Paris – Brest – Paris ’07
Some Rides Are Less Perfect Than Others

By Mark Beaver

Crap, it’s starting to rain again, I thought, for the fourth time tonight. This sucks.

Oh, well, nothing to be done about it, I’m here, it’s gotta be done, gotta keep going. Gotta get ‘er done.

It’s raining harder. “Stopping, putting on raincoat”, I call out.

This was pretty much the story for a good part of the 2007 Paris-Brest-Paris ride. Although August in northern France is usually pretty hot and dry, this wasn’t the year. This was the wettest summer in the last fifty years in central Europe.

Paris-Brest-Paris, or “PBP” as it is usually known, is the granddaddy of all of the ultramarathon bicycle rides on the planet. Literally. It’s the oldest organized cycling event on the planet, the first one having taken place in 1891, in the heyday of the bicycle boom. That year (only four years after the pneumatic tire was invented!) two hundred and six riders participated in a race from Paris to Brest, on the Brittany coast, and back, a distance of 1200km. One hundred riders finished. Since then, PBP was held every 10 years until the forties, then every five years through the fifties and sixties, until 1971 when it began to be held every four years. The oldest bicycle ride on the planet just finished its sixteenth running this year.

Raincoats on, Michael and I continued up the road. The reflections of everyone’s red taillights on the wet roads were mesmerizing. Looking ahead, you could see a line of red taillights snaking around, and disappearing over, the crest of the next hill. It was three in the morning, and we had been on the road for five hours, and had eighty or eighty five hours to go. Michael and I passed some groups, and other groups passed us; we settled into a rhythm and continued on.

Just before the first control checkpoint, at Mortagne au Perche, it really started coming down. I reached into my pocket for my helmet cover, it was gone; I must have dropped it somewhere. Damn, what a time to lose your helmet cover! We continued up the road, as the rain became torrential, bouncing six inches off the pavement. Soon we reached Mortagne, and gladly parked the bikes in the parking racks and went inside the control to get some coffee. There were hundreds of riders in the room, the heat and humidity and bright lights were dazzling.
PBP is the biggest ultramarathon “randonneuring” ride on the planet, by a factor of ten. There were 5300 riders from 30 countries who started. We were sent off in groups of 500 at a time every 20 minutes, beginning at 8 o’clock at night. We had started in the fourth wave.

Everyone who started had gone through the same training regimen, and everyone had ridden the same qualifying rides or “brevets”; a 200km ride (12.5 hours or less); a 300km ride (20 hours or less); a 400km ride (26.5 hours max) and a 600km ride (40 hours or less). There was an amazing array of riders there, from the super fast to the super tourist, but everyone was a good rider, and we all shared our common experience. I had completed PBP in 2003, the first Maritimer to ride the event. In 2007, there were five of us from Halifax making the attempt. I was riding with my friend Michael Thomson, a former Haligonian who is now living in Toronto; we have known each other since 1981.

Having had some soup and pasta and coffee, Michael and I headed out into the still-teeming rain in the pre-dawn darkness. The gloom lightened a couple of hours later, the rain letting up as the sky gradually lightened. The gale force sidewinds, however, continued unabated.

We reached the second control of the day, at Villaines-la-Juhel, in the midst of another rainshower. At each control, the rider must present his or her
checkpoint card to one of the control staff, who stamps the card and notes the time, and swipes the rider's magnetic card through a card reader, which records the time and uploads the information to the internet. Friends around the planet could follow the riders' progress as they made their way through the ride.

This set the theme for the rest of the day. Gusty gale force northerly sidewinds, mostly headwind but occasionally favourable, made it impossible to draft, and there were showers on and off all day. I rode with Michael all day, not that we had planned it, but it just worked out that way. Eighty km between controls; Villaines, Fougere, Tintinniac, three hours, eat, three hours, eat... Darkness fell, the rain resumed just as we arrived at Loudeac, at the 455km point, 24 ½ hours after the start. We checked in at the control, and then went to the cafeteria for some supper. We met Ole Mikkelsen, another ex-pat Nova Scotia Randonneur there. Michael and I had booked a hotel room at Loudeac for two nights, as the next day it was about 360km to Brest and back to Loudeac. We picked up our backpack from the bag-drop and made our way to the hotel. A shower never felt better! We hit the hay at midnight for about five hours’ sleep.

