

## **NEW FOREST 1000KM**

What does riding a 1000km mean? Well, night riding, route sheet reading (while riding), sleepless nights – or rather riding through the night thereby missing out on your nights sleep and an excess of chamois cream!! These are just a few things but certainly the ones that stood out for me.

Paul O Donoghue, in his wisdom decided that it would be a good idea for me to ride the New Forest 1000km, as it would give me the experience I needed to ride Paris – Brest – Paris (PBP – 1200km) next year. I agreed with him as I want to enjoy the PBP and going into a ride of that length is always (well...most of the time) better with a bit of knowledge as to what lies ahead.

The ride started on Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> at 21.00 (this is the same format as PBP) The day is spent checking in, getting the bike prepared, eating and if possible sleeping. Come 21.00 the group of about 58 riders set off. I was fortunate enough to have Kevin O'Sullivan from Cork and John Connaghan ex Donegal and now living in Edinburgh, with me to guide and advise me. And thank goodness for that!! Kevin patiently guided me through the night, not only by feeding me tip bits of advise and doing an amazing job of route navigation but also with his powerful Dynamo lights! There are two things necessary for this type of night riding – Powerful lights (which I discovered I did not have) and the ability to read a route sheet while riding, that is bouncing around and vibrating faster than a wind up toy on high speed! Definitely a mastered art!!

It is a bit surreal riding in the pitch dark of night. You do not know when you are approaching hills or how long or steep they are. You are riding along and as you approach the hill you can obviously see the road slope upwards but have no idea how far it is going to go on for. A few of the riders were commenting on the amount of hill work we were having to do but I think I was too nervous to notice too much in the beginning, or maybe it was because I was settling down after all my nerves of the day that I was beginning to enjoy the ride?

In these rides there are certain check points where you have to clock in as proof of completing the route. Every now and again there is a secret check point so no short cuts are taken going from point to point. Most of our check points were service stations where you have to go in, buy something and get a receipt for it. This receipt will reflect the date and time of purchase, and believe me, you will always need to buy something by the time you reach a check point – be it drink or food or both. Our first secret check point was approximately 50/60km into the ride. This was one man standing beside a container which was laden with a huge array of food, hot tea and coffee – a dream come true in the dead of the night!! We had a very quick stop here (few mins) and then back on our bikes. Some people take their time sit down have a cup of tea, a chat and some food – whatever takes your fancy is fine, so long as you complete the entire event by 23.00 on Sunday night.

Our first advertised check point was a service station which we reached at 02.15 and 112km into the ride. Just before arriving I had been having the first of my 'sleep moments' on the bike, which was rather scary. 'Sleep moments' as I called them were when you would be riding along and before you knew it you had closed your eyes only to be jolted back by wobbling on your bike. This is where it gets dangerous as not only are you at risk of falling off your bike but you could also ride into another cyclist and knock them off their bikes as well. There are two things one can do when these moments occur. You can get off your bike and have a quick cat nap on the side of the road - Something which was not appealing to me (there were a few times during the ride where we would be riding along and see a bike propped up against a fence and if you looked hard enough you would see a cyclist sleeping somewhere close by). Or you could start talking to whoever would listen and hopefully they would talk back to you and help keep you awake. Unfortunately that between 02.00 and about 04.30 people (including myself) tended to be very subdued. I would presume it is because one would normally be tucked up in bed and in slumber land during these hours. I found that talking – even if it was just general chit chat, managed to hold off the sleep moments....but have to say, even I felt it was an effort to make conversation during these hours!

When dawn broke, everyone woke up with it and the banter and chit chat started. It is a stunning experience to be riding over hilly terrain as dawn breaks and the most awesome views start to come into sight as the sky lightens. Talk about feeling alive! The fresh morning air breathing new life into our weary minds and the knowledge that in about 20km we would reach a check point where we could have coffee and breakfast.

