

# “Je suis un ancien”



“IF YOU CAN FINISH PARIS-BREST-PARIS, ROB, ANYONE CAN!” THE COMMENT WAS MADE IN JEST BY A FELLOW CAPE RANDONNEUR TO ROB WALKER AT A GET-TOGETHER BEFORE THEY HEADED OFF TO PARIS.



**I**t certainly hadn't been intended as a compliment, but over the next few days, it dawned on me that it actually was. You see, three-and-a-half years earlier, I had no idea that audax was a type of long-distance cycling.

The furthest I'd ever cycled was 110km – yep, the Cape Town Cycle Tour, of course – and my best time for doing so was 4:43. I couldn't ride especially fast or especially far, which makes it all the more ridiculous that I would become obsessed with the idea of taking part in a non-stop 1,230km ride with a time limit of only 90 hours. But obsessed I became.

Entering PBP (as Paris-Brest-Paris is known) is not a decision you make rationally, it's a virus you catch from someone else. Once the germ burrows into your brain, there's only one cure.

My infection came via the internet, courtesy of an expat South African living in Canada named Guy Pearce. A HubSA (now Bike Hub) thread on riders' greatest cycling achievements of 2011 included Guy's post on completing the 1,200km of PBP. I bashed out a helpful reply correcting his typo – of course he'd meant 120km? As my mouse hovered over the Post button, I started to wonder if it was a mistake – surely nobody could cycle that far?

## Entering Paris-Brest-Paris is not a decision you make rationally: it's a virus you catch from someone else

After several hours of reading every article I could find, my cycling horizons had expanded irreversibly. I knew that audax (from the French for "audacious") described rides of 200km or more, that a *randonneur* was a cyclist taking part in them, and that a core ethos was self-sufficiency – riders carried what they needed or found it along the way.

I also discovered the real lure of PBP – it's a historic ride that invokes a level of passionate French support normally reserved for professional riders on the Tour de France. I had no clue how to train for such crazy distances, but I wanted to try.

I wasn't far into my investigations before being discouraged from using the term "training". An *ancien* (a title earned for completing a PBP, *ancienne* if you are female) pointed out that you do not train for an Audax, you prepare. It might seem an arbitrary distinction, but

**1. The coveted rider number that I'd dreamed of for years.**

**2. Queuing up to register with fellow *randonneur* Tim, one of more than 400 riders from the US.**

**3. A packed bike park, with 6 000 riders heading in to collect their numbers.**

**Opposite:** A foggy dawn crossing on the bridge into Brest – halfway!

it's completely accurate. Within a few weeks, multiple thought paths were competing for my attention: equipment, planning, average speeds, sleep strategies, eating, mental toughness. Fitness would clearly be essential, but it was just one aspect of successful participation. "Preparation" was indeed a far more appropriate term.

Every avid cyclist understands that a new adventure is an excuse for that N+1 bike. So it's not surprising this path was quick to grab some mindshare. Details of my chosen machine can be seen in the box attached to this story, but suffice to say, one of the first things I did was go shopping.

Physical preparation was a tougher path, which started with joining my local cycle club (Wannabees) to get on a Coronation Double Century team. In the gales of 2012, our time of nine hours didn't break any records, but it was a valuable milestone. More than four hours quicker than the Audax allowance for that distance, I finished feeling that my legs had more in them.

For reasons that now escape me, I decided the next logical step would be attempting London-Edinburgh-London (LEL) 2013 – "to gain some experience". At 1,418km, LEL is longer than PBP, but with a much more generous time allowance. →





Overall time 84 hours,  
52 minutes: riding 61:14;  
sleeping 6:30; getting lost  
1:00; and the remaining  
16:08 spent enjoying  
myself rather too much.



It was a ludicrous choice for my first actual Audax, but somehow, I got to the end. Riding the last 400km with a neck that had given up nearly broke me. And it was months before the PBP dream returned. Clearly my physical condition and bike fit needed a lot more attention.

Luckily, it's practically impossible to get to the start of PBP so woefully underprepared – a strict qualification process takes care of that.

## WE'LL ALWAYS HAVE PARIS

Rolling the clock forward to 16 August 2015, randonneurs from around the globe gathered in Paris to take part in the 18th edition of PBP which, for the first time, started at the Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines velodrome. It's an amazing cycling facility but being brand new, it's rather soulless.

