

## The 15<sup>th</sup> Paris – Brest – Paris from 18 to 22 August 2003

### Part Two

Since I wrote Part One, I have been asked, “What is the history of P-B-P” ? Well In 1891, Pierre Giffard, a French journalist, came up with the idea of a 1200 kilometer (750 mile) bicycle event starting from Paris and going to Brest on the Atlantic Ocean and returning to Paris as a way to promote cycling in his country. The winning time that year was 71 hrs 35 mins, set by Charles Terront. Because of the difficulty of the event, it was planned to be held only once every ten years, which it was until 1941 when the event was postponed until 1948 due to the German occupation. Since 1971, the Paris-Brest-Paris event has been held every four years and hosted by the Audax Club Parisien, a French randonneuring society. The winning time in 2003 was set by 6 persons who all crossed the line together at 14.40 on the 20 August 2003 in a time of 40 hrs 40 mins. The first British finisher was Gethin Butler who came 32nd in a time of 47 hrs 44 mins.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with riding Audax events, riding PBP is a process of progressing from one control to the next. Typically there is about 80 kilometers (50 miles) between controls, except for the first control, Mortagne au Perche, which is at 141 kilometers (88 miles) which is a feeding station only on the outward journey. The controls are the means of monitoring the progress of the riders as well as providing them with support. You must check in at each one and get your brevet card stamped, your time recorded and then you can go to the dinning rooms and do everything else you need to attend to. Because the event is in France, every control also has a bar.

The Controls on PBP are vast, not Pete’s van, Cafes and Village Halls that I was used to in England, more like mini University campuses. There was always 350 riders at a control and double this where riders crossed on outward and return legs, all of them wanting to have their times recorded, eat, drink, sleep, ablutions, some needed medical attention others needed to get their bikes fixed. During daylight hours there was always a large crowd of locals and in the evenings there was a definite carnival atmosphere. You could spend 15 minutes just orienting yourself and I was advised that a lot of precious riding time could be wasted at controls. When I visited the controls the queues for food were so long that I used the local villages and small towns for sustenance. I survived on a diet of fresh milk, yoghurts, bananas and baguettes as well as all the rations I took with me.

For lighting I have two lumotec’s at the front powered by a Schmitt hub dynamo, with a cateye front LED for backup and for the rear two red LED’s remembering not to have them on flashing mode. The roads in the area were not very well lit, and when it got dark, there being no moon it was black.

I carried in two medium sized panniers: Spare shorts, two spare tops, one long sleeved for night time, rain jacket, pair of longs, two spare pairs of socks, two spare folding tires, five spare inner tubes, tools, repair outfit, small medical kit and a wash bag with the necessaries.

In addition to that lot, 3lb of bread pudding, 2lb flapjack, 4 Malt loaves, 12 chocolate biscuits, two packs of jaffa cakes, large bag of assorted sultanas/raisons/apricots and 1 litre of orange juice in case of an emergency. At the start I got some strange looks and someone asked me if I was going camping? He was French and his equipment consisted of arm/leg warmers, 2 tyre levers, one spare tube and two bananas all in his jersey rear pocket. On closer inspection of his bike I noticed that his front light was a torch taped on to the handlebars. I wondered how did

he get through the bike check, you get the picture. I was carrying no more than I had been lugging around on Sunday rides for the past month.

Cycling in Brittany means being greeted as a hero by all the locals along the way. At every town, village or hamlet people would be out to watch the cyclists go by. Some would move their tables outside and eat their dinner where they could watch us pass. All so many of them would set up tables from which they could hand out water and food to passing cyclists. Bicycles decorated with flowers and lights were put out on display to welcome us and everyone you encountered would cheer you on with cries of "Bon courage! Bonne route! Al-lez! Al-lez! Al-lez!" Even the car drivers were considerate and patiently waited for minutes behind large pelotons of P-B-P cyclists before passing. I was very impressed by the contrast with the way cyclists are treated by the majority of motorists in England. I am informed that this attitude toward cyclists was not, in fact, universal to France but was unique to Brittany. Brittany was the home of such cycling heroes as Bernard Hinault, and their pride in his accomplishments has made them sympathetic to other cyclists.

