



faster and safer, I reasoned, and the infamous line-ups for food at the controls will be shorter. Well, it was certainly faster...

### The first 4 hours

By lunchtime on August 19<sup>th</sup> the rain that had dampened the previous day's 'bike-check' was long gone—PBP was kicking off under sunny skies and pleasant temperatures. We left Rambouillet's historic Bergerie nationale (a fancy sheep farm with lots of space) in pre-determined waves of ~200 riders each. After a bit of confusion and a lot of cueing, Group A left at 4:00 PM and I rolled under the start banner 15 minutes later as part of Group B. The crowds were amazing. I caught a glimpse of my wife and two teenagers on the way by and focused on the task at hand: stay near the front and out of trouble. All the planning and waiting was over. It was a relief to know that the only thing left to do was ride my bike.



The first 100 kilometers were exhilarating. It had been ages since I'd ridden in a pack that big (1992 in fact), but some things you never forget; I was comfortable moving around the bunch and having a blast! Make no mistake: we were *racing*, for the time being at least.

The opening kilometers were also sketchy. The road furniture was a general nuisance, par for the course in Europe. It didn't help that after about 45 minutes we started passing slower Group A riders. This wasn't much of an issue out in the open countryside but it made navigating the narrow town streets even trickier. Within the first couple of hours on the bike I saw two crashes and had a few 'interesting' moments.

At one point I had to bunny-hop a curb in order to avoid running over a dropped water bottle; I got a bit sideways in the process and came uncomfortably close to hitting a traffic bollard. On another occasion the entire right half of the pack somehow managed to ride straight into a shallow curb. The sound of rim-slamming and cursing filled the air—and a hundred metres later the sidewalk was filled with cyclists fixing pinch flats. I escaped the scene without incident, feeling good about my decision to run wide tires at low pressure (32 mm, 50 psi).

The most bizarre incident I saw occurred on a fast descent when a rack-mounted bag suddenly parted ways with its owner's bike. Chaos ensued. The bag took on a life of its own, skittering unpredictably along the pavement in the middle of the group and forcing riders to swerve dangerously left or right. I myself went right and, having dodged a bullet, glanced left to see the hapless, bag-less rider coasting down the hill in a state of paralysis. His bag was wreaking havoc behind; he couldn't slow down for fear of being run over by other cyclists; and he couldn't pull off to the left of the pack because a car was coming *up* the hill in the other lane. I can only assume that things did not end well.



I arrived at Mortagne-au-Perche (Km 118) feeling a tad shell-shocked. Outbound to Brest this was not an official control, just a place to get water. My Garmin showed an average speed of ~33 Kph, not bad against a solid headwind and also not surprising given the adrenalin running through the pack. I took note of the fact that during the entire opener I'd taken only one pull on the front, which I purposely limited to 60 seconds. I'd also succeeded in keeping my average heart rate at a level I knew I could hold for 200+ Kms. Still, I was surprised that the pace had yet to settle down (it was *supposed* to settle down, wasn't it?) and worried that with all the big-pack shenanigans I was burning too many matches. Were my efforts to stay near the front and 'out of trouble' worth it? In hindsight I don't think so. More on that later.

Mortagne was noteworthy for the intense support crew action. No sooner had we turned off the main road than the shouting began. Upon hearing his name, one particular rider abruptly stopped right where he was, in the middle of the lane—I almost crashed into the back of him. *Couldn't you at least pull off to one side?!?* Fresh bottles were placed on his bike and he was handed his yellow vest. He was clipped in and riding off before I'd even located the water spigots!

My pitstop proceeded at a somewhat more relaxed pace. I filled my bottles and set about replenishing the food I'd eaten from my jersey pockets. I reached into my frame bag and... pulled my hand straight back out again. Everything was sticky. My zip-lock bag full of *Perpetuem* (a powdered energy drink mix) had a hole in it.

*Doh!*

Users of *Perpetuem* will know that it is one of the most hydroscopic substances known to humankind—my hands get sticky just *looking* at it. I had planned to save the energy drinks for much later in the ride when I was sick of eating solid food (I had a total of four bags of the stuff on board). So I solved the problem the easiest way I could think of at the time: I threw the bag away, rinsed off my hands and hit the road, keen to re-join a fast-moving group. I ended up throwing out the remaining three bags at the first control, one of which had also sprung a leak (presumably from me compressing my saddle bag so tightly). What a mess.

## Night sweats

Everyone's got their own internal thermometer; mine tends to run cold. For me, the hardest part about randonneuring is staying comfortable at night. Depending on one's natural ability, fitness, ambition, and start time, PBP involves at *least* 2 nights-worth of riding, and for the vast majority of entrants it's 3 or 4 nights. I had been warned that it could be very cold in Brittany, even in August. I thought I had come prepared—and I was, sort of.

