

PBP without the bike

It all started last September with a chance remark by Simon Gent, “I’m going to try for PBP next year, I think I’ll keep a video diary as I go on...”

As I am quite new to Audax (only four 100km under my belt) the significance of Paris-Brest was a little lost on me. The more I read about it, the more I became hooked: the history, personal accounts in Arrivee and on the internet, the sheer scale of human effort. This was documentary material. What it needed was a ‘hook’, someone to take us on the journey through qualification to Paris, Brest and back. Simon was our ingénue, the PBP initiate. He suggested Derek & Sara Slann as well as Gethin Butler and Jack Eason. A pitch document was drafted and I set about trying to tempt a broadcaster into making the film.

This proved to be more difficult than qualifying for PBP and after a couple of months of rejections from all corners I decided to go it alone. With a lot of help and generosity from my friends and an extended line of credit on a plastic card I embarked on my journey. Due to a lack of proper funds, the project was scaled down somewhat from the original pitch and the riders we focussed on were Simon Gent and Derek & Sara on their tandem.

The biggest contribution came from the cameraman, Skippy - christened David Mirus but he is Australian... Apart from being a keen cyclist, his regular work on TV series (including “Casualty” and “The Bill”) ensured a professional level of photography that has captured the essence of PBP. Although not regularly involved, my friend Dorothea de la Houssaye kindly made all the formal contacts with Audax Club Parisien. She also conducted the interviews with Pierre Theobald and Robert Lepertel at the ACP presentation in January and arranged for our official press status during the event itself. Discounts on equipment, free accommodation and understanding spouses all helped us towards the final film.

Following the press launch in January, Skippy and I attended several Audax events filming Simon and the Slanns through their qualifying. We also met other PBP hopefuls and have got some good stories that take us to Paris and beyond. Thanks to all of you who gave us an interview! During this period, the kindness and co-operation of Dave & Pam Pilbeam allowed us to film some excellent material on the Denmead SR 200km and 600km rides and also gave us the opportunity to experience endurance film-making...

I decided to keep a diary during the filming of PBP. It’s a little raw but hopefully gives an idea of PBP without a bike:

Thursday 14th August 20.00

Just had a slap up meal at the re-vamped “Chairmakers” (paid for by my parents!) and about to drive to Portsmouth to catch the 22.30 ferry to Caen. Packing the car this afternoon I felt like I was embarking on a completely lunatic venture. Whatever possessed me to sink all my savings into what was originally a home video?!? Sometimes think it would have been easier to just ride PBP... Hope the weather will be clement – a reduction in peak day temperatures would be an advantage. Skippy

called this afternoon but I forgot to call him back, guess it couldn't have been that urgent. Been checking the route map – there is some interesting geography the further west one goes. Am looking forward to travelling through Brittany as I've never been there before.

Friday 15th August 08.00 CET

Terrible night's sleep. Monty (my husband) particularly grumpy. Reclining seats that don't and boy, does my back ache! Will book a cabin next time... Boat packed. Caught up with Noel Simpson (a jolly, bearded fellow) who has been very helpful and suggested this crossing as a chance to catch up with some PBers. Also met the legendary Jack Eason – 78 and riding his 4th PBP. Talked to several riders and filmed two chaps bedding down on the deck. They gave me an interview in the morning and seemed to have had a better night than us! Had a chat to Noel before we disembarked, he isn't riding this one but will be looking after AUK interests at the depart. He also suggested interviewing lots of Australians and Americans to increase international sales! Managed to snatch some shots from the boat of riders cycling off into France. Fairly easy drive to our friends' house near Carentan to stay Friday night.

Saturday 16th August 08.00 CET

Up, bathed and dressed. M hasn't stirred yet... would like to be away by 9am. Hmm. Breakfast with Dorothea and picked up the keys to the flat in Paris. Hit the road about 09.30. I did the first leg, due south to Fougères. 2 hours on the nose. We stop for coffee and consult the map. This is almost halfway, 300km to Paris. M took over the driving and we followed the route back to the capital. I made notes along the way, picking out possible filming sites with interesting backgrounds. Took breaks at both controls and at Nogent le Roi, a beautiful medieval town not too far from Paris. Simon got in touch, he had arrived in Versailles so we arranged to meet for a beer. Last 20km very confusing but found the depart/arrivee in Guyancourt eventually. Drove in to Versailles to catch up with Simon and did a quick interview in front of the palace. Arrived at the flat after getting a bit lost, it's very warm in the city. Skippy arrives tomorrow.