The Course was very well marked with direction arrows at each junction. I did carry a route sheet although not needed, but, it was handy for the distances between controls and for their closing times. The countryside in Brittany is everywhere hilly but nowhere steep and I would compare it to the North York Moors and the Yorkshire Wolds. The entire route seemed to me to be a succession of long rollers with climbs of about ten or eleven percent. I was told that there are no potholes in France, and although this is not literally true, they certainly keep their roads in a much better shape than those that I am used to cycling on in England. In general I thought the route was very undulating for the majority of the way, apart from two major climbs into and out of Brest. Officially the amount of ascent is 9,888 metres, or 32,440 feet.

Now for the ride itself. I left the dining rooms at around 19:00 and made my way to the start area, but it was jammed full of the 80 hour starters trying to funnel their way into the official starting enclosure, as well as others thinking like myself in getting there early. I was advised to get to the front even though there was still three hours to go. Once you are in the first marshalling enclosure you have to produce your Book to have it marked by an official with a coloured pen (this determines which start group you are in) before proceeding to the starting enclosure, it all sounds complicated but it all went very smoothly and there is a small army of helpers and officials to guide you through.

The start is along a dual carriageway and participants depart in groups of about 600 every 15 minutes, so if you were at the back you could be over an hour before you even left. This is compensated for at the finish depending on which group you departed in as to whether you needed the extra time. I saw one person with a wheel off changing a tube in the first enclosure and heard of two others that had to do the same thing on the dual carriageway. I did wonder if one of them was the Frenchman with only one spare tube. On advice from others I had put two new tyres on a couple of weeks previously and did not have any problems during the event.

I was in the first group of 600 and eventually with lights blazing cheers from the crowd, which I estimate to be about 2,000 we were off. Rather than talk you through the whole of the four days blow by blow, I will just highlight the ups and downs and give a brief scenario.

Luckily there were not many downs. The worst was at 999.99km. I was looking at my computer virtually constantly from about 980km to watch it register that magical 1,000km for a single ride. When the moment came the computer reset itself and reverted back to 0.00. I somehow felt cheated, but luckily this happened just before a control so it was soon forgotten.

During the day, temperatures were a very pleasant 80 degrees or so, but just as soon as the sun went down, the temperature would drop quickly and be in the 50s by the early morning. I wasn't having trouble with the cold temperatures because of the extra clothing I was carrying. Towards the end of the ride my metabolism was going through such an ordeal that it was liable to shut down at the first indication that there might be rest. To complicate matters, my right knee started to ache after about 700kms. In retrospect I should have raised the saddle a couple of centimetres, which I have done since returning and this seems to have done the trick. I was in new territory as I have previously never cycled over 600kms. What with the knee and the fatigue that had made cycling so difficult on the second night, made it worse on the third night. For the only time on the ride this was when I started to suffer, I don't know how much longer I could have gone on for.

After listening to previous entrants and comparing how well it went for me during the two 400km training rides, I completed on my own from Hull to Canterbury and return. I decided on three strategies. I wanted to complete the event in a good time and four years is a long time to wait for a second chance. So the first strategy was to try and ride 600km i.e. get all the way to Brest before sleeping, then ride 400km sleep again and finally the last 225km in the hope of a reasonable time.

The second strategy was on stage one get to Loudeac 452 km. Stage two ride to Brest and back to Loudeac 337 km. Stage three Loudeac to Mortagne au Perche 311 km. Stage four an easy ride of 141 km in daylight back to Paris with time to enjoy the scenery, stop in the cafes, self congratulations and think of the next challenge and complete the event in 89 hours and 59 minutes.

The third strategy was, see how it goes, listen to my body, sleep when tired and hope to get to the finish within the ninety hours. In reality this was how it went.

### **Stage 1 - Paris to Carhaix**

**529 Km ( 329 Miles), 27 Hours 16 Mins, from 22:00 Monday to 01.16 Wednesday**

The first 15km of the route was escorted by an official car and motorcyclist outriders, whom I saw again and again during the event. At one stage I had to stop for a call of nature and looked up the road ahead and for miles all you could see were a 1,000 or so red lights, and to the rear was a barrage of white lights, a truly fantastic sight. The first control at Mortagne Au Perche (141km) was only a feeding station so I filled my bottles up and off I went, we were still riding 3 and 4 abreast. I tried to keep to the speed that I was most comfortable with, but it is difficult when you are being constantly overtaken, you think you should be going faster than what you are. Dawn arrived and I was in a bunch of around 50 cyclists, the earlier chatter had died down and I stayed with this group until I arrived at Villaines Ja Huel (223km). Whilst here I ate from my rations washed down with a bowl of hot coffee. Even though I did not have to queue for any food, I used the toilets and also had a wash and it still took me 50 minutes before I was on my way again. The weather was good in the high seventies all day I just admired the scenery. At Fougères (311km) I did the necessities and was still eating from my supplies so I was only at the control for about 40 minutes. After checking in at Tinteniac (366km) I decided to have something more substantial to eat. Unfortunately the queues were still very long and not moving very quickly so I decided to look elsewhere and just outside the control, next to a large shop they