Prior to PBP I'd only ever ridden through the night on three occasions: two 400 Km brevets (both starting fresh at midnight) and a 600 Km brevet in Spring 2019. The point of riding the 600 Km event without sleep was to see how my body and brain reacted to a full night on the bike after 300+ Kms of riding. I gave myself a passing grade but not much more. I never felt sleepy but struggled with sweat management and cold feet.





I hit Control #1 (Villaine-la-Juhel, Km 217) at ~11:45 PM. It was lovely and warm and there were no line ups to speak of. Brevet card stamped, I was soon staring down a full tray of food and bowl of black coffee (yes, it was a bowl). Together with a few dozen other riders I ate in silence, trying to ignore the Italian rider hunched over a garbage can in the corner. Some 800 kilometers later this control would prove challenging for me as well.

Bathroom visited and bottles re-filled, it was time to switch into night mode: winter gloves, buff, warm hat, shoe-covers, knee-warmers, official PBP yellow vest. I peeled out of the control sometime after midnight with a full belly and in a good frame of mind. I soon found myself in a large (but not too large) group that was setting a good pace. Perfect—I'll surf the wheels all the way to Brest!

### **Wardrobe malfunction**

Yeah, right.

At some point during the night I felt the need to put on my rain jacket—and sometime thereafter found myself in one of the most feared situations in all of endurance sport: the dreaded *zipper jam*.

With no rain to speak of in the forecast, I'd packed a rain jacket (brand and model withheld) for use as an occasional windbreaker and, if I got into trouble, a road-side emergency layer (I also had one of those crinkly space blankets, which thankfully never got unpacked). I hadn't planned on needing to wear the jacket at night, but it was cold and damp. Leaving Villaine-la-Juhel my Garmin read 11°C and it was soon down to 6°C.

Where exactly I was when things went pear-shaped I'm not sure—I reckon it was somewhere between the Fougères and Tineniac controls (Kms 306 and 360, respectively). What I do know is that sweat management had again become an issue. I was working hard to stay with the group on the climbs and feeling chilled when we freewheeled on the descents. Zipper up, zipper down, repeat. Suddenly the zipper wouldn't budge.

*Huh...*

Hands off the bars, I sat up and did what one does with a stuck zipper: I zipped it up a bit, tugged it back down, and tried to work the jam free. I did this a few times without success. I did not like where this was heading; we were climbing another hill and I was rapidly overheating. I started to panic—if the zipper gets any higher, *I will not be able to get this effing raincoat off!*

Upper body exploding in sweat, I reluctantly pulled out of the group and off the road. I laid my bike down, whipped off my helmet and glasses, and tried pulling the jacket over my head. No dice—the zipper was already too far up.

*Dammit.*



My zipper-tugging became increasingly frantic; frantic and tiring. I alternated tugging and resting so as to keep my heart rate down (I'll be honest: I was tugging, resting and swearing). I watched a group of about 10 riders go by. Then another.

*Dammit!*

A final desperate tug and the zipper gave way. I was free! And dripping with sweat. I stood there panting, the steam coming off me illuminated by the headlights of passing riders. I considered stripping down and changing on the spot but decided against it. My second jersey and base layer were at the bottom of my saddle bag, and I didn't fancy a shiver-fest and road-side re-pack in the dark.

Nothing to do but start riding again. Soaking wet, I froze my ass off for the next I-don't-know-how-many kilometers, stewing over the fact that I'd lost my place in a proper group because of something as stupid as a broken zipper. Venting frustration and riding hard to stay warm, I burned more calories than I could afford to lose.

### **Bonk(ers)**

Dawn came, it warmed up, I kept riding. That pretty much sums up the early part of Monday August 19<sup>th</sup>. At the control in Loudeac (Km 445) I saw John Jurczynski and Ann Benoit Jurczynski, a super-strong tandem couple who I had met on two previous 1,000 Km brevets. John and Ann ended up being the first tandem finishers for the second PBP in a row (56 hours and 19 minutes, despite having had to run their bike the last four Kms to the finish because of a puncture). If you ever get the chance to jump on their wheel I highly recommend it! I also bumped into Bjorn, a tall Swedish schoolteacher who I'd met at my pre-PBP hotel in Maurepas. It was nice to see some familiar faces. Bjorn and I chatted about our rides and sleep strategies moving forward (I complained about zippers). We rode out of the control mid-morning into what had become a beautiful day. Bjorn was strong and his stature provided an excellent draft! I was feeling pretty good.

Until I wasn't.

About 10 Kms outside Saint Nicolas-du-Pelem (Km 488) I started running out of gas. Reasoning that the next stop (and proper food) was only a bit further up the road, I decided to keep holding the wheels and tough it out. Big mistake.