Sunday 17th August

Accreditation day. Wake up before alarm – good night's sleep even though it's fiercely hot. Kick Monty into life. Easy drive to venue on main roads, hope I can remember how to get there again tomorrow! Can't park in the official area so unload the camera gear & M takes the car to the designated car park. By the time we get the gear together, a sweet chap from the Guyancourt organisation has found us and we are issued with press passes. We are then introduced to Corinne Guillemot who is involved with running the event. She offers to set up interviews with the mayor and the president of Guyancourt as well as a chap who is about to ride his 11th PBP! We then seek out Noel Simpson who helps me to make contact with Robert Lepertel and sort out an official press pass for the car – don't want to get thrown off the course... Grab interviews with Americans, Aussies and even some Russians. Lots of shots of signing on and other details. Plenty of footage of bikes gathered at the back of the sports centre plus the bike checking area. A very good hotdog from a stall in the 'village' restores us in the midday heat. Simon turns up and tries his hand on the static penny-farthing roller racing. Looks like hard work to me! By 3pm we have got all the material we need and head back to the flat. Am very impressed with the level

of organisation, not only are the Guyancourt personnel exceptionally helpful but there seem to be so many of them. Dump the gear and the car and take the Metro to meet Skippy. His train is a little late but he arrives in good form. Drop his stuff at the flat and walk to the Eiffel Tower. Spot a couple of AUKs taking snaps of each other in front of the Arc de Triomphe.

Monday 18th August (PBP depart)

Wake up around 8am. Decide to set out after lunch so spend a gentle morning eating croissant and discussing tactics. Skip & I load the car and set out for the depart. The press pass gets us straight in to the official car park which is very handy. Jump right in getting interviews including some good stuff with Simon around the site. He finally sets off with the 80hr vedettes group. Spot Derek & Sara and get a quick piece to camera with them before they disappear off to the start. Bump into Pam Pilbeam who gives us a great interview as the riders stream by behind her into the night. Nip back to the depart and catch Mark & Jo Bertini as they set off in the last group of 90hr riders. Fantastic sight seeing all the bikes go out, lights lit. What an atmosphere! Catch up with Noel who invites us 'backstage' for a sandwich and a can of drink before we set off to Brest ourselves.

Decide to avoid the official route for the first 100km or so for safety reasons. From my recce I know the roads are quite narrow and with 4500 cyclists fairly closely bunched, at night, I didn't want to be the cause of an accident! We take the main road and pick up the route at Mortagne au Perche. Get lots of amazing footage of lights strung out all along the roads. Push on to Villaines la Juhel where we get a couple of hours sleep in the dormitory.

Tuesday 19th August

I wake up to find Skippy has disappeared and spend 20 minutes trying to locate him. It turns out he's found the canteen and had coffee and breakfast and is raring to go. Am not best pleased and stomp off to grab a bite for myself. A large intake of caffeine also required.

On the road again and the stunning dawn we had hoped for is not forthcoming. Spend the morning stopping and starting picking up good shots along the way. We are following an Italian rider about 10km from Tintenaic when he suddenly pitches straight over his bars and lands face down on the tarmac. It's pretty dramatic and there is blood everywhere. Can't work out what happened. Get the first aid kit out and we patch him up as best we can. A local French lady calls an ambulance and a couple more Italians stop to help. Within ten minutes an official car has arrived and the PBP organisers have the situation under control. When the ambulance turns up, Skippy and I decide the guy is in safe enough hands and set off west again. Poor fellow was riding his first PBP without back-up and seemed to be more upset about having to abandon than the rearrangement of his very Roman nose...

We continue on to the controle at Fougères where we catch up with Mark Stockdale who had given us such a good interview on the Denmead 600. He was kind enough to talk to us again and we also had a nice chat to John Paul Lambhorth who was looking very splendid in his Welsh kit. On we go again, Skippy hanging out of the car from every angle getting some splendid shots. Not far from St Meen-le-Grand Skippy spots John Paul by the side of the road sporting a huge bandage to his forehead. It turns out he touched wheels when a Spanish rider braked suddenly in front of him. We escort him to St Meen where the local GP cleans him up and gives him four

stitches and some painkillers. He is given the 'all clear' to continue and decides to take it easy to the next controle and see how he feels from there. We wish him luck and carry on to Loudeac where I had hoped to film the infamous 'hosepipe shower' in the shed! Things are much more civilised this year and have to be content with some general atmosphere shots and a short break to restore concentration... and more coffee. OK, so we're not doing PBP on a bike but driving it is proving pretty draining nonetheless! Fortunately the route is exceptionally well marked so navigation isn't a factor but constantly looking out for 'photo moments' and negotiating the various groups of riders along some quite narrow roads takes a lot of concentration. Back on the road again but take a detour to find fuel. Continue along a main road parallel to the course and enjoy the freedom of open, cycle free roads for a few kilometres rejoining at Corlay. Get some fantastic sunset shots – the sky in western France is stunning. As we push on towards Carhaix Plouger we pass, in the opposite direction, the fast riders heading back towards Paris! It is 10.30pm on Tuesday – they have been to Brest and are 100km into the return journey after 26.5 hours!! Chapeau!!! At Carhaix Plouger we decide to kip: Skip opts for the sleeping bag under the stars (Australian, remember?) and I go for a berth in the official dormitory. Pay for a bed & shower and am shown to a camp bed amongst hundreds of others in this vast sports hall. Am lulled by the rustlings, snores and sniffles of the countless exhausted riders all around me... In fact, I am too tired to sleep and spend a restless couple of hours before finally drifting into a strange, dream-laced somnambulance.