With about 5km to go to the first check point Kevin's derailleur broke as he was changing gears to climb another really short sharp hill. He managed to take the derailleur off and shorten the chain so that he was now effectively riding a fixer – of sorts. He limped into the check point and from there went onto the next town he could find on the map to get to a bike shop and get repairs done. This brought home to me the fact that it is best to have some sort of knowledge of the mechanics of ones bike – or a really good mechanic friend who would be happy to help out! I was impressed though that most people had devised a plan for Kevin by the time he arrived at the check point so the general support was always there. John and I continued our ride as Kevin went off in search of the 'holy bike shop'.

The rest of the morning was great with the temperature rising and at time it was even too hot but I – with my Africa upbringing – was not complaining one bit! Just after our first afternoon stop I found myself having serious problems keeping my eyes open. We had just left a check point which we had probably spent a little too much time sitting in the shade eating and drinking as my body (and mind) had started to shut down. It was a dreadful feeling trying to fight off sleep, keep my head up and focus the eyes on the road instead of them literally rolling in my head. I got a huge fright when I nodded off for a split second and I woke by wobbling of road and into the bush. I think John was feeling the same as he was very quiet and all I could think of was if he was sleeping on his bike and I was sleeping on mine – then who the heck was watching the road!! Luckily a group of riders caught up with us and we all started talking which seemed to revive our minds and our cycling and the sleep moment passed us by. The day flew by taken up with route sheet reading, cycling and chatting. It is amazing how focusing on checking where you are, how far to go until the next turn and getting to the next check point can eat the time away. Also getting to know your fellow riders, listening to their stories and learning from their experiences was a very pleasant way to pass the time. Check points were a rush of taking the shoes off and walking around in socked feet (more on that later), buying and eating enough food and topping up on the drinks. No sooner was the last bite of food put in the mouth and it was on with the shoes and back on the bike. Some riders took their time at the various check points – going so far as to go into take-a-ways or 'Little Chef's' and sitting down and having a full meal but that was not for me so I stuck to the 'shovel and dash' method.

The shoes come off because it is very common to get dead feet when on the bike for so long. If you take the shoes off it cools them down and helps the blood circulation and therefore minimises the onset of 'hot feet syndrome' where you end up being in so much agony that it could stop you in your tracks!

At the final check point all the guys I was riding with decided to do the sit down and eat thing but as my desire to finish the first leg and get back to base was stronger than ever I decided to leave them eating at the check point and head out on the last 70kms on my own. Very brave! As up to now I had followed everyone and not really had to do too much route sheet reading. Also to venture out on the last 70kms of a 457km loop after riding for 20 odd hours is a bit of a head wrecker. But to sit around waiting for my fellow riders, watching them wolf down their food while I was feeling positively ill, knowing I was so close to base and therefore a shower, food and bed was a even greater head wrecker!! So I opted for the 'easy' path and headed off.

I had to really focus hard on this leg as day light hours were getting short and I did not want to have to go into a second night. Also my lights would not have been strong enough riding through the forest and I would have been reduced to a blind walk/ride until someone caught up with me. It is so easy when one is so tired to lose focus of pace and without even realising it you can reduce to a crawl. I will never forget when I was doing a run in the desert – I was dehydrated, sore, the sun was baking me and my mind was mush. I was plodding along thinking I was doing ok and amusing my self with the mirage of a

lake that I kept seeing when a chap ran past me. I looked at him and thought 'shame that poor guy he looks a wreck and is barely moving forward' Then it dawned on me that if he looked like that and he was passing me then I must be going in reverse!!! That clicked my brain into action and I concentrated on picking up the pace and ended up running fairly well for the rest of that days race. I kept this past experience in the fore front of my mind least I fall into the same trap on my ride. Although I had the odd slow moment I was pretty pleased with my progress and finished back at base a 21.10 just as dusk was setting in. Once back at base it was a blissful shower and sit down to eat..... My first real meal since Thursday lunchtime!!

