

## Paris-Brest-Paris 2007

It was brutal, at least half the time it was raining. The rest was cloudy, misty mornings but we had about four hours of sunshine. On the final morning, the run in to St Quentin was highlighted by scattered showers. My original plan was to cycle nonstop to Brest, sleep for a few hours, cycle back to Fougères for another sleep and then finally home to Paris. This plan did not last beyond Loudeac.

Monday night after dinner, we started to queue to start but so had everybody else and we got a start time of 1030. We were Kenneth Fant, Olle Jansson (I had ridden a lot with them including Raid Pyreneen at the end of June), Johan Delbeck, and Torbjörn Wikland. As we queued on the side of the track nearest to the gymnasium, it began to spit rain and I put on and off my Paclite rain jacket several times before we exited the stadium to begin the real countdown to start on the road outside. Here I finally decided to leave the jacket on. Even though it was about 15 C, I put on my heavier semi-waterproof pair of gloves. And then we started, slowly moving through the suburbs- under motorcycle escort apparently- although we were so far back in the group that we never saw them.

Then we left greater Paris and I was determined to ride steadily and not to go mad and waste energy in the first 100 km. Somehow I was elected to ride at the front and had Torbjörn directly behind me. But in the movements past slower cyclists, I managed to lose contact with members of our group, as they got blocked in passing. Soon there was only Torbjörn despite my attempts to slow down a little and wait in for the others. And then suddenly he too was gone and I decided to keep going.

### Monday-Tuesday

The road out to Mortagne la Perche was memorable, as most of my attention was directed to staying out of trouble with other cyclists. The rain got heavier and this seemed to slow down many people. There was no obviously strong wind just rain. When I stopped in Mortagne la Perche, it was only to eat a barbecued sausage in a baguette and drink an orangina under a canopy. It was now very wet and I could feel the temptation to get out of the rain and into warmth. I had been eating biscuits and fruit until this point but felt it was too dangerous to go into the big bright (and probably warm) hall where a lot of people seemed to be heading. After stuffing some more fruit and biscuits into my jacket pocket, I headed on. Now the roads were more noticeably up and down and the rain was heavy enough to defeat my peaked helmet and coat my glasses with a fine coat of water droplets. Going downhill was difficult because many people braked rather heavily on the slightest bend or when they began to pick up too much speed. I found the best place to be was hugging the white line in the centre of the road. Here I could focus on following the line without distraction. The diodes of my Solidlight and headlamp gave me more than enough light to cover the whole width of the road. The scary and exhilarating thing was that my vision of the road was rather awful despite wiping my glasses continuously. I was mostly alone for the next four hours being passed by only one small group.

Arriving at the first stamping control in Villaines-la-Juhel, I decided to eat a hot meal of pasta and some bread and cheese with orange juice. On my way to the table with the

food, I bumped into Rose in her Irish jersey and we exchange comments on how horrible the night had been. I basically wolfed down the food and did not take more than 50 minutes for the whole stop from getting off the bike to leaving the control. Starting again, I remember that the rain was not so heavy any more but when or where it stopped, I cannot remember. After here I had a slow patch of about two hours where everybody went by despite my best efforts to keep up with them. Fougères was a fast stop, a stamp and a couple of baguettes with orangina and then on again. Here I finished off the last of the fruit that I had carried with me from the start. My legs had picked back up again and the road to Tinteniac went quickly. After I got my stamp, I had a couple of baguettes with orangina. I also bought some cake and energy bars on the way out.