Wednesday 20th August 02.15 CET

Now, I'd set the alarm for 03.30 but am woken to vacate my bed for a far needier peddler so stumble out half asleep and clutching my clothes. A shower goes part way to refreshing me and I change into clean kit back at the car. Skippy is away with the fairies so I let him slumber and get a decent feed. And more coffee. Back in the car and set off for the last leg to Brest. Feeling very tired now. Stop briefly in a small town for Skip to get some night shots and me to try to get some sleep then we are off again. It is very dark and difficult to tell what the landscape is like except for this ENORMOUS hill at Huelgot. It's a monster, Skip & I bow our heads in awe to the riders who must tackle it after 550km! At the top, we are treated to a spectacular view of the twinkling lights in the city below.

The long, long descent must be a scary ride, particularly at night. It is pitch dark and the road twists and turns between the tall trees. Finally cross the river into Brest as the dawn breaks and get some stunning shots on the bridge. At the controle, we meet up with Dave Pilbeam who is looking shattered. He gives us a few words before crashing out on the mattresses at the end of the hall.

Get some good footage before we turn around and set out on the return trip to Paris. I am very tired now and have a complete sense of humour failure. The cigarette lighter has packed up and I can't charge my mobile phone. A minor problem, you might think but my better judgement is clouded by lack of food and fatigue. We stop the town where Skip got some material last night. It is completely 'en fete' and he wanders off to shoot daylight footage. I attempt to facilitate repairs and in my failure become enraged. We set off on the road once more and a red mist descends resulting in me ripping the charger cable out of its mounting and hurling it out of the window whilst uttering some very unladylike expletives... Skippy suggests pulling over which we do atop the Roc de Trezeval. A good place to clear the brain cells.

We carry on for a bit until I can hardly keep my eyes open. Pull in to a service station and I just fall asleep. Skip uses the opportunity to get some fabulous long-lens heat haze shots which give a good idea of the conditions at peak day time. Some quality power napping and a wash in the service station restores me to almost new and we continue on to Fougères once more. Skip gets chatting to some fellow Aussies and I check Simon's progress on the Minitel. It seems he is only a couple of hours ahead of us so we decide to crack on to Villaines le Juhel and see if we can find him. Put the hammer down and arrive just in time to catch him & his chums before they set out again. He is very, very tired but still hoping for a 60-hour finish. He has had less than 2 hours sleep and is still 220km from Paris. Anticipating an average 20kph, his estimate is to get in around 8am (or shortly after). They head off into the night and we do a quick calculation: it is 10pm, three hours to Paris (around 01.00), a good 4 hours sleep in a real bed to be up and out by 06.30 would get us to Guyancourt for about 07.15. Decide to go for it and make a mad dash back to the capital. Get back in estimated time (including coffee stop) and put all the batteries on charge. Turn in and sleep like a log.

Thursday 21st August 06.00 CET

Alarm goes off too soon... Quick shower, load the car and back to Guyancourt to wait for Simon. And wait and wait and wait... Banana Bob and John Curtain turn up: bad news! Derek & Sara Slann packed at Loudeac on the way out, something to do with Sara's knee (NB found out later not the knee but sunstroke). Apparently they caught the train to Paris and drove back to Blighty yesterday, what a bummer.

Simon finally arrives at 11am – 63 hours. He looks good and gives us a piece to camera. I check up on the progress of Mark & Jo Bertini: another blow – Jo abandoned at Fougères on the return leg. Looks like Mark is sticking it out so hopefully we'll catch him in Paris. Have lunch with Si and his chums (nice echo of the chat we had at Versailles before the event last Friday). Skip and I then gird our loins and set off out again on the motorway back to Mortagne au Perche. We are attempting to catch up with Dave Pilbeam and are assisted at the controls by two English ladies who have volunteered to help out. They had never heard of PBP but thought the whole thing was amazing. Discover Dave is making good time and not too far ahead of us. It seems like a good idea to head back to Paris and get Dave arriving so point the car in an easterly direction and rumble off.

Skip gets some stunning landscape footage along the way and more good shots of bikes & riders. Arrive at Nogent le Roi to find Dave just about to leave. Reckon we have two hours before he gets to Paris so take a quick break for victuals before continuing. The food at N-l-R is the best yet, the hall looks like it's been set for a wedding reception: mountains of fresh fruit, melons & ham, vast cheese board, variety of hot food. It's an effort to tear ourselves away!

On the way back we get some fabulous 'Tour de France' shots of bikes passing through wheat fields and the like. Think this is going to look pretty good... Catch up with Dave again on the outskirts of Paris and arrive at Guyancourt about half an hour ahead of him. Pam is there and Skip sets himself up at the arrivee with her and we await Dave's return. Not a huge crowd (it's 9pm) but they are cheering and applauding every rider in. It feels exciting, as if