

PARIS-BREST-PARIS by Aileen Martin

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Ed: In 1987 Aileen Martin was the first Australian woman to complete the PBP. And she did it with a broken pelvis.

For about two years I thought about riding the Paris, Brest, Paris wondering if I was strong enough, not wanting to start and not be able to finish, but the excitement of riding 1,200km with nearly 3,000 cyclists in this international event spurred me on. John was fortunate to be able to take four months holiday, so we toured England, Scotland and Ireland for 11 weeks before the event, covering some 7,000 km in that time, added to the qualifying rides and training I did in Australia I was really feeling capable. Then disaster struck, I came off my bike near Cork in Ireland, exactly one month before the big ride. Landed in hospital for four days with multiple abrasions and bruising, but worst of all a cracked pelvis, the news was I would be on crutches for three to five weeks. My burning question was "how soon can I ride my bike?" The answer was that I could do anything if it did not hurt too much.



We had a week in Cork after I came out of hospital then crossed to Swansea, hired a car for a week and toured Wales, then based ourselves at Windsor. I had been two and a half weeks off the bike and it was only ten days to the start of the PBP. Trying to get on the bike was the worst, any sideways movement with my right leg was very painful so I would put my bike in the gutter and get on and off from the wrong side. For a week I started slowly, then increased the distances, and I just hoped this would be enough and my earlier fitness would help me through.

We flew to Paris and stayed at a quiet place 50km north and rested for three days. John stripped our bikes down and checked them over, then on Sunday we rode to the start where we had arranged to meet Susan and Stewart Stockdale at the bike check at 1.30pm and also Phillipe, a Parisien cyclist whom we had met while in Ireland who was also riding the PBP. Cyclists were flocking to the bike check some wearing jerseys showing which country or club they were from which made it more interesting. We were wearing our Audax Australia jerseys which attracted an enormous amount of attention, not only from riders from all other countries, but also enabled the other Australian riders to make contact with us.

There were 12 riders from Australia in total, three from Western Australia and it was a great pity that we could not all have been wearing Australian jerseys. Meeting with Susan and Stewart who brought messages from home was exciting and gradually meeting the other riders from Australia was great. After having our bikes checked, we were introduced to M. Lepertel by the Audax U.K. correspondent, John Nicholas, as we had a gift for him from CTA/Audax Australia. I feel that we as Australians received a very warm welcome, perhaps because we had come so far to participate, perhaps since Audax Australia was formed we have only had three riders in 1983 ride the PBP, perhaps Sir Hubert Opperman being the Patron of Audax could have been the reason, but I feel I received extra attention, maybe because I was the first woman to ride from Australia. Phillipe arranged for Susan to travel in one of his clubs' support vehicles which was great as we would be able to see Sue at most control points, and she kindly took our camera to take photos for us. Our starting time was 4am the next morning. We had booked the night's accommodation in dormitories nearby and also the evening meal and breakfast. This is something to be wary of as with so many people we had to queue for almost three hours for dinner and although we were back at the dorm by just after 9pm there were other people still coming in and it was too noisy to sleep. We only managed an hour's sleep as we had to be back at 2am for breakfast and then 3.15am at the start control.

I think that the largest group would have started at 4am, you joined the line after checking in at the start control, then waited until 4am. You heard the gendarmes lead out on their motorcycles, I think we would have been about in the middle of the start, and it was some time before we actually started riding. The atmosphere was tremendous as the ride had really begun, hundreds of tail lights in front and if you were game to look, hundreds of headlights behind. To add to the atmosphere it did not know whether to rain or not, so there were people stopping to put coats on. One poor rider was stopped in the first kilometre with a puncture, and the first few kilometres you really had to pay attention as the road was very bumpy and the riding quite jerky.