For me the early signs of a bonk are excessive sweating and tingling in my hands. These symptoms came on rapidly, and from past experience I knew I had about 10 minutes to get some sugar down before hypoglycemia got the better of me. I sat up, let Bjorn and the other riders go, and quickly shot a gel. Then I inhaled a banana.



Too late! After 18+ hours of riding, my tank was suddenly on empty and pocket food wasn't helping. I struggled up a steep climb at a pitiful 5 Kph, completely sweated out (again), scolding myself for letting this happen. I crawled into Saint Nicolas-du-Pelem, changed my base layer and jersey, and took stock of the situation. Had I gone out too fast? *Obviously!* Had I not eaten regularly enough? *Apparently so.* Was I dehydrated? *Probably.* I bought food (I forget what) but struggled to eat it. I could really use some *Perpetuem*. Damn...

I arrived at the control in Carhaix-Plouguer (Km 521) at ~1:30 in the afternoon feeling nauseated and somewhat demoralized. But a hot shower and a warm bed were only 90 Kms away in Brest. More food and drink and off I went.

Lovely day though it was, the afternoon headwind was not conducive to making time. I found myself in groups of 5 to 10 riders exhibiting little or no organization; most people weren't interested in taking turns on the front and I was basically useless. It was somewhere along this part of the course that I made my first (and thankfully only) emergency pit-stop in the woods to relieve my rumbly tummy. It was also here that the lead group flew by going the other way—they'd already been to Brest and were on their way back to Rambouillet, now aided by a strong tailwind. I looked at my Garmin: 3:30 PM. Wow!

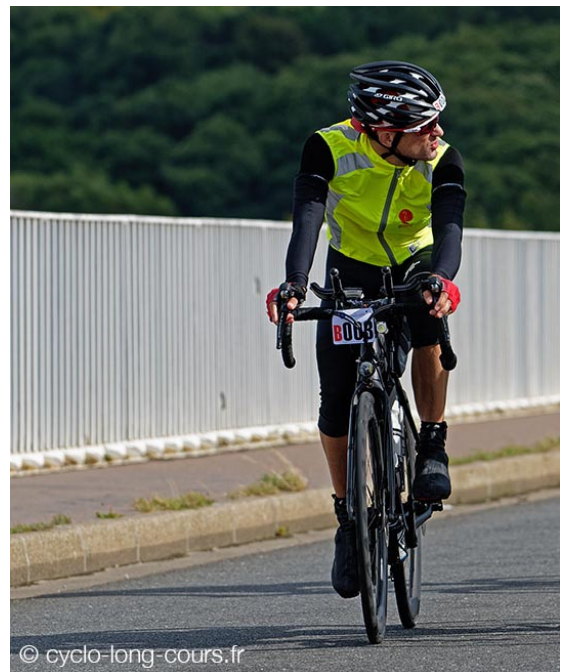


The wind was particularly strong heading up and over the highest point of the route, the Roc'h Trevezel (elevation 1,260 feet). It's not a steep climb by any means but is quite long; here I rode solo, pushing hard knowing that the half-way point of PBP was getting closer. The views were spectacular, and the descent down the other side was a lot of fun. I was impressed by the number of riders climbing up the hill towards me, mostly in ones and twos. There were so many strong cyclists here at PBP. A group reformed and before long we caught our first glimpse of the ocean. I chatted with a young Belgian rider who I recognized from the first 100 Kms. Like me, he hadn't yet slept and was looking forward to getting off his bike.

### **Brest (610 Kms)**

When I arrived at the iconic bridge on the outskirts of Brest I was surprised when nobody in my group bothered to stop. Screw that! I figured I may never be back here again and wanted to document the occasion. It was windy and cool but bathed in late afternoon sunshine the views were spectacular. I was about to do a selfie when a pair of riders came along; we took photos of each other.\* I put on my yellow vest and rode off the bridge thinking about one thing: sleep.

The volunteers at PBP are amazingly helpful—all 2,500 of them, scattered across 178 French towns. But on one



\*There are actually two bridges. The riders go across the old one (now for pedestrians only) and usually take pictures of themselves with the new bridge in the background.



occasion they proved to be a bit *too* helpful. On the final climb into Brest, I pulled over to retrieve the directions to my hotel. It was just off the course about a kilometer before the control. Turn left at the next round-about—perfect. I wasn't sure how late the hotel front desk would be open, so I had decided to pick up my room key before riding the final stretch to the control. I hit the round-about and turned left as planned.

A half-second later I heard whistling and shouting. Sigh. I knew what this meant. I stopped, look over my shoulder and saw a couple of volunteers frantically waving me back.

*“YOU ARE OFF COURSE! THE CONTROL IS THIS WAY!”*

*“I know. I'm going to my hotel.”*

They were too far away to hear me. I waved appreciatively and gave them a thumbs-up.