The atmosphere at 7.30pm on this warm summer evening was electric though – the jangling nerves of 1 500 or so riders still to start, mixed in with a buzz from large crowds lining the route. Superficially, it resembled the start chute of any road ride anywhere in the world, but it was uniquely different – a moment that riders

**ABOVE:** The St-Quentin-en-Yvelines Velodrome, a brand-new cycling facility being used for the first time on PBP.

had been dreaming of for years was here. Final announcements drifted away on the slight breeze, the last Mexican wave rolled overhead and a hush descended, broken just seconds later by the sound of hundreds of cleats hitting pedals and hubs whirring up to speed. This was it, we were off!

The first few kilometres followed suburban streets, with supporters chanting "bon courage!", "bonne route!" and a number of other expressions that soon became familiar as we were welcomed. Even when the crowds gradually thinned, hardly a village or street corner went by without a group of people waving a banner or cheering us on.

Maybe I'm easily pleased, but to me, the early scenery wasn't nearly as disappointing as I'd heard – rolling rural farmland, quaint villages and deep, lush forests. As wonderful as the cheers were, heading out across France in the slowly fading sunlight was also rather magical.

Riders all around began to switch on their lights – one by one at first, but eventually they joined up to form a spectacle that every PBP aspirant has read about. Ahead lay an unbroken twinkling line of

red cutting through the darkness, running down through every dip and rising up again to disappear over the distant horizon. Knowing it will happen does not prepare you in any way for actually seeing it stretched out in front of you, mile after mile, and hour after hour.

As that first night of riding wore on, the bodies of sleeping riders appeared at the roadside. The more experienced leave their rear light on so that other riders will walk a few more steps before taking a pee.

Gradually other PBP experiences unfolded, one of these being the speed at which the riding mass travelled. Within three hours, we reached a well-known sports bar at 80km. It was well above my sustainable endurance pace, but I went with it. Less time riding meant more time sleeping.

The lumpy terrain between the food stop at Montagne-au-Perche (140km) and the first actual control at Villaines-la-Juhel (220km) calmed things down. It was like a cruel joke – 80km of near continuous hill intervals, short but nasty. Thankfully I hadn't studied the route profile in detail. Had I known – it would be like this all the way to Brest and back,



## Start shopping

These specifications are used on a total like-for-like Audax – virtually any human-powered vehicle will do if the idea of cycling over 1,000km sounds mad. Look up Etnapeak for a whole new definition of crazy. My main bike follows a more orthodox and well-proven formula:

### FRAME

Boris Titanium, endurance geometry, Kinesis DC07 carbon fork, clearance for mudguards and 28mm tyres

### WHEELS

Mavic Open Pro, 32h front on SON Dynamo hub, 36H rear on Hope Mono RS hub

### GROUPSET

Ultegra 11-speed, cable shift

### BAR

Ritchey BioMax II, wrapped over gel pads

### SADDLE

Specialized Romin Evo Pro

### FRONT LIGHTS

Extreme Lights 14K, SON Edelux dynamo backup

### REAR LIGHTS

2 x LED AAA-powered primaries, B&M Seculite dynamo backup

### NAVIGATION

Garmin eTrex 30 (50 hours from 2 x Lithium AAs)

### LOGGAGE

Bridge Street saddlebags M (approximately 8 litres)

### SPARES

You name it, but always spokes and a tyre

## As wonderful as the cheers were, heading out across France in the slowly fading sunlight was also rather magical

### BELOW:

My trusty sled, while I lunched in Sizun – there and back with not so much as a puncture

I might have packed it in right there. If anyone tells you PBP isn't flat, believe them.

After wasting an hour at Villaines I decided control points were for essentials – a brevet card stamp and water refill. I'd enjoyed coffee

at a family's impromptu stall earlier and resolved to meet future fuelling needs at similar pop-ups, or cafes en route. As day broke though, I made a rookie mistake. I rode past a table being laid out with fresh croissants. By the time I reached the next village, a hungry swarm had passed through cleaning out everything aside from a couple of fancy fruit tarts. Reluctantly, I ate them.

The rest of that day is something of a blur – long straights and rolling hills connecting town after town, many of them still festooned in their Tour decorations, which had passed this section of the course a month back.