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N° 3051 GROUPE SANGUIN : CLUB: <i>Audax West Australia</i> LICURE: <i>AU 19.585</i> N° de Département : NOM: <i>MARTIN</i> PRENOM: <i>Aileen</i> Personne à prévenir en cas d'accident (à remplir par l'interessé) MRS. C. TASTER		DEPART <i>£</i>	(A) TINTENIAC 279,5 Km <i>9</i> <i>22 h 40</i>	(11) FOUGERES 229,5 Km <i>8</i> <i>16 h 50</i>	(12) VILLAINES le JUI. 380,5 Km <i>VILLAINES</i> <i>27 h 20</i>
		(7) BELLEME 182 Km <i>11</i> <i>10 h 10</i>	(5) LOUDEAC 455 Km <i>8</i> <i>1 h 35</i>	(18) TINTENIAC 832 Km <i>10 build</i> <i>TINTENIAC</i> <i>13 h 58</i>	(13) BELLEME 1052 Km <i>BELLEME</i> <i>3 h 20</i>
		(3) VILLAINES le JUI. 233,5 Km <i>Yafa</i> <i>75 h 00</i>	(6) CARHAIX 521,5 Km <i>1</i> <i>10 h 55</i>	(9) LOUDEAC 754,5 Km <i>LOUDEAC</i> <i>5 h 45</i>	(14) NOGENT le ROI 1137,5 Km <i>NOGENT-LE-ROI</i> <i>70</i> <i>14 h 50</i>
		(4) FOUGERES 223,5 Km <i>JW</i> <i>19 h 20</i>	(7) BREST 689 Km <i>EST</i> <i>16 h 15</i>	(8) CARHAIX 696,5 Km <i>CARHAIX</i> <i>20 h 55</i>	RUEIL - MALMAISON 1215 Km <i>RUEIL</i> <i>16 h 33</i>

Then we turned onto a more major road with a better surface and although still congested it was much safer and we were able to increase speed. It was like a sea of riders through to well after daylight, the first control at Belleme was over 160km and to check in and have a meal took an hour even though by then the riders were beginning to spread out. After Belleme we settled into a more even paced riding and began seeing the same riders more often as they were riding at a similar pace to us. Some were riding as teams and there were a variety of machines, tandems, tricycles, a tandem trike and even a fully enclosed three-wheeler. The weather cleared and stayed fine until dark when we had a short, heavy shower, then into a head wind right out to Brest.

We had planned to ride through the first night, but I could not keep awake, so we slept for about an hour on a park bench about 2am, then went on to the next control and slept on the floor until light. The control points would have averaged 80km apart, we reached Brest about 4.30pm on the second day, and were just leaving Brest when a chap whom we had met in England arrived, he was riding a tricycle and had started at 10am.

I thought the course quite hard on the way out, but when we turned with a favourable wind the ride back to the control at Carhaix on a beautiful evening seemed very easy. We spent the night at Carhaix indulging ourselves with ten hours rest. We started riding at 7am in quite thick fog so we had to have lights on for a while. I was not feeling very well and when I tried to eat at the next control at Loudeac I started vomiting. I think that I had a wog from the water as I could not keep any food down for the rest of the day. I am sure that I broke Neil's time record for trying to eat a banana that day, I never knew before how hard it could be to try and eat. That day I thought about a lot of people from the CTA who had given me so much encouragement since starting to ride, about the first time I ever managed to ride 50km, the many rides I have just managed to finish with someone's wheel to sit on and especially the last Easter tour was very much in my mind when Beryl and Denise were both so especially determined to finish and enjoy the ride, and these thoughts made me very determined to finish.

We rode that third day until about 3am through to Belleme, it was slow going after dark as again it was very foggy and it was great to come across a secret control and know we were on the right road. We were determined to reach Belleme that night and it seemed a lot of other riders had the same idea as there were bodies asleep everywhere. There was no room anywhere so we sat in chairs and put our heads on a table but

after a while someone got up and one of the officials tapped me on the shoulder to take his place and John and I curled up there and slept.

I woke about 7am and this was my lowest point, I could not believe I still had diarrhoea. I had ridden over 300km the day before without food, it was only 163km to go to Paris, but I just sat there shaking and wondered how far I could ride without food. I finally drank some warm milk and we headed for the last control before Paris, Nogent Le Roi, and then on to the finish. The last day was cold with bits of rain, and it was very cold when we finished about 4.30pm, some 84 1/2 hours after starting. We had a very warm welcome from Sue, checked in, and then off to have a warm shower and some clean clothes.

Some of the warm memories I have are seeing Sue at a lot of the control points, the support of the French people along the route, in all weathers they were out there cheering, the encouragement I received from many riders especially toward the end both en route and at checkpoints, the interest and interviews shown by the video team, the helpfulness of the officials at the control points especially at the finish control at Paris, and the help and friendship of Phillippe, the Parisien cyclist we had met in Ireland. I sincerely hope there will be some West Aussies riding the PBP in 1991, it is certainly an amazing experience.