*“ICI, ICI! THE CONTROL IS THIS WAY! THIS WAY!”*

*“I KNOW THE CONTROL IS THAT WAY! I'M GOING THIS WAY!”*

*“ICI, ICI!”*

*Sigh...*

15 minutes later, room key in hand, I rejoined the route, smiling wearily at the helpful volunteers as I went by. (*Silly Canadian. He went the wrong way...*)

I was relieved to be heading to the control but also miffed to discover that it was at the bottom of a hill, which I would have to climb back up again to return to my hotel. Whatever. I wheeled into the control—sunshine, applause, smiling faces, it felt amazing! I got my card stamped and noted the time: 6:30 PM. I had yo-yoed myself to the half-way point of PBP (Km 610) in 26 hours and change. 24 hours had been my rough target, so considering the constant headwind I was feeling pretty good about my progress.

I was also worried about how I *felt*. I needed to refuel but was still nauseated. I bought a meal—a chicken pasta dish, a salad, several pastries for dessert. I couldn't stomach any of it.

What's the French word for plastic wrap? I had no idea. I pantomimed the volunteers into wrapping my meal up on a piece of cardboard. Resting it on top of my aero bars with one hand, I crawled back up the hill to my hotel, past a steady stream of tired riders coming down into the control.

First things first: get clean. After the best shower ever, I was still feeling lousy. I picked at my food for a bit but eventually gave up. I shoved the food in the bar fridge, plugged in my Garmin and phone, set my alarm for 12:30 AM, jacked the volume *waaaaay* up, pulled the blinds and crawled into bed.

## **Part deux**

My alarm scared the bejesus out of me (mission accomplished). My plan was to sleep for four hours in Brest; I reckon I got three. Contact lenses back in, I took a few tentative nibbles of food and start getting dressed. A few more bites, so far so good. The more I ate the better I felt and before long I'd scarfed down most of last night's uneaten meal. Good! I left the hotel at ~1:15 AM and was soon back on the course heading East.

I was half-way through PBP, a ride I'd been thinking about for the past two years. The air was calm and the stars were out; what a beautiful night for a ride! My spirits soared as I pedaled hard to warm up.

It didn't last long. A few minutes down the road my heart sank when I realized that nausea was still an issue. I settled on 120 bpm as my target heart rate—any slower and I'd start to shiver, any faster and I felt like throwing up. I resigned myself to crawling along, making sure to sit as upright as possible.

On this section of PBP the return route is different from the outbound one. This meant that there were no riders coming towards me and thus no blinding headlights. Save for the red taillights, the road was completely dark, which made the night sky all the more spectacular. Most of the riders I encountered were riding solo; everyone seemed to want their space, myself included. At some point I came across another Canadian (she was from Vancouver but living in the UK?). We chatted two-up for a bit and she mentioned that there was an outdoor crêpe stop not far up the road—a PBP tradition. *Great, see you there!*

I managed to stay reasonably warm climbing back up the Roc'h Trevezel but fretted about the descent. I was already wearing everything I had, including my raincoat, the front of which I kept closed by wearing my vest on the outside (amusingly, the zip on this garment had also started coming apart<sup>†</sup>). I'd even stopped to put on my last line of defence: three-quarter-length rain pants, which make an annoying rustling sound when pedaling but are very effective at breaking the wind. They were soon covered in dew, an indication of how damp the air was. I had to ride much of this section without glasses because of the mist. It was 4°C. Crêpe Town looked to be a happening place but I was far too cold to stop.

The descent off the Roc'h could hardly have been more miserable. Fortunately, soon thereafter I spotted a café with a bike outside. Inside was a British rider standing at the bar huddled over a café au lait; *I'll have what he's having*. Beside us stood a couple of people drinking beer. That's odd, I thought. Then it dawned on me: these guys were still out on the town! Worlds collide at PBP.

## **Chaos in Carhaix**

I arrived at the Carhaix-Plouguer control (Km 693) chilled to the bone. Including stops, it had taken me 5 hours to ride the ~85 Kms from Brest to here. I got my brevet card stamped (6:16 AM) and headed for the toilet.

*Woah!*

At that moment I realized I'd hit 'the bubble' my friend and five-time PBP finisher Mark Beaver had warned me about. The place was absolutely crawling with riders, some heading back to Paris, most still heading West to Brest.

The line for the washroom was out the door and down the hall. I end up standing there for 40 minutes. I know because I passed the time chatting with a Brest-bound British rider who was running a stopwatch. The entertainment included watching (and listening to) the 'baked potatoes'—riders wrapped up in crinkly space blankets sleeping or trying to sleep. They were lined up against the wall, head-to-toe, parallel to the line I was standing in. Impressive. We also passed the time watching the rider's expressions as they walked in and realized that, like me, they were not going to be having a bowel movement any time soon. Some laughed, some swore; most of them immediately turned around and left, presumably to make other arrangements.