had set up a 'Bar-B-Q' so I had something to eat there. On arrival at Loudeac (452km) I had to decide whether to stop and sleep or go on. I know I had been on the bike for 24 hours and it had just got dark, but if I was only to have 5 hours sleep, I would be getting up at about 03:00. The decision was made for me when I heard some Americans saying that there were no places left in the Dormitories. As it was only 77 km to the next control I decided to carry on. It was very dark I was conscious of being followed most of the time, I suspect this was because of the powerful lighting system I was using. I became very tired because of being on the front and was glad to get to Carhaix-Plouguer (529km), I had soup, turkey and rice to eat and then went to look for somewhere to sleep. Again unfortunately the dormitories were full, so along with about 40 other tired cyclist I took my cycling shoes off made a pillow of my extra clothes that I was wearing and laid down on the floor and went to sleep. I was awoken abruptly about 3 hours later, some clumsy person had bumped into the table I was sleeping under. I tried unsuccessfully to get back to sleep but to no avail, so I got up and decided to cycle on.

**Stage 2 - Carhaix to Brest return to Carhaix and on to Tinteniac  
330 km (206 Miles), 18 Hours 49 Min, from 05:45 Wednesday to 00:34 Thursday**

I set out from Carhaix-Plouguer at 05:45 and found I was cycling on my own, I could see no one in front and stopped on some pretext to look at my lights which were working perfectly, after a couple of minutes had passed and no one had overtaken me I decide to double back, good job because I had missed a turning. I had not had enough sleep, I was not concentrating. As luck would have it I was passing a picnic sight with overnight campers and found a bench and laid out and had another ninety minutes sleep. I awoke from this sleep much more refreshed and I now understand the meaning of 'Power Napping'. Yesterdays Pelotons which would form spontaneously, sometimes growing to hundreds of cyclists were a distant memory, for today between Carhaix and Brest I cycled mainly on my own, either being overtaken or overtaking others. From time to time a cyclist would get onto my wheel and stay with me for a while, or I would find another English speaker to have a conversation with and do the same and take his wheel.

Half way towards the major Climb 'Roc Trevezel' I came across a village where there were many cyclists availing themselves of the local cafes, shops and patisseries so I did likewise. I sat on the pavement and ate some food whilst watching the fast riders on their way back towards Paris. Now fully refreshed it was easy to cover the final 40 km into Brest. The descent into Brest would have made the trip worthwhile on its own! The views of the Atlantic Ocean, the ride over the causeway footpath bridge with the suspension bridge as a backdrop were superb, my cheapo Digital camera did not do them justice. Brest (615 km) is the turn-round point on the route. Half-way in 36 hours, I remember saying to myself not to become complacent, but, could I do the ride in 72 Hours?

I had a long stop, first I took a shower and put on a complete change of fresh clothes, after all I had carried them for 615 Km. I also applied large amounts of 'Zinc and Caster Oil' Cream and then had some food and drink and took a look around me at some of my fellow companions and their machines. I think they came within 3 categories. The Americans with all the latest high-tech gear, carbon fibre, titanium, loud and seem to know everyone and speak to anyone. The British very reserved were riding something that was excessively over laden like myself, a heavy touring bike or otherwise absurd in some fashion or eccentricity. The French were riding whatever old bicycle they happen to pull out of the garage on Sunday for the bike check.

I Left at around midday and headed back toward Paris, although the return leg is the reverse of the outward leg, this is not so for the first ten miles out of Brest. Eventually though I

was also in a position of seeing riders making their way towards Brest whilst I was now on the way back. I could see how the last of the riders had strung out, but there were still some large groups. I saw the last few stragglers at around 15:00hrs as I was coming into Carhaix-Plouguer (529 km) for them, (696 km) for me. I wondered if they would arrive in Brest before the cut-off time, I fear not for some of them.