The alarm ringing at five AM was a most unwelcome sound. We grabbed some breakfast at the hotel buffet, and headed out into the darkness. Already, there were hundreds of other riders on the road. The first twenty km were pretty
slow, between tired legs and several long climbs. The daylight eventually brightened the sky but it remained overcast and windy, misty but not raining. We made our way to the first control of the day at Corlay, and had some coffee in a pub beside the control. On through rolling terrain to the next control at Carhaix, fairly pretty scenery now that we could see it. The majority of the route of PBP is on very small backroads, with little traffic for the most part. Lovely little towns every five or ten k’s, old stone buildings with slate roofs, ornate churches and cathedrals, the occasional ruins of castles and estates were to be seen. After Carhaix the weather actually began to improve and the sun actually came out for a couple of hours as we reached the halfway point at Brest.

The control at Brest was a zoo, hundreds of riders, almost thousands, were in the control, checking in, eating, sleeping underfoot everywhere. It was a lot of fun. We headed off on the return leg, anticipating a tailwind finally, but it didn’t seem to be so, or perhaps it was but I was just too tired to feel it. We headed inland after Landernau up into the hills on a beautiful forested climb. We stopped at Sizun, a lovely old town with a cobblestone square in front of the ancient cathedral, and a wonderful bakery. Aah!

A couple of hours later, we arrived back to the control at Carhaix. When we were inside the checkpoint, we looked out to see the rain beginning again. We met fellow club mate Ole Mikkelsen, and decided to get a real supper in a fancy
German restaurant just past the control. While we were in the restaurant, it really began to pour. The rain let up a bit as we headed out of town on the last leg back to Loudeac. Darkness fell. It began to rain in earnest again. I rode for a couple of hours in the company of four Italians who had woefully inadequate lights. My dual beam lighting system lit up the road very well, even in the rain, as I lit the way for the Italian contingent, who spoke no English and I speak no Italian but we got along pretty well.

I met up with Michael again, and we headed into the hill country west of Loudeac. It was raining pretty hard now, and very dark, no streetlights or towns or even houses, just the cone of light from your headlights and the white line in the middle of the road. There was virtually no traffic, fortunately. The climbs were long, and the descents in the rain were utterly epic. Descending in a pack of dozens of riders on a road barely a lane wide, in the rain, the taillights of the other riders multiplied hundredfold in the reflections off the pavement and from the raindrops on your glasses, roostertails of water off the riders ahead. We passed dozens of riders who had inadequate lights, creeping down the descents, as we flew by them at fifty and sixty km/h, our twin headlights lighting up the road and the ghostly reflective vests of the riders ahead. It was utterly magic.

For a while. As we descended into Loudeac, and found our way to the control, it was two-thirty in the morning. Very tired, we got a couple of bratwursts from a barbeque tent outside the control and headed off to the hotel for two and a half hours sleep.

The alarm at five-thirty AM was even more unwelcome than yesterday. My wet shoes from the first day had dried out in the hotel yesterday, so I had the luxury of dry shoes this morning again! We packed up the bag drop quickly, wolfed some breakfast and headed out. The going was pretty slow this morning. I can hardly remember the terrain between Loudeac and the “secret” control at Illifaut, about 30k’s out. I remembered a couple of big hills from the first day but this morning was a blur.

On we went, through town after town, Tintiniac, Fougeres, Gorron, Lassay. The weather showered on and off all day, raincoats on and off, on and off. We were all going slower now, as the cumulative fatigue of nine hundred, then a thousand k’s began to show. Michael had aggravated a tendon in his knee on the first day and had been fighting the pain most of yesterday and all of today. Normally a much faster rider than me, the pain slowed him down to my speed; I couldn’t have gone much faster anyway. It was absolutely dumping with rain when we arrived at the control at Villaines again at about suppertime.