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<sup>†</sup>*"The official PBP reflective vest: guaranteed to last until Brest or your money back!"*



The highlight of the event was a guy in green kit who speed-walked into the building holding his butt-cheeks together. To everyone's relief the cleaning staff immediately recognized the urgency of the situation and escorted him to the front of the (much shorter) women's lineup. Crisis averted. (The following night at Villaine-la-Juhel I witnessed a similar such incident, this time in an open courtyard; the poor rider was frantically dance-limping around in circles, presumably trying to work out the least disastrous course of action. From what I could see there wasn't one.)

*Why on Earth* had I waited in line for 40 minutes? Hindsight is 20/20 but the simple answer is that my brain was mush and it was warm. A bit too warm in fact; as I shuffled forward I started getting sleepy. Eventually it was my turn at the front and, job done, I rotated to the back of the equally long food line. After a few minutes I realized that this was plain stupid. I was sleepy and nauseated; what was the point of standing in line to buy food I'm pretty sure I won't be able to eat?

So I followed the signs for Rent-a-Cot instead. I was annoyed at myself for deciding to sleep again just one control after Brest, where I'd already spent a serious chunk of time. But it just seemed like the right thing to do.

I pay my 3 Euros, tell them to wake me up in an hour, and am escorted to my assigned cot in the gymnasium. The bad news is the blanket I'm given is not actually a blanket. It's a see-through sleeping bag liner; it does nothing. The good news is the gym is mostly empty and the surrounding cots are littered with discarded 'blankets'. I pull on two more, then a fourth. I pull up my buff and fall asleep wearing everything I'd walked in with.



I wake up 1.5 hours later. What the hell? Why didn't they come and wake me?! Maybe they tried and I don't remember. It doesn't matter... what matters is that I'm feeling better and *famished*.

While I was sleeping the lineup for food had become shorter, which was good because I was practically drooling over the sight and smell of spaghetti Bolognese. Shuffling forward I spotted Gordon Launcelott, a fellow Haligonian! It was the first time since bike-check day that I'd run into any of my Nova Scotia rando-club mates and seeing him lifted my spirits considerably. Gordon was outbound for Brest. We shared a meal together—I can't remember ever enjoying a plate of pasta more—and he kindly gave me some Maalox tablets in case my stomach started acting up again. All too soon it was time to wish each other luck and head our separate ways. 68 years of age, Gordon called it quits less than 70 Kms from Rambouillet after going off course (apparently people had started taking the signage as souvenirs). He eventually rode to the finish in Rambouillet anyway.

### **I just like riding my bike**

If memory serves, I was introduced to Bristol Guy by the Slovenian Spearfisherman. Of all the cyclists I met at PBP, I spent the most time with these two. We had our moments...

I'd met Spearfisherman midday on Tuesday, August 20<sup>th</sup>, whilst applying sunscreen outside the 'secret' control in Saint Nicolas-du-Pelem (Km 738.5) (it actually might have been Loudéac, Km 783). On and off over the next few hours we chatted about our families, about the weather, about the 24-hour time

trials he'd done, and, yes, about the merits of spear fishing (I had no idea). Chamois cream<sup>‡</sup> was also a popular topic. Warm temperatures, beautiful towns, quiet shady lanes—this stretch of the course had it all. It was one of the most pleasant parts of my whole PBP experience. I doubt this was true for my riding partner.

Spearfisherman was a strong cyclist and I initially had difficulty keeping up with him. But while I was recovering nicely from my hard bonk the previous day, he was starting to struggle—basically his ass was falling off. His saddle sores had become so bad that he couldn't hold the same position on the bike for more than 20 seconds at a time. His fidgeting became incessant; it was painful to watch. He resigned himself to buying a new pair of shorts at the earliest opportunity, a sure sign of desperation.

Bristol Guy was a 30-year old academic who was also up against the 80-hour time-limit. He was from... Bristol. My mother had grown up there and I'd spent some time in the UK myself so we had lots to talk about. With his orange retro-style jersey, Bristol Guy was easy to spot on the road and at the controls. We hit it off.

This was Bristol Guy's first PBP but he had done London-Edinburgh-London, a less famous but even longer (1,400 Kms) randonneuring event. Like PBP, LBL runs every four years. The two rides are staggered like the winter and summer Olympics, presumably for the benefit of those crazy enough to want to do both events (two years being roughly the time it takes for one's backside to completely heal). I was keen to find out how PBP and LBL compared.

I don't remember his exact words, but the gist was this: *No contest; LBL is better*. Bristol Guy lamented the fact that PBP was too intense, too much like a race. Looking back at the opening 12 hours of my ride, I couldn't disagree. *"I just like riding my bike"*, he said. Amen to that.

### One more night

As the second half of Day 2 unfolded our paths merged and diverged several times. I recall a solo stop in Quedillac (Km 843) that involved warm sun and killer-good crêpes filled with Nutella. I had good legs and a positive mindset.

