200 kilometers along a prescribed course between dawn and dusk. A big part of this was to show that bicycles were a viable means of long-distance travel—back then, it was not at all clear that this was possible. The award certified that the hardy cyclist had completed the event successfully within the allotted time, no small feat considering the rough roads and the primitive machines of the era. Longer distances were eventually added to the randonneuring calendar, but the 200k brevet remains the most popular event worldwide since it usually doesn't involve any night riding and training for it doesn't require as much commitment as the longer brevets. In the 1970s randonneuring began to spread beyond France, and thus, you hold a handbook from the Randonneurs USA. Obviously, a hundred years after the birth of randonneuring, the reliability and efficiency of the bicycle has been shown, so what is the purpose of doing a brevet in the 21st century? Hasn't the point been made? It has, but only in part—brevets are still needed to demonstrate that the rider is up to the challenge too! A modern-day cyclist who sets out on a brevet is doing it to prove he has the requisite determination and stamina, just like our randonneuring forefathers (and mothers) did.

No matter what speed you ride, remember that a brevet is not a race. A randonneur does these events to earn his brevet certificate and medal, not to defeat his fellow riders. Riding fast on a brevet is perfectly fine, but "dog-eat-dog" is not a phrase used to describe randonneurs' behavior or tactics. Good manners and camaraderie are the norm here. If some of the participants ride particularly fast that is their affair; if others choose to complete the course at a slower pace then that is theirs—but neither approach is considered better than the other. In both situations these

13

RUSA Handbook

for a nominal fee from the brevet organizer after the successful completion of the brevet). There is no acknowledgment for first place, second, third, and so on, nor are there any age, gender, or ability classes, as in racing. Randonneurs do not ride for prizes or trophies resulting from beating others, that is not part of the Randonneur's Credo. No, a randonneur rides his brevet to enjoy the wholesome camaraderie among the participants, the fine scenery found along the route, and especially to feel the intense personal pride at having completed such an arduous event. If there is any "battling" to be done during a brevet, it should be against one's personal limitations, not the other riders.

Along with being non-competitive, randonneuring is all about self-sufficiency. This hearkens back to the origins of the sport, when proving that the bicycle, and its rider, could cover long distances without any help. Nowadays the bicycle has been proven to be a very reliable means of transportation, but modern randonneurs still set out to show themselves that they have the Right Stuff. And so, while not forbidden under our rules, personal support vehicles are strongly discouraged at all brevets. If a cyclist has some personal circumstances that requires such assistance, then he or she can receive this personal support only at the official checkpoints along the route listed on the event's brevet card. Per official ACP regulations, any rider getting personalized help in-between checkpoints is subject to disqualification from the brevet.

Luckily, personalized support on brevets isn't needed. Just like in 1904, randonneurs are free to buy or borrow anything they might need along the route, or to get help from the other entrants. Indeed, helping one's comrades on the roadside is all part of the randonneuring tradition. Riders can also receive assistance from the event staff anywhere along the route, so there is little reason to rely on a personal support crew. If the thought of cycling long distances without motorized assistance is too daunting, then perhaps randonneuring might not be for you. Another important part of the Randonneur's Credo is that one rambles far and wide on two wheels day or night without much

15

RUSA Handbook

one with greatest participation. So don't give up easily on brevets, your nation needs you to finish! And remember to keep track of your certified brevet cards since they can be used later for awards such as the prestigious Randonneur-5000 medal. Above all, don't lose your card during the event; this probably means disqualification.

Okay, enough rules and background information, what about doing the rides themselves? Let's start with the 200k brevet since it is a logical place to begin your randonneuring adventures. First, you'll want to choose an event that interests you. This will probably be in the region closest to home—but perhaps not. Ride organizers endeavor to select the best cycling routes through rural areas and doing a far-away brevet is a wonderful way to explore someplace new to you. (The national brevet calendar on the RUSA Web site or in the quarterly newsletter will be a good place to look for events to enter.) Phone, write, or e-mail the brevet organizer at least a month in advance to get a sense of the route, and details about the start time, location, etc. If the area the route passes through is new to you, it is strongly recommended that you do some advance map-work and try to get a sense of the "big picture" before the ride. (Most brevet organizers will send the route sheet to participants a week or so before the ride and this will be particularly helpful in your planning.) Visiting the organizer's Web site is another good way of getting info in addition to phoning, writing or e-mailing.

In the weeks leading up to the event, be sure your bike is in tip-top shape. You don't want to lose valuable time during the event taking care of repairs that should have been done beforehand. Your riding pals will probably stop to help you with a puncture repair during a brevet, but don't expect them to hang about if it becomes obvious you began the event on a bike that was poorly maintained. Also, if you can't do a reliable puncture repair in five minutes or less, practice until you can. It is unreasonable to expect others to wait while you waste time doing a laggardly tire repair.

Randonneuring is all about self-reliance, so be sure to carry a map of the region, some simple repair tools, extra

17

RUSA Handbook

make the subsequent controls in the specified times. (To do otherwise undermines the accomplishment of the other riders and brings his event into disrepute.) And don't deviate from the official route! Avoid any temptation to take a shortcut no matter how tired or late you are. Not only is this cheating, but there may well be unannounced secret controls set up to prevent exactly that sort of thing. At any rate, hopefully you have at least 15 minutes before the start. If you can go ride a couple of miles to warm up, that will make the first part of the brevet go better than not.

Once underway when the course opens, ride sensibly and warm up during the first miles. Some brevets will have just a handful of entrants, while others could have well over a hundred. Hopefully you can find some riders of similar pace and ability to cover the miles with if you didn't come with a cycling buddy. If not, just get on with it and enjoy the scenery. Some brevets will have route arrows to show the way, while others won't and you will have to rely on the route sheet and your odometer. In either case, stay alert and don't get lost! The control is ticking whether you are on course or not. Better still, if you have riding companions, don't rely on just one person's efforts, get everyone involved in the navigation so that the entire group doesn't get lost.

Importantly, don't spend too much energy trying to keep up with riders faster than yourself: 200 kilometers is too long to keep that up all day. Hopefully there will be some riders more your speed close behind. Slow down a bit, eat, and let them catch up. But overall, ride your own pace and stay ahead of the control closing times, even if that means a fair bit of time is spent alone. If your average riding pace is on the slow side, be careful that you don't dawdle off the bike so much that you run out of time. Look at the control times and try to arrive with at least an hour before the closing time. This will allow some extra time for puncture repairs, getting back on track if you become lost, etc. Or, you may need some extra time late in the ride when you're in need of a longer rest to eat and get some energy back into your legs. In general, it is always a very good idea to keep your stops quite short in order to build up some extra

19