One major problem I had at the start of this ride was my nerves. I have always got a bit nervous before races and as a result not been able to eat but my races/rides have never been this long before so was not too much of a problem. On the Thursday of the ride I had a hearty breakfast and then it was rush around preparing for the off that night. Finally at about 3pm we managed to have a meal. But for me this was too late – not in the day for eating as such but by now my nerves had started to set in and all I could force down was a seafood chowder which was more like a soup than a thick chowder. And that was it, the nausea feeling got progressively worse as the day wore on into the evening and by the time all the entrants were sitting down to dinner wolfing down their food, I was feeling very ill and unable to touch my food. I had to keep getting up and leaving the table for fear I would throw up in front of all there. Eventually I got my water bottle filled it with a carbohydrate power and sat there drinking that for my dinner.

The whole of the first day at all the check points I tried to force food into me. Ham sandwich, creamed rice... doughnuts seemed to go down ok but the food intake was not great. I know that I have a problem eating while doing endurance events so had taken plenty of carbohydrate powders etc to compensate. But there is nothing like the real thing for the nutritional needs. From this experience I have realised that, for me, I need to do the carbohydrate loading thing a few days before my events and it is an ongoing training process to learn to eat on the ride. Everyone is different on this side so knowing what you can and can not eat/stomach during an endurance event is an advantage.

After my victory of managing to eat a decent meal on Friday night I fell into my sleeping bag at 22.30 and was asleep before my head hit the pillow! John woke me at 4am, breakfast was had and we were back on the road for 05.30. Mike (UK) and Rod (Canadian living in the UK) joined John and myself at the off. At about 64km we hit Gillingham and we (and everyone else) decided this was a great place for an early morning coffee and breakfast roll – Just the wake up call we all needed!! After that it was full steam ahead and into the rest of the day. It was a very overcast day but not cold so was great. Certainly a welcome relief after the scorching day the day before! Eventually it was just Rod and myself plodding along on our own. Around 14.00 it started to rain and of course that slowed us down as visibility weakened and the road conditions were not the greatest when covered in running water. We had been told that the second day was not nearly as hilly as the first – They lied!!!! It was just as hilly and this was blowing our minds big time! There was only suppose to be one major hill called Cheddar Gorge but to be honest I did not think it was too bad. The first part was very steep and at times was a battle to stay on the bike and not stall but once over that short bit I found the rest was a lot easier than some of the other hills we had climbed. Once at the top it just plateau out and never seemed to go down – ever! To this day still not sure how that happened!? But it was certainly the deadest section of road I have ever ridden. It was cold with a pumping wind and drizzle. By this time I was on my own as Rod had dropped off on the hill. As a result of being on my own on such a lousy section, with no one to entertain me as Rod had so aptly done during our riding together, I had to use my own mental strength again to keep pushing along at a decent pace. By now both time and pace seemed to drag and the only thing that kept me ploughing along was my usual mantra – the harder I ride the sooner I can finish this section and the sooner I reach the finish. I have used this – or variations of this - mantra many time in all my endurance races and it works wonders with me – not that it makes the work any easier (sadly) but it is my mental 'on' switch and thankfully has never failed me.

I waited for Rod at the next check point (well ..... I sat and ate something – Rod came in – barely had time to eat and I said 'right I'm off are you coming?? –did I say that as a command Rod?? Eeerr

....probably – ouch – sorry Rod!) Thankfully Rod accepted my offer/command as not long into our final stage the heaven opened and it started to lash – skies darkened and we slowed to snail pace for lack of visibility and danger of road surface. Night came and that added to the slowing of pace. Luckily for me Rod had half decent lights so he had to guide me through the darkness – yes, he had his revenge on me, racing through the night and me trailing in his wake trying to catch his light. I was one big knot of tension as riding half blind is a nerve wracking experience!! To add to our woes I got a puncture when we were about 20/30kms from ‘home’ and in the black of the night and rain we could not find the cause. It was a slow puncture which progressively got worse so after two pump stops I suggested we change the tyre and just hope for the best. Thankfully it worked and we managed to get back to base without any more mishap arriving at 22.30, an hour and a half later than I would have liked. Dizzy with hunger and fatigue and looking very much like a drowned rat, I was grateful to be able to jump into a shower and 10 mins later sit down to a lovely hot meal! Finally after hanging out all the wet gear and packing the bag for the next day I managed to get to bed at 00.30.