I arrived at my planned sleep stop in Loudéac (448km) by 6.30pm, more than an hour ahead of my most optimistic schedule. Conventional wisdom has this as the worst place to sleep owing to crowds, but I had a hotel room booked and a drop bag containing fresh supplies. The comfy bed and quiet room were a lifesaver. After a hasty hamburger and a call home, exhaustion overtook me and I drifted into a deeply satisfying sleep.

Three hours and a shower later, I felt refreshed, although the midnight air was biting cold as I set out for a second night on the road. I cursed, having left my leg warmers at home. Progress was steady, and I was now regularly passing the lights of riders returning towards Paris.

As dawn broke, my wheels suddenly rolled free, starting the long run down the only significant hill of the ride – Roc'h Trevezel. It was impossible not to think that in an hour or two I'd have to slog my way back up. For now, all that could be done was to enjoy the relatively free ride down to the coast. →





## What is PBP?

First held in 1891, Paris-Brest-Paris, or PBP, predates the Tour de France by 12 years and is regarded as the oldest cycling event still running. As with its more famous cousin, it was started by a newspaper, the motivation being to promote the practicality of the bicycle.

On untarred roads and fixed gears, it was originally considered too demanding to hold more than once a decade, only more recently moving to every four years. Aficionados are quick to point out that it is a ride, not a race, but its origins as a competitive event are undeniable.

Although the last event to include professional cyclists was in 1951, every edition has a small bunch of elite riders vying for honours at the front. For the majority, it's a personal test of endurance. Most choose the Touristes category with a 90-hour time limit. Those braver or more experienced can opt to ride as randonneurs (84 hours) or vedettes (80 hours).

Regardless of time limits, the rules remain the same; every rider carries a brevet denoting the required control points. These must be visited within defined opening and closing times, and a verifying stamp must be collected at each.

This being a French event, there is, of course, some leeway to the rules. Racers finishing first will be celebrated and their riding faster than the 30km/h maximum forgiven, but only if they have shown good sportsmanship and courtesy to officials during their race.

At the tail, riders can miss their cut-offs but be granted the coveted finishing time of 89:59 if they've upheld the spirit of the event — such as forgoing their own attempt to help an injured rider. Even those finishing out of time are classed as *Hors délais* (delayed finish) rather than DNF.

PBP definitely has winners, but it has no losers.





It's easy to imagine that reaching the halfway point would be something of a positive milestone, but for me it wasn't. The body was already knackered, and the reality was I had to do it all again. At least the route planners guided us to the most magical of sights: We crossed the old bridge into Brest (614km) with the suspension towers of the new bridge hovering alongside us, floating on a bank of early-morning fog. Riders all around pulled over to grab cameras, including me.

It was an uplifting image to hold in mind as we turned at the control and started the slow task of ticking off each kilometre again.

The climb back up was not nearly as bad as it appeared. Far worse was the stiffling warm afternoon that followed. Shortly after the secret control at Maël Carhaix (included to prevent cheating), I slumped badly.

I prefer real food on long rides, but I now stuffed down my emergency energy-bar rations, hoping they would coax some life into the legs. It was just barely enough to carry me back to my hotel bed in Loudéac. My goal had been a more relaxed day of 350km and around 20 hours of riding. I should have been pleased to arrive back by 8pm, but three hours of mental slog had drained me. Sleep was the only answer.

It worked. I rode out again around 7am, revived but somewhat daunted that ahead was another 450km on tired legs. Keen for progress, I pushed a bit too hard to the Tinténiac control. The following leg to Fougères was only 50km, but on the final ramp up into the town, I paid the price: my right knee gave out.

The prospect of riding 300km with searing pain might seem awful, but more concerning was that it may give out entirely and end my ride. Nervous of the official medics who could declare me unfit to continue, I luckily found a helpful pharmacist in the town of Gorrion. He instantly understood my distress, quickly fitted a knee brace and stuffed handfuls of icy gel sachets in my pockets as he urged me back to the bike.

## ITB. BABY, YOU AND ME...

The next 100km or so were tentative, the pressure finally being relieved by a combination of cold beer and a Facebook message from a club mate. She'd completed 30km of the Comrades Marathon in a similar state and explained that your ITB might hurt like hell, but it won't tear. It was exactly what I needed to see me man up and stop whinging. There was a ride to finish.