Sometime around the Tinteniac control (Km 870, 6:50 PM), Bristol Guy told me his plan. He was going to try and make it all the way to Villaine-la-Juhel (Km 1,012) before having a proper break. His logic was simple: avoid riding between the hours of 3 and 6 AM when the temperature was at its lowest. I certainly liked the sound of *that*. And as far as sleep was concerned, my plan for the return leg from Brest was equally simple: I didn't have one. I was winging it. So after a quicker-than-usual stop in Fougeres (Km 923, ~10 PM) Bristol Guy and I bundled up and pushed on.

For much of this 90-kilometer stretch we rode two-up, which was conducive to chatting and allowed us both to stay warm. To be honest by that point we were pretty much talked out. *A windfarm*. Yes, yes, lots of windfarms. *Look, another windfarm!* Meh. *Did I tell you about the zipper on my rain jacket?* Yes. Twice. *Look at the moon—I've never seen it so red before!* Now *that* was worth talking about, for awhile at least.



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<sup>‡</sup>For those not in the know, a chamois is the padded section of a pair of cycling shorts. I'll let you fill in the blanks.

Gradually things got quiet. We were both thinking the same thing: *where the hell is the control?* Neither of our Garmins were behaving quite right<sup>§</sup>, and more than once over the span of 30 minutes we determined that we had *'about 10 kilometers to go'*.

On the run-in to Villaine-la-Juhel we came upon a rider who was bobbing and weaving; he was obviously falling asleep. We gave him a wide berth and provided VERY LOUD words of encouragement on the way by, hoping to jolt him awake. *'KEEP GOING! THE CONTROL IS JUST UP THE ROAD!'* (I think).

It was also along this final stretch that I realized that I couldn't change gears. My rear shift cable had broken (or jammed) and my bike was stuck in its biggest gear.

*Interesting...*

Under normal circumstances, I would have done the old rock-in-the-gears trick: lodge a small rock or stick in the derailleur to lock it in an intermediate gear. But it was 6°C and I was dog-tired—this wasn't normal. As I soft-pedaled along, brain-farting over what to do next, I felt a shiver-fit coming on. Stopping to sort out my gears was not an option.

So on we went, me on a two-speed bike with a 50x11 gear for the steepest downhills and 34x11 for everything else. My front derailleur grinded noisily (due to the extreme cross-chaining) and my legs objected to the low cadence... but at least I was generating heat. I don't remember how far I rode like that; it seemed to take forever. I spent half the time riding out of the saddle. Just get to the control and take it from there.

### **Villaine-la-Juhel (Km 1,012): black hole control**

3:17 AM. Brevet card stamped, my first stop was the mechanic's tent—every control's got one. I'll get my bike fixed while I'm resting and eating. No problem!

But there was a problem. The man fiddled with my rear shifter and concluded that he can't fix it. In broken English he explained that he's not *really* a mechanic, he's just volunteering; sorting out the internal cable routing on my rig was beyond his pay grade.

The good news is there's a professional mechanic on site. *Yay!* The bad news is he is sleeping. *Boooo.* I'm told to come back in 2 hours. *Really?*

In hindsight perhaps I should have insisted that the mechanic be woken up. I'm not actually sure what, if anything, I was entitled to in that situation. What I do know is that I was shivering, exhausted, and sick of ham and cheese baguettes. So I decided to sleep too.

Everything at this control was quite spread out but the volunteers were beyond helpful. At this stage of PBP they are used to dealing with helpless zombies. Pointed in the right direction, I crossed the street and made my way to the sleeping area. After a short cue, I paid the fee and told the volunteer my wake-



Crime scene? Nope. Sleeping cyclists at Paris-Brest-Paris.

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<sup>§</sup>By this point, my Garmin was reading roughly 20 Km too long relative to my cue sheet, but inconsistently so. By Rambouillet it said I'd ridden 1,240 Kms.



up time. Unlike the large gym in Carhaix, here I was escorted back outside and across a courtyard (was it a schoolyard?) to a small classroom with floor mattresses instead of cots. Whatever. At least I've got a proper blanket this time.

I laid down, bundled up, and became aware of two things. The first is I had a sore throat. *Not good.* Second, the room was full of snoring cyclists. It was basically a snoring competition with points being awarded for volume and creativity. And while I was keen to participate, I'd stupidly left my ear plugs in my bike's frame bag. *Dammit!* I thought about going back out into the cold and dark to retrieve them but convinced myself that they would be of little use anyway. I passed the time fretting about my bike and my ride. Things were starting to go pear-shaped.

## Round 2

Two hours later I hadn't slept a wink. Not even close.

*"The mechanic's not here".*

*"But... but you said come back in two hours!"*

Shoulder shrug.