04.00 and we were up for the last day/leg of our ride. A beautiful morning and only 230km to go - brilliant!! We had been told that this leg was not as hilly but rather ‘lumpy’....this was an apt description as it was smaller hills and not as many as previous days so felt relatively easy. Mike, John, Rod and myself set off at 05.30 into a cool crisp morning and headed straight through the animal reserve (or park as they are called in the UK) The parks were miles and miles of land – sometimes open sometime involving forests – where horses or cattle roam free and have right of way. They were so use to cars or bikes going by that they did not move when we passed them and would just nonchalantly just glance up every now and again totally disinterested in us. They would also meander across/in the road whenever it took their fancy so something you had to be aware of – especially if you were tired and in automated mode! At this time of the year there were a multitude of foals and it was amusing to see them wobbling on their new legs, trying to stand or, if adventurous, gallop! A privilege to be mixing so closely with these beautiful creatures.

On the last day the mist was rising off the vast open spaces and the sun breaking through the clouds = just the four of us silently spinning the pedals, gliding past the horses. A magical, mystical sight and feeling and worth having to ride the previous 700 odd kms to arrive here in this perfect place!!

Just before our first check point my tyre started to go down again. I managed to get into the check point and settled down on the grass to find the cause of my woes – a miniscule piece of wire that I had to scrap and tweezer out = yes some of the lads carry everything in their tool bags!! Once done I enjoyed the sunshine while grabbing a bite to eat – a longer stop than usual but it was just such a lovely morning that is was a sin to rush off on the bike again instead of just enjoying the company and chat.

Rod and I headed off leaving John and Mike at the check point. It was a lovely ride to the next check point but was getting hot and I was starting to feel weary. As a result when I got to the check point I did not feel like eating – or rather was just too depleted energy wise to be bothered to try eat. There were queues at every counter at the shops and the only thing I could get quickly was ANOTHER ham sandwich from the service station – I had had enough service station food to last me a lifetime and just could not stomach another cardboard sandwich. I ended up buying water as proof of passage and decided to just get on with the ride. So after filling up my bottles and making sure I added a double dose of the carbohydrate powders I found Rod and told him I was going as I was not in the mood to hang around. The poor man had to throw the remainder of his coffee down his throat (nearly a full cup) and join me. I am sure he was cursing me half the time as he was enjoying the rest in the sunshine and the catch up chat with the other riders when I issued my ultimatum of ‘come now if you want to ride with me’. I tried to say it in a pleasant way but sure he heard the irritability in my voice – not at him, but at wanting to get this ride over and done with now. After three days of riding with me I think he knew that there was no hope of convincing me otherwise. The previous evening he had suggested that at about 20km to go we might stop and grab a bite to eat – I told him through peels of laughter and with a sharpness in my voice – which I am sad to say a few people have been subjected to – that sure, if he wanted to but he would be doing it on his own, as I was not waiting for him! I have no doubt there were many a times he wished that I would not wait for him as I was not resting up as he normally would have

on these rides and I probably put him under a bit of pressure at times. But I have the greatest admiration for him as he never complained and was the ultimate gentleman at all times and at the age of around 60 (never did get his exact age) he would put most men half his age to shame with his determination to take all the challenges I threw at him – including dealing with me as a person – not easy as some will know!!