We had a bag drop there, so Ole and Michael and I collected some dry clothes and headed off for the eighty k’s to the next control at Mortagne, where we had another hotel room booked. It was dark as we left Villaines, and I knew we wouldn’t get much sleep tonight either.
I began to get very weary after about 40k’s, and began to nod off on the bike. I dropped back behind them. I just couldn’t stay awake. I began to fall asleep on the bike, scaring myself awake again and again. I stopped and popped a couple of caffeine pills. Nothing happened. I was barely making 20km/hr. I stopped and popped a caffeinated PowerGel, nothing happened. A little while later, I came upon a roadside table in Mameres, where townspeople under umbrellas were giving out coffee and tea and cookies to the riders. I gratefully accepted some coffee.

As I headed out, I realized that if I didn’t pick up the pace, I wouldn’t be getting any sleep tonight at all. I shifted into overdrive, picking up the cadence and finding energy from the pace. The next thirty k’s were mostly flat to gently rolling. I began to ride with my generator lights off, just a small LED lighting up the road. I was cruising at 30 to 35 km/hr, I really don’t know where the energy came from. I knew that I would pay for it tomorrow but I didn’t care, I just wanted to get to Mortagne. As I would overtake riders, singly or in small groups, I would flick on my dual-beam headlights just as I passed them, then flick them off and speed away. I found this most entertaining.

The clouds began to break up. The moon illuminated the countryside. I made the 30 k’s to Mortagne in just under an hour. A kilometer from the control, I slowed my pace to cool down before arriving indoors. I checked in at the checkpoint, then found Michael and Ole having some supper at the cafeteria. I joined them. It was three in the morning. We spent about twenty minutes hunting for our hotel, and each had a quick shower and dropped into bed for a sweet hour and fifteen minutes sleep.

Up at 4:40AM, into a string of taillights. Only one hundred and fifty kilometers to go! There were hundreds of riders on the road already. The first twenty k’s were in a forested hilly area, absolutely spectacular in the morning mist as the day began to brighten. The descent into Logny-au-Perche was epic. The road flattened out soon after, and we entered a long stretch of flatlands with really bad pavement, rough chip-sealing that pounded your ass and hands and made your legs tired. We reached the second-last control, at Dreux, and checked in. Coffee and pastries! The sun actually started to break through the clouds as we headed out on the last 80k’s to Paris. The road seemed to wander interminably, but later looking at the map, it was actually a fairly direct route. Michael’s knee was killing him at this point, we were barely averaging 20 on the flats, and the climbs were done with one leg. I decided to stay with him the rest of the way into Paris. Five k’s out of town, the skies opened for one last crack at us, but it wasn’t worth stopping for raincoats, it only lasted five minutes. The last few k’s were through the western suburbs of Paris, to the ending point at St-Quentin-en-Yvelines. We hit red light after red light! The last kilometer marched around downtown SQY, through traffic lights and unwelcome road construction. Finally, we headed around the roundabout to the Gymnase des Droits de l’Homme and the finish line. Hundreds, almost a thousand, spectators began to clap and cheer as our little group rolled the last hundred meters and entered the stadium, where we parked the bikes and got our final stamp on the checkpoint cards. We finished in 88 hours, two hours
before the cut-off at 90 hours. Unlike the euphoria of my finish in 2003, this was more like relief that it’s finally over. I found out after the event that 1500 riders had dropped out of the event, a drop-out rate of 29% of the starters, one of the highest percentages ever. Usually, fifteen to twenty percent of the starters DNF for some reason. The weather this year was considered the worst weather for PBP in fifty years.

As we came out of the control, the sun burst through the clouds and it became hot and sunny. Ah well, we got ‘er done.