This was only a short stop as I was still relatively fresh and proceeded onward to Loudeac (773 km) where I had a longish stop. The next section was by far the hardest section of the ride for me. Although the most significant climbing was over it was still undulating, but sleep deprivation was taking a big toll on me. I was so tired I had the unique opportunity to experience the hallucinations that I'd heard so much about and nearly fell asleep while pedalling. I eventually arrived at Tinteniac (859 km) and after recording my arrival went in search of a bed. I was in luck and for the price of 2:50 Euros I was escorted to a bed in a dormitory and I requested an early call for 05:30 hrs, I went straight to sleep.

### **Stage 3- Tinteniac to Paris**

**366 km (229 Miles), 19 Hours 53 Min, from 06:30 Thursday to 02:23 Friday**

This was my worst day, even though I was heading for home and I had got some welcome sleep, most of the day went by in a blur. I was woken up at 05:35 and I ached all over, my rear end was sore I had developed a bit of tendonitis and my right knee was extremely painful. I had come this far I was not going to give up now. The discomfort wasn't serious enough to keep me off the bike. After a visit to the ablutions and a good wash I decided it was time for food. I drank two bowls of hot coffee and ate a large ham and cheese baguette and by 06:30 I was on my way again, there were gaps now between the riders. The sun was beginning to rise, after about an hour I was overtaken by a group of about 40 riders and managed to hang on to the back, this gave me a needed boost. The weather was again superb and we went through many delightful small towns and villages, which were having big celebrations for the riders as we passed, this was very heart warming. There were now many people along the road cheering for us. Children had set up makeshift tables on which was water and small items of food. Larger preparations were being made to spur on the stragglers which by now were about 8 hours or more behind me and would be passing through in the middle of the night. Fougères (914 km), Villaines La Juhel (1002 km) and Mortagne Au Perche (1084 km) all came and went without problems.

I arrived at the penultimate control Nogent Le Roi (1167 km) at 22:30 and I knew that I was going to finish, after all I only had 58 km left and I had 17 and 1/2 hours in which to cycle them. My dilemma was either to have a good nights sleep, get up fresh and meander in soaking up the atmosphere and complete the ride within the 90 hours. Or, should I have a power nap and go for a reasonable time at my first and maybe only attempt. I decided on the latter as did many others, but, as I realized on listening to them they did not have any option as they were either in the 80 or 84 hour groups.

There really wasn't much fanfare at the finish, at least not at 2.23 in the morning only ten or so people obviously waiting for friends. There was a hospitality tent with food and drink available but I was not hungry. A bit of an anticlimax for me as I could not see anyone I knew and no one to share the moment with or to congratulate, so I headed back to the hotel to a proper bed for some welcome sleep.

In all a truly fantastic memorable unique cycling event, an unforgettable experience and challenge which I am glad I took the opportunity not to miss.

I completed the event in 76 hours and 23 minutes and have included my statistics for those that might be interested.

### My Statistics

<b>Control</b>	<b>Stage K m</b>	<b>Total Km</b>	<b>Arrival Time</b>	<b>Time Taken</b>	<b>Average For Stage</b>	<b>Overall Average</b>
PARIS			22.00 18Aug			
Mortagne Au Perche	141	141	03.27 19 Aug	5.27	25.87	25.87
Villaines La Juhel	82	223	08:05 19 Aug	4.38	17.70	22.12
Fougeres	88	311	13.05 19 Aug	5.00	17.60	20.62
Tinteniach	55	366	16.48 19 Aug	3.43	14.80	19.47
Loudeac	86	452	21.54 19 Aug	5.06	20.98	19.74
Carhaix-Plouguer	77	529	01.16 20 Aug	5.22	22.87	20.14
BREST	86	615	09.54 20 Aug	8.38	1* 9.96	17.62
Carhaix-Plouguer	81	696	15.06 20 Aug	5.12	15.58	17.36
Loudeac	77	773	19.42 20 Aug	4.36	16.74	17.29
Tinteniach	86	859	00.34 21 Aug	4.52	17.67	17.33
Fougeres	55	914	08.42 21 Aug	8.08	2* 6.76	15.84
Villaines La Juhel	88	1002	13.35 21 Aug	4.53	18.02	16.01
Mortagne Au Perche	82	1084	18.12 21 Aug	4.37	17.76	16.13
Nogent Le Roi	83	1167	22.30 21 Aug	5.18	19.30	16.32
PARIS	58	1225	02.23 22 Aug	4.53	11.88	16.04

1\* Includes 5 Hours stop for sleep between Carhaix-Plouguer and Brest.

2\* Includes 5 Hours 30 Mins stop for sleep between Tinteniach and Fougeres.

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