Sigh. *"When will he be back?"*

*"Je ne sais pas... maybe 2 hours?"*

I'm paralyzed by indecision. Eventually I concluded that there was nothing to do but try and sleep (again). Back at Sleep Country I explained the situation to the volunteers and they happily offered me my original mattress, free of charge.

*"Wake me up in 2 hours"*

*"Oui, oui. Do you know where to go?"*

*"Yes, yes I remember the room. Merci beaucoup."*

I walked across the courtyard, found the room and went inside.

It wasn't the same room. This room is full of stinky, snoring cyclists, just like my room. But it was a different room. *Huh.* I briefly considered lying down anyway (pick a mattress, any mattress) but decided against it. I still had enough brainpower to realize the danger of 'going rogue'—the volunteers wouldn't have known where to find me when it was time to wake me up.

I stumbled back to Sleep Central. *Bonjour, me again.* I'm usually quick to find humour in such situations and it would have been hilarious were it not for the fact that I was on the verge of tears. One of the senior volunteers caught my eye, sensed my desperation, and took me by the hand. She looked at her spreadsheet, found out which mattress I had had the first time, and took me back there herself. As luck would have it most of the snorers in *my* room had left. I fell asleep doing mental math:

*How much more time I can afford to waste in this hellhole of a control and still make the 80-hour time cut in Rambouillet?*

This was getting ridiculous.

### **Day 3**

*“Time to wake up... it’s time to wake up. Your friend fixed your bike.”*

*“Ehhh... Huh? Friend? What do you mean?”*

At the mechanic’s tent I found my bike parked off to one side. ‘All fixed’ said pro-mechanic-dude. ‘Wow!!!’ I said, with a level of enthusiasm bordering on absurd. He’d replaced my shifter cable, not built a time machine. I resisted the urge to give him a hug. Cool as a cucumber I paid my 20 Euros, said ‘merci’ 17 times, and wheeled my bike away.

What exactly Bristol Guy had to do with all this wasn’t entirely clear. Obviously he hadn’t fixed my shifter. But what he did do was notice that my broken bike was still on the rack next to his when he was preparing to leave the control. He’d been kind enough to wheel it back over to the mechanic’s tent and get him working on it. He then went to Sleep Central to make sure that the volunteers would tell me where to find my bike when I woke up.

Or something like that. Bristol Guy later explained to me precisely what had happened; the details of that conversation are foggy. We may have even left the control in Villaine-la-Juhel together, I’m not sure. I just know that I was over the moon knowing that I could still get to Rambouillet within the 80-hour time limit. With any luck I’d finish before sundown. All told, I’d spent almost 7 hours at the control in Villaine-la-Juhel, but it could have been worse. Later that morning, our paths having crossed yet again, Bristol Guy and I stopped with another rider at a lovely bakery to refuel and shed some layers—coffee and pastries on me.

### **The final push**

There were two controls and less than 200 kilometers to go. I spent a good chunk of the ride before and after Mortagne-au-Perche (Km 1,097) riding solo. The past 12 hours had been a rollercoaster and I enjoyed the quiet time for reflection. Physically I was holding up pretty well, and despite having slept for less than 7 hours since the start, I didn’t feel the least bit sleepy when I was on the bike. Tired yes, sleepy no.

Others clearly felt differently. From Mortagne onward, more and more riders could be seen napping along the route: in grassy fields, on park benches, in bus stops, you name it. Some even slept right on the shoulder of the road or in the ditch. Occasionally I rode by someone whose haphazard position and discarded bike made them indistinguishable from someone who had crashed and been knocked unconscious. It was a big unnerving.

Riders with ‘contact point issues’ were also increasingly apparent. I passed the time speculating on what those issues were based on what I saw. Riders sitting off to one side, or perched very far back or forward, or standing up on the pedals for minutes at a time were, like Spearfisherman, clearly suffering from saddle sores. Deep into PBP, anything goes in the quest for relief. Other riders were holding their handlebars with the very tips of their fingers; wrist problem, neck problem, or both?

For some the only option was to get completely vertical. At one point I came upon a rider who from a distance looked like he was riding hands-free. Closer inspection revealed that he was in fact sitting bolt upright and steering his bike by holding on to the end of a foot-long piece of wood, which he had zip-tied to his handlebars! I can only assume that this poor soul had a bad case of ‘Shermer’s neck’—when bent over in a typical cycling position, his neck muscles were no longer able to hold his head up.\*\* Man, that guy *really* wants it. On the way by I (very) gently patted him on the shoulder and gave him a thumbs-up. *Bon courage*. What would I have done in that situation? Would I have zip-tied a stick to my bars in order to finish PBP?



On the run in to Dreux, the final control (Km 1,174), a group of a dozen or so riders formed. Belgium, France, Sweden, Denmark, and Germany were all represented. It was good to have company against the late afternoon breeze. The terrain was flat; the wide-open spaces were exceedingly beautiful.

