

PARIS-BREST-PARIS

Congratulations to Bob for competing and completing this event.



2245 hours, Monday 18 August 2003, St Quentin-sur-Yvelines, near Paris. On the front row of the sixth starting group, 600 strong, tyre touching the tape, I shake hands with John Hopper, my partner. "We're here – and we'll be back on Friday!" That was all we needed to say; for we were both determined to complete this, the 15th Paris-Brest-Paris Randonnée. We would be riding 1225km (765 miles) by Friday 22 August 1600 hours. Yes, in among tandems, recumbents, trikes, streamliners and Moultons, not to mention the penny-farthing, the kick-bike and the triplet, John and I were among the 4069 riders from 25 countries starting one of the world's most prestigious cycling events, held only once every four years - PBP.

There was such an atmosphere of celebration, anticipation, apprehension, tinged with a little unspoken fear of the task ahead over the next four days that we were eager to move beyond the three days of registering, queuing, bike checking, carbo-loading and aqua-loading and get on with the riding.

Cheers rise from the crowds lining the streets as the peloton cruises out of town, slowly leaving streetlights for the intense darkness of the French countryside on the first night. PBP veterans had told of a long line of red lights ahead and white lights behind, reaching both ways to the horizon, rolling over hills and across the plains. Nothing can do it justice, there's no way I can really describe the excitement that sweeps through you seeing this, and realizing what you're doing on this ride. "I wanted to do PBP because I would become a little part of cycling history - a small insignificant part, but a part all the same, if only for me - and now there I was. I'd had the conviction on deciding to ride this year, that I was going to finish, whatever the cost. Whatever the cost? Well, it's late autumn now, and my little fingers still tingle and my grip is poor. Nerve damage, I'm told; it'll come back eventually." (Joel Matz, US)

0200 Tues 71km. Small village bakery bathed in light with decorated bicycle lit up; they offer us all water and fresh bread; delicious. This will be repeated many times during this epic.

0500 Tues 140km. Mortagne au Perche. The first refreshment station; it's like a small town in the middle of the night, with lots of bikes, lights and cauldrons of pasta. Everything is on a gigantic scale. We, fall behind our schedule as each control and food stop can waste ages.

1000 Tues 223km, Villaines La Juhel. First control, where your accreditation card is swiped and via the web, people at home follow your progress, and then to the pasta counter. Day starts in early morning mist, then we watch the sun climb and move round. Always there are cyclists within sight. It will be Wednesday before you can view the road ahead clear of Lycra.

1530 Tues 308km Fougeres control. Girls bring complimentary postcards to the dining tables; we scribble whilst downing pasta, they thank us as they take them to stamp and post. What is this strange world we are in and why are we being treated with such kindness?

2000 Tues 366km. Tinteniac control. The sun has finally set on the first day. We feel the chill of evening as we set off again after pasta, bread, energy drinks and sweet puddings. We must press on. Ahead of us is a bag drop with sleeping bag and more food. About midnight we see a weird sight approaching. A car with a flashing roof light followed by 30 small but bright lights at waist level and more at head level. It's the Vedettes, already on their way back before we've even slept once! Wonder if Gethin Butler is amongst them?

0230 Weds 452km Loudeac control. It's getting hillier now; slower progress despite brilliance of Schmidt hub dynamo allowing fast night descents. Pasta and then 3 hours sleep. A bowl of porridge, then we move off at first light, pockets stuffed with jam sandwiches. Simple day ahead to Brest and return. Life is not measured in days but time between controls.

1030 Weds 529km Carhaix-Plouguer. The control comes and goes, with rice for a change and warnings of the big hills ahead. A steady stream of riders is now returning on this out and home course.

The climbs are long and wearying but the descents are divine. Photos get taken at the bridge entering Brest, then an unexpected haul up to the control.

1645 Weds 615km Brest. Mechanics replace John's broken spokes while we stock up on pasta. 45 hours for the return; we must press on to Loudeac for our support tonight. A beautiful evening over the Breton moor of Roc Trévezel will mean a cold night, more layers needed. I ride alongside the recumbent tricycle tandem, now feeling seriously tired.

