

PBP – 2019 by Ruth Brown

When did the dream start? Maybe it was during my early teens, watching footage of Gertrude preparing to swim The English Channel. The appeal of putting my body to the test, exploring the limits of my endurance has always been with me. I was never in a hurry, age seemed no limit. I joined Audax in 2017. This began my adventure of riding longer distances on a regular basis. 2017 - 100km's; 2018 - 200kms and as 2019 began to approach, I thought this is my year for something bigger. The chatter had begun. The Paris Brest Paris 1200km ride took on the feel of legends. Who had done it, who hadn't. How many times and in what category. Reading the ride reports from previous years gave me further inspiration. I started to dream - I can do this. I didn't do it alone - without the support from fellow riders, who welcomed me into the Audax group and shared their own bits of advice, tips and tricks, as well as kind ears and companionship during those initial longer rides - I would have failed before I began. A big thank you to all. I'm still riding on a high after finishing PBP.

Like all great achievements I had a few obstacles to overcome. Firstly, I needed to address the bursitis in my foot. Age it seems was the issue. So with some shoe orthotics fitted, I would be able to ride longer distances without triggering inflammation and the unbearable nerve pain that resulted. Now I needed to qualify by completing a 300km, 400km and 600km ride. For these longer rides I needed to buy some new gear. Some padded bike pants or 'knicks', a camelback for extra water storage, and some frame bags to carry supplies for snacks enroute. The other big obstacle was fuel. Eventually I found a powder shake, full of carbohydrates, I could reliably drink anytime.

I was very lucky with my riding companion. Mark, a gallant rider who never left me behind. There were a number of very late/early morning finishes with me skiving off for a 20min restorative kip beside the road. Finally I managed both the 300km and 400km rides. My next goal the 600km would prove more challenging. I had to travel to the Grampians. The Victorian Audax group was generous with their time and assistance. I mentioned my goal of qualifying for PBP, and this started the reminiscing of their own adventures. They were all encouraging and supportive and this filled me with hope and promise. My last qualifying ride ticked off, I started seriously preparing for PBP. Unfortunately, I already had a big family holiday planned - which put a big hole in my training schedule 6 weeks before the ride. It was 2019 or not, so I arranged to do some spin classes in the local gym. At least get the heart rate up was my thinking. Flights booked, accommodation sorted, there was no turning back.

The day to leave arrived. I prepared family and friends - providing the website so they could track my progress and hopefully reduce any worry regarding my safety. Arriving in Rambouillet for the bike check the sky let loose and I was negotiating rough cobblestone streets slick with rain, I survived, others were not so lucky. The comradeship among the riders was uplifting - meeting and greeting teams from around the globe - many returning after previous years - all excited for the chance to be part of this amazing ride that is part of audax history.

I woke up on ride day too early, stayed in my pj's and tried to get an afternoon nap. I managed a quiet rest before it was time to begin the journey to Rambouillet. The bulk of riders have left by the time I'm lining up for my start at 8:30pm. I hope to make the first control before needing sleep, although I do have an emergency blanket, just in case. A little over 130km a fellow rider asks if I'm ok. Why? You're moving from

side to side. Oh dear - time to join the other cocoons on the side of the road. After 20mins I'm back on the bike and feeling much safer.

Finally, I reach the first checkpoint and after going through the process of filling water bottles, eating and getting brevet stamped I realise the time stamp is one minute after my cutoff. I decide to pay 5 Euro and get a warm blanket and mattress in a hall with plenty of other heavily snoring sleepers - I ask to be woken after 30 minutes. This is either lost in translation or they tried and failed, either way, next I know I'm being woken by a woman apologising and asking me to leave. The room is empty, everyone's gone, including the mattresses - good thing they needed the room clear or I might still be there dreaming of PBP glory :)

Anyway restored by the generous sleep and delicious baguettes, I'm feeling better and ready to make up for the lost time. Back on the bike, my body once again is singing - this is where I want to be. The km's seem to fly by. The villages are beautiful and the people encouraging, all seem to wait at the top of a hill to cheer you on. At the bottom of one such hill, an elderly gentlemen starts to run beside me - giving a helpful push on the bottom. Is that allowed? I don't care, we're having so much fun. Loudeac has come and gone and Brest is in my sights. I had a couple more kips beside the road and my spirits are doing well. Then I start to see the riders returning en masse. At least I'm getting to go downhill while they trudge uphill - oh no!!! that will be me on the return - don't think about that now - focus on Brest - I arrive in under 45hours. I can still do this. I just need to repeat what I've already done with maybe less time at controls faffing about - I can do this. I feel great.

On the return I notice the signs "Courage!Courage!Courage! Bonne Route" - yes I do need courage - keep going - you got this. At the smaller controls the volunteers are starting to pack up. I'm starting to recognise their faces on return, they have all been amazing. I take a photo of the group and before I know it everyone wants a photo on their phone. Oh well - at the moment this is what is important - I want to enjoy this ride. The chats with other riders are uplifting - we are all joined by our desire to see this through - we might still make the 90hrs.

I make it back to where I enjoyed that initial unexpected sleep and this time decided to have a short nap on the floor of the cafeteria - once again I am woken with an apology - very sorry you have to leave - yes of course. I also need to pick up the pace. I manage this in fits and spurts as I meet up with other riders. I'm running out of food and stop at all the make-shift stalls along the way - families, young children or local community groups - they have all put in huge efforts over the previous days, supplying riders with water, food and encouragement. This community spirit is what makes PBP so special. This ride is like no other you will do - yes there are hardships and yes there are great joys and you will get to share this with many, many riders from around the world, all joined in their love of the ride.

Merveilleux voyage!!

The Stats: Distance 1238.43km, Moving Time 65:14:26, Elevation 11,575m
Speed 19km/hr avg 65.9km/hr max, Elapsed Time 94:11:52