I got my brevet card stamped at 4:56 PM. Time for one last pastry before finishing the job. And who did I see in the cafeteria? Bristol Guy. We left the control in hot sunshine. One last hill to climb then a flat 45 Km run to the finish. We rolled along two-up, time in hand, savoring the moment.

## Rambouillet

Sunday to Wednesday. 74 hours and 55 minutes. 47 hours and 42 minutes in the saddle. 26.1 Kph average speed. 20,000 calories burned. It’s just after 7 PM and the shadows are getting longer. At the finish banner I hear someone call my name. It’s Adam Pearce, a club-mate from Nova Scotia, who I had bumped into on two previous occasions on the return journey from Brest. Adam has done a fine ride. After a brief chat, I head off to get my final brevet card stamp and something to eat. And a drink.

Standing in the beer line, I chat with a Frenchman. ‘*Is this your first PBP?*’ I ask. ‘*No, it’s my fourth*’, he says, ‘*...but it’s the first one I’ve finished*’. The look on his face and emotion in his voice tell me everything I need to know.



My wife and kids pick me up in front of Hotel Mercure. They’ve spent the past three days exploring Paris. We load my bike into the back of the car and I slide into the front passenger seat, tired but content. On the drive out of Rambouillet I spot the Slovenian Spearfisherman. He’s walking down the street with

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\*\*Named after Michael Shermer, science writer, editor-in-chief of *Skeptical Magazine*, and co-founder of the Race Across America (RAAM). A few years back I emailed Shermer on a work-related matter. I told him that I was a cyclist and had heard about (but fortunately never experienced) ‘Shermer’s neck’. His response was “*everything I’ve done in my life and I’ll only be remembered for having a bum neck in RAAM 1983!*”



his family. They too are going on holiday. I roll down the window and wave; I think he sees me. So long my friend, see you next time.

### Next time...

Paris-Brest-Paris has a way of getting under one's skin. It certainly got under mine—two months later I still think about it almost every day. In an effort to make this narrative as accurate as possible I've spent time cross-referencing my Garmin ride file against the (unofficial) PBP results and the time stamps on my brevet card. But it's more than that. It's more than just where I was, when, and for how long. On a deeper level I'm still trying to figure out what it *means*. At any rate, having experienced PBP myself I now understand why so many people keep going back. There's always a reason, usually more than one.

Next time I'm going to make the time cut. Next time I'll crack 70 hours. Next time I'm shooting for 50.

Next time I'll ride more conservatively. Next time I'll do one long sleep instead of two short ones. Next time I plan to catnap my way to Brest and back. Next time I'll bring aero bars. Next time I'll be leaving the aerobars at home.

Next time I'll bring more clothes. Next time I'll waste less time off the bike; I'll drink less coffee; I'll eat more fruit and go easy on the pain au chocolat (good luck with that). Next time I'll take fewer pictures.

Next time I'll take more pictures. Next time I'll stop and smell the roses. I'm riding for my wife; I'm riding for my Dad; I'm going to finish for my brother.

Next time will be 2023. Will I be there? I wouldn't rule it out. There's just something about randonneuring. There's something magical about being around so many people who like riding their bikes. And I never did eat a Paris-Brest pastry. Surely that's reason enough to go back.

 **John Archibald** | No. B003  
 Paris-Brest-Paris No. B003  
 Finish Time: **74:55:02** - UNOFFICIAL  
 RANDONNEURS NOVA-SCOTIA

Finish Time  
**74:55:02**  
 16.22 km/hr

Point	Time	Time of Day	Pace
RAMBOUILLET	00:00:00	16:15:59	---
VILLAINES-LA-JUHEL	07:27:53	23:43:51	29.07 km/hr
FOUGERES	10:31:56	02:47:54	29.01 km/hr
TINTENIAC	13:05:52	05:21:50	21.05 km/hr
LOUDEAC	16:53:38	09:09:36	22.39 km/hr
CARHAIX-PLOUGUER	21:17:21	13:33:19	17.29 km/hr
BREST	26:12:34	18:28:32	18.09 km/hr
CARHAIX-PLOUGUER	37:56:36	06:12:34	7.12 km/hr
LOUDEAC	45:59:02	14:15:01	10.70 km/hr
TINTENIAC	50:24:26	18:40:24	19.56 km/hr
FOUGERES	53:51:13	22:07:12	15.67 km/hr
VILLAINES-LA-JUHEL	58:54:29	03:10:27	17.61 km/hr
MORTAGNE-AU-PERCHE	68:39:40	12:55:39	8.66 km/hr
DREUX	72:36:22	16:52:20	19.65 km/hr
RAMBOUILLET	<b>74:55:02</b>	19:11:01	19.04 km/hr

Avg. Pace **16.22**