The rolling hills back to Mortagne-au-Perche were the end of the worst terrain, and with time in hand, I tried to grab a nap on the floor. But my mind would not switch off and lying there awake was wasting time, so I kitted up and pushed on.

Later that night, I pulled into a brightly lit roadside stall – a chair appeared under my bum, and its hosts issued encouraging words as they poured two cups of delicious *potage de légumes* (vegetable soup). I savoured the moment – there didn't seem much hurry now.

Sleep deprivation caught up with me, though, heading towards the last control at Dreux. The city lights were tantalising close, but for the first time, my mind wandered, my eyelids

**1. Bitten by my bike! (Sleep deprivation combined with sloppy handling of a heavily loaded bike.)**

**2. The South African team (and long-suffering family members) gathered for dinner the evening before.**

**Opposite: Prepare to feel like a pro... The entire town of Villaines closed down and came out to support us.**

began to blink, my vision blurred. Tiny gaps appeared in my consciousness, telltale signs of the dreaded microsleeps often referred to as "the doozies". My concentration held just long enough to roll safely into the control area, but I was wrecked.

After wolfing down a plate of food and two coffees, I set an alarm for 45 minutes, rested arms and head on the table, and drifted off. I woke before the alarm – feeling dreadful but not so sleepy. Maybe it was the extra coffee before venturing out, but standing by my bike on a small bridge, I had a moment of absolute clarity.

I scraped the contact lenses out of my eyes, losing them into the stream below, and put my proper spectacles on. The effect of clearer vision was amazing – rolling out again, I felt properly awake.

Nevertheless, I took the precaution of buddying up with an English rider who generously agreed to stay with me so he could warn me if I started drifting off.

We rode through that night into a damp grey morning, the outskirts of Paris now in sight under ominous clouds. No PBP can be complete without rain and, on the way. →

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1



2





Paris

Dreux

Mortagne-au-Perche

Villaines-la-Juhel

Fougères

Tinténiac

Loudéac

Carhaix

Brest

Rob Walker has a blog - [www.justkeppedalling.com](http://www.justkeppedalling.com) - where you can find out what his next silly mission might be. Possibly before Yolandi does.

## Qualify right here

Entry to PBP requires completion of a qualifying series of brevets within strict time limits: 200km (13h20); 300km (20h); 400km (26h40m); and 600km (40h)

The qualifying window for these events opens on 1 November in the year preceding the PBP edition, and ends a few weeks before the start of the event. Despite a significant increase in Audax interest around the world and a record field of 6 094 entrants for this year's edition, everyone who registered got a place.

South Africa has a long history of audaxing, and although turnouts are smaller than many of the countries qualifying, brevets have been regularly staged in Gauteng and the Western Cape.

Of the 66 countries represented at PBP 2015, SA had a contingent of 15 riders, although one rider was unfortunately unable to start.

First home was Cape randonneur Chris van Zyl, beating his own national record with a time of 54:56. In total, 11 riders finished in time, with two withdrawals and one finisher outside the 90-hour limit.

Further information, schedules and contact details can be found on the Audax SA website: [www.audaxsa.co.za](http://www.audaxsa.co.za)

we also kicked off another essential - getting lost. Somehow, we missed both a direction sign and my Garmin track, adding 20km to our ride.

Neither the weather, the mistake, nor the heavy rush-hour traffic mattered now. The route left the busy road and followed a cycle path through a park - I didn't need the map to realise this was the final stage and that, just ahead, was the end.

Moments later, our small group of riders swung a corner and the velodrome came into view. We were there, we'd done it.

The crowds weren't huge, but it was only just after 8am on a wet, suburban morning. They cheered each one of us loudly and enthusiastically up the last ramp and

over the line. I vaguely recall seeing someone dressed as a monkey in those last metres to the finish area, but my mind was not really all there. It was a little surreal.

Sheets of rain poured down, and water splashed off the grim, grey tarmac of the bike park. On any other day, it would have made for a dismal scene, but nothing could dampen the feeling inside.

I fumbled at the touchscreen of my phone to dial the only other person who would share the significance of the moment. The call to my long-suffering partner Yolandi was short and wonderfully sweet, starting with a sentence that even my limited French could compose

"Je suis un Ancien." 🇫🇷