We were now on the route back to base and was almost a reverse of the 'out route'. I attacked the hills too hard in my eagerness to get back as quickly as possible but shortly after a fairly hilly section we hit the flat. I had cycled all the irritability out of me and seeing miles of flat road for a change put me on a high. The sun was shining but was not too hot, there were miles of farm land on one side, forest on the other and the flat road with a great surface laid out in front of me. Brilliant!! I clicked into my big gears and just opened up! I flew down the road whooping for joy at the top of my voice – joy to be alive, joy to be on the bike on such an amazing day and joy at feeling unstoppable – If there is a heaven I visited it that day at that moment!!!

Of course I paid dearly for this extravagance and lack of eating later in the ride but I will treasure that feeling and even as I write about it now I still get a buzz! The downer hit me when we turned into the wind, the afternoon was stale and my energy levels now sucked dry from the previous reckless spending of energies on the flat. Now Rod took charge and shielded me from the wind for most of my slump – he was terrific. I tried to take the front every now and again but the pace slowed so badly that he soon took the lead again. That is endurance riding for you – ying and yang – a few hours previous I was in heaven and now I was most certainly in hell!

As always it is a matter trying to click the mind over and hang in long enough until the body catches up. Thankfully my body did catch up and the energy tanks refilled by me drinking more and trying to eat anything I had in my back pockets. Another check point saw me shovelling the food and drink in and that acted as my 'on switch' this time. Poor Rod - my homing drive also clicked in and I shot off dragging him with me. I was really making him work hard but I decided (no discussion with him of course) that I was going to be determined enough for both of us. He actually said to me at one stage 'you are determined to get me home fast aren't you? I have to admit to been ruthless and selfish in that when I dropped back a bit for him to suck my wheel he kept dropping off whereas if I shot off ahead and continued to push hard he seemed to keep the same distance between us and did not let me out of his vision.....so I continued to push hard and he continued to keep the piece of imaginary elastic between us intact.

With about 20/30km to go we hit the final park which was very open and very windy, which would have been great, if it was behind us! So Rod and I worked together on this stretch changing the lead rapidly and riding really hard as if we were coming to the end of 40 mile race! Insane but it felt great and we could smell home. Eventually we could not maintain the pace and slowed slightly to a more human pace. Now I told Rod to sit behind me and I would ride us home – I owed him that and was very happy to take the work load for the last +/- 10km. I was feeling strong anyway and running on pure adrenaline knowing the end was so close. We rode into the finish at 18.30 – bang on the time we (!) wanted!!!! What a rush – what an experience!!

There is so much I learnt from this first adventure into long distance cycling and I could go on for pages (more) detailing all the pearls of wisdom and knowledge I gained but some of the important survival ones were:-

- Try to get as much info from people who have done these events – listen to a variety of their tales and take what you can from them.
- Know as best as possible from your training rides what does or does not work for you in both nutrition and training = use your training to experiment as it will give you more confidence that you are using tried and tested methods during the event - one less thing to panic about!

- Remember in listening to the tales of others – what works for one does not necessarily work for the other – learn from their experiences and again try different thing in training to see what would work for you in the various situation that they encountered.
- Be prepared for all types of weather and occurrences – one guy had no lights or warm gear going into the second day, expecting to be home long before night fall – he ended up spending the night in a phone box trying to keep warm and waiting for daylight!
- Get your bike serviced before the ride – a full check up! There were people who did not finish the ride due to mechanical problems. The servicing before hand is no guarantee that nothing untoward will happen (as with Kevin) but it will minimise as best as possible any possible problems.
- And most importantly ENJOY!!!!

I can not explain the high of finishing an endurance race, the sense of achievement. I have often tried to analysis what it is about endurance events that makes them push my (and others) buttons but have yet to come up with an definitive answer other than I can't wait to get out there and do another one. I think it is a combination of a few things. The people one meets, places one sees, experiences learned but ultimately of pushing the body to the limits and beyond – and succeeding.