2230 Weds 696km Carhaix. Bloody steep hill into the town. I remember nothing else – except 77km further before sleep. Cold night, small group, lose way, see imaginary herd of cattle ahead, swerve to miss them, John agrees to 15 min power nap, plod to next control.

0400 Thurs 773km Loudeac. Control has board displaying times of trains to Paris for the DNFs. Don't even think about it! Eat, drink, sleep for 90 minutes, fill pockets with jam baguettes, and roll out at dawn. Chill morn, but wonderful sunrise.

Sometime Thurs 859km Tinteniac. Pasta, drink and off again. **Later Thurs 914km Fougeres.** Pasta, drink and off again. Day is punctuated by supporting cries of "Bon courage" and regular sight of bodies and bikes collapsed on the verge. Lose contact with John, fall asleep on roadside mid-afternoon, fail to set alarm correctly, 45 min instead of 15 oversleep!

Well after nightfall Thurs 1002km Villaines la Juhel. Pasta, drink and off again. This next stage is the crux. People riding haywire; I see a recumbent fall in my path (no hallucination this time) and help the bruised rider to the verge. Quick nap on garage forecourt – tarmac warmer than wet grass; you really need company on this fourth night. I lose John, but ride with two young Spaniards. They are clearly stronger, but time trialling useful here and I keep steady pace for us in rolling country. Suddenly, paradise - An open café at 0300! A large strong coffee and a handful of sugar sachets act like rocket fuel. What a boon, helping to keep pushing on a long stretch of straight road covered with gravel seemingly the size of conkers. "Rolling resistance goes through the roof and the vibration is killing your hands. A modest hill takes on the appearance of a wall at this point" (Joel Matz).

0545 Fri 1084km Mortagne au Perche. Beat control closure by 5 minutes. Meet the van again. Half an hour's sleep in the stands of the local racecourse. Shower – heaven –, clean clothes, food, then off in the mist, with frost in the hollows. The verges are now crowded with slumbering cyclists; some will sleep for too long and miss the deadline. Friday morn feels *great* for me, but what do I look like? "The scenes at breakfast are heartbreaking and there's no temptation to use the camera. Riders who have had to force themselves to ride through the Thursday night are still streaming in, looking like death and they don't have time for more than an hour or two's sleep; now I'm seeing the real downside of PBP". (Sheila Simpson, on her sixth PBP). Crikey, missus, that's a bit steep! There's only 140km to go and we are going to be back in Paris this afternoon.

1200 Fri 1167km Nogent Le Roi. We know we're towards the back end, but there's about 200 of us at the restaurant, all laughing, relaxing and I having this wonderful empathy; we're all going to finish this afternoon. I have an omelet and a beer; the first non carbo-serious food for a week. Wagons roll! It's an easy afternoon's social club run with a multinational bunch of riders. The last few kilometers are a bit fraught through suburban traffic until, riding past cafés bursting with earlier finishers, we roll home.

1555 Fri 1225km St Quentin sur Yvelines. Swipe the card, get the ticket for a free beer, sit down, and then suddenly deflate. An hour later, the 5km to our hotel is the hardest stage of all. Time? Beautifully gauged, with me at 89h 25m, John at 5 minutes with Joel 2 min further. The others? The first six Vedettes had returned on Wednesday afternoon in 44h 40m, with Gethin at 49h 01m. Of the 4069 starters, 604 were DNF and we were among the 3465 PBP finishers.

"An unforgettable experience and challenge...I would like to thank from the bottom of my heart the organizers, staff in the controls, people of the towns and villages, for their catering, help and encouragement were magnificent...I'll be back." (Anon). John and I never ever thought "Never ever again" and we are definite for the 16th PBP in August 2007. Just admit that you'll never make the Tour de France; your best chance to make a historic, world- renowned French cycling event is waiting for you – and it's only half the length of the Tour! We will be happy to help you organize for the next one and you've got four years to prepare.

So if that overweight, under-trained Bob Harber enjoyed it so much that he's eagerly awaiting his second opportunity, why don't we work towards a sizeable Club representation in 2007?