From here, it was cycling under steady rain to Loudeac. For the first and only time in the whole trip, I began to feel drowsy and I had two or three quick stops to waken up. I tried counting primes, recalling the highlights of the trip so far, looking for interesting points in the dim distance but nothing helped. Fortunately, I managed to link up with a French man who had passed me earlier but had got dropped by his two companions. We talked a little (yes, tired; very wet, yes; will you sleep at Loudeac, no for me, yes for him). When we got to Loudeac, I was physically fine but mentally tired. We found a perfect place to leave the bikes, close to the restaurant and stamping point (it was cordoned off on the return from Brest). We exchanged thanks and he went off straightaway to sleep, he was going to get stamped later on his way out. I went for a baguette and a slice of cake and sat opposite Ken. Here comes my vote of thanks to Ken, the quiet Canadian or very quiet American who sat opposite me as I ate at Loudeac who made me remember that I had loads of time. Ken said that he was going to have a full night's sleep. He asked me if I really need to rush on into the very wet night? I took five hours sleep after stripping off my wet clothes. I found the sleeping arrangements very good. A slight delay as the personnel made sure that they had got the time right as to when to wake you. Here were the first and only examples of discourtesy that I saw during the whole PBP. Two cyclists skipped the queue for beds- I silently wished heaps of punctures on them. We were all suffering and they did not appear to be as exhausted as the French cyclist who sat and waited for his turn for a bed.

### Wednesday

I was very refreshed when I set out again for Brest on Wednesday morning (it took me more than 30 minutes to get from bed to the bike as I took a quick coffee and banana before starting). It had stopped raining and was just misty by the time I got to Carhaix. On this leg I tagged along with an Australian from Victoria who was riding a Polish frame that he had put together with other and was riding unsupported for the fifth time. We kept steady time and the road flew by without anything of note except for a stop at the outward secret control. At Carhaix, I had pasta and bread and orange juice. On then to Brest with the climb to Roc and then the descent and final climb to the control in Brest. Passing over the bridge, it was certainly impressive to have the suspension bridge to the right but the view on the left out into the bay with its islands was much more pleasing. I have a memory of sunshine here but now details are blurred- the only thing that is certain is that it was not raining on the road in or out of Brest. Mineral water, soup and bread and then I was ready to go. But I saw Kenneth and Johan in the soup queue and talked briefly

with them before heading back towards Paris. They looked fine and did not seem to be tired, I guessed that they had taken it easy out to Brest in order to have good legs for the return.

It felt wonderful to be on the way home. Heading out of Brest on Wednesday afternoon, an Australian on an orange-red Thorn linked up (now I am not sure if it was really him who rode that Thorn) with me. We pedaled side by side up the Roc and he told me that he was on his fifth PBP (so unintentionally but my claim to 15 seconds worth of fame was that I had cycled with the two Australians who would top the list of Australians with most completed PBP's). We agreed that some of the national jerseys were a little underwhelming. We talked a little about the qualifying brevets and how boring in and out routes seemed to dominate. On the descent from the Roc, we saw riders still on the way out to Brest and they were cutting it fine in terms of making the cutoff. I had already decided that I was going to try to continue beyond Loudeac this day, We reached Carhaix, he decided to stamp and go but I decided to eat a hot meal again (this was more insurance rather than hunger) chips, pork and some bread. Then off again. At this point I had no idea how quickly or slowly I was moving apart from whether I was overtaking people or they were overtaking me as my GPS had not worked at all well under the whole trip. It gave a few beeps when I switched it on but then switched itself off. Whether it was the dampness or the bumpy roads is unclear. I found it relaxing not having to worry about speed. I knew the distances between the controls and could reasonably estimate how long it would take given a hypothetical speed of 20 km/h which I assumed I was doing.

From here until several stops later at Villaines-la-Juhel, things become a little jumbled (next time write a few notes at each stop rather than trusting to memory) about whom I met and where. After Carhaix, I cycled a couple of hours with a meteorologist working on long term weather forecasts who frankly admitted that while he was good at modeling medium to long term weather, the day to day forecasting was not really his thing. He was optimistic that the worst of the weather was over. But it began to rain again and as we cycled towards Loudeac in the wet, we were glad of an excuse to stop for coffee at a family under a tent- they were offering cakes, chocolate bars as well and they would not take any payment. The generosity of the people along the route made me feel really small, as they supported us riders not only with their snacks but also with their time. Even outside the villages, there were couples under umbrellas outside their house and at almost every side road on the way back there was a car and people encouraging us onwards. I did feel it was a little cruel when on probably the last climb into Paris, there was a group with a handbell ringer (why don't you stand under the shower and then cycle up this hill? This was one unworthy thought that went through my mind) on the top saying "Bon courage" and "Allez" to the small groups and individuals.

Anyhow, I was on the way into Loudeac and I weighed up whether it was better to press on to the relative quiet of Tinteniac or sleep in Loudeac. The rain got heavier and as I pulled into Loudeac, I could see no line outside the sleeping hall and that clinched it for me. I took my Carradice bag and booked myself in for five hours sleep. Falling asleep to the sound of both rain on the roof and a steady drip of rain through a leak in the roof, I was glad to be inside. I woke on my own after four hours, put on dry clothes and threw

my stinking socks into a rubbish bin and went for coffee and cake before cycling off in the misty dark. On the way out of the sleeping hall, I bumped into a freshly washed and beaming BeGe from Göteborg with some of his Hisingen gang. I had met him at earlier controls and good humor and happiness just leaked out of him.

#### Thursday

Cycling in the dark before dawn with no rain was pleasant, hills were only detectable by the extra effort needed. I was a bit disappointed to be waved into the secret control, as my legs were going so nicely. And they did not really begin to spin again until Byron caught up me with about 25km before Tinteniac. His dad was cycling on a two speed original model where one pedaled forward on the flat and backwards going uphill. I could tell him that I had briefly talked to his dad about how damp it was at Villaines-la-Juhel on the way to Brest and seen the bike again as I left Brest. We talked the kilometres way and arrived in a very quiet Tinteniac, I had two baguettes and a cup of chocolate in the tent before going indoors to the restaurant to find Byron who was eating something hot. He decided to sleep a bit so I headed off again with Bob, back again after 16 years. In the quieter parts of the few hours cycling together, he spoke of having taking it steady to Brest and back. We worked well together for about a couple of hours together with Marco. However Bob's idea of steady riding was a little more explosive than mine. I learned that he had raced motor bikes when younger. He still had a lot of competitive spirit left and I made the mistake of trying to match his speed as he chased after and beyond groups that had the audacity to go past him. Eventually I blew up and crept along in alone into Fougères. Here I loaded up with chips, ham and a rice desert together with bread and cheese. Finishing off with a good cup of coffee, I felt better and cycled off alone. This stretch I cycled pretty much on autopilot, I remember overtaking and being overtaken several times by a trio of Spaniards until eventually I tucked in behind them and arrived in Villaines-la-Juhel. Here I had a couple of pain aux raisins and a cup of chocolate. I saw Bob and Marco and laughed a little about how I had blown up. There were about to go so I quickly finished and left with them after they reassured me they were going to take it easy as they intended to go straight through to Paris. All went easy for a while and then the first cyclist went past and peace was destroyed. Marco told me just to hang on the back and so I did until we caught and drew the offender into line behind us. The pace was bearable as we passed other cyclists and then a second cyclist went by and he of course was chased down and hauled into line. At this point, I recognized that I was not going to stay with them into Paris, so I said good luck and slowed down to my own rhythm. It had been great fun and it certainly shortened the time into Mortagne. Shortly after been dropped I met up with Dai from Wales and he made me laugh a lot (what about has vanished completely from my memory) before we arrived in Mortagne. On the final hills just before Mortagne, there was a brief glimpse of the sun though the clouds and I wondered if there would be sunshine next day, the final day of the PBP.

After stamping, I went to book a bed but was told that there were lots of beds and it was easier if I came back when I was ready to sleep. I also went to take a shower but the water was cold and I decided to wait until Paris. Going back into the tropically warm hall, I saw Åsa and Henrik who had started in the 84 hours group and who were going to sleep

before the final stretch into Paris. They left to sleep while I ate turkey with a mushroom sauce and mashed potatoes followed by cake and cheese and washed down with a beer. This was the best meal of the whole trip. While the food was always hot and plentiful at other controls, this tasted delicious. I sat around a little and talked with two English guys and an Australian about what was better: to finish in the dark or during the day when one could milk all the cheers at the finish. I had made my mind up for the latter. So I said good luck to the English guys as I headed off for five hours sleep. I woke spontaneously earlier than expected (only four hours I saw as I switched off the alarm on my mobile phone) and did not feel tired, so got up and went for a blood sausage baguette with my final orangina of the PBP.

### Friday

Turning round to go I met Alan, from the campsite where Peter Thidholm was staying. Alan had cycled down to Paris on his first trip outside England. He had a dry sense of humor and kept me happy and awake for most of the leg into Dreux. But I stopped to take off my jacket and then I lost him. On into Dreux where after stamping, I drank coffee with a pain aux raisin. Everybody here seemed a little sleepy, so I left alone and felt awful in my legs as I headed towards Paris. I had a touch of runny bowels after leaving Dreux and had to make an emergency stop. But thankfully it was the only time. I noticed that others were not going too fast either and their suffering helped to keep me going at slightly more than snail's pace. After about an hour, I pulled into a bar to have a coffee and croissant and the owner was good enough to clip away the ties holding my headlamp fast on my helmet. The loss of 150 grams from the top of my head was fabulous and it felt nice to have such a light head. I said "au revoir" and pulled out. I was now on a plateau and here there was a slight headwind. I swapped places with a French pair for about an hour and then teamed up with a Russian for the last set of hills before St Quentin. After these ups and downs which were noticeable to my legs coming so late in the ride, it was a bit of a disappointment to start meeting traffic lights. It was start and stop for about the last eight kilometres. All the red lights resulted in a clumping of cyclists some of whom I recognized from this stage and some such as the female French co-pilot of the back-to-back tandem recumbent from earlier stages. We waved to each other and then came into the last straight before the roundabout at the gymnasium. I was happy to have arrived.

Into the gymnasium and after stupidly queuing at the photo collection counter, one of the earlier arrivals was kind enough to point me in the right direction towards the extremely large sign saying control. I handed over my control card and got in return a free drink coupon in return. I looked around for other arrivals. I met Johan Nyander who had come about half an hour before me. I met some of the Irish, Barney, Rose who hugged me as she came into the gymnasium and then I went back to the hotel to shower and change clothes. All my extremely smelly clothes were packed into double plastic bags. Afterwards, I returned to the gym and met the Irish Audax who had all arrived including Paul who had been the first to offer positive words of support after my DNF in 1999. I met Peter Hampus who was very happy and pleased and then found my Swedish friends and room-mates that were in the long queue to hand their cards into the final control. Olle, Kenneth and Johan had happy smiles and a bent neck too in the case of Kenneth. I

said my goodbyes to the Irish Audax gang and wished them well over the next four years. After the free drink, we cycled back to the hotel for hot showers, drinks, dinner and deep sleep.

I rode out in a Swedish jersey and home in an Irish jersey over a long-sleeved vest. I used the two spare sets of clothes that I had packed. I threw away one pair of socks and bought another pair. I ate all the reserve food that I packed at the start before the midpoint. I had no punctures which I attribute to the new tyres that went on the wheels the week before PBP. My lights worked perfectly and I never felt unsafe in the dark even on the steepest downhill. I should have packed a multitool to be able to cut the stays holding my headlamp in place on my helmet. Physiologically, my body came out rather well. Two matching sores on my buttocks where the wet seams of two month old shorts had rubbed away the skin was the worse immediate problem. Now, two weeks after the event, I have little feeling in my right thumb and left index finger while both big toes also are less than fully functional.

Reflecting on the whole ride, I feel that I had good luck on my side all the way through. You help to make your own luck in terms of preparations. But others better prepared had worse luck than me making a single wrong decision about sleeping or stopping to eat or cycling in the wrong place at the wrong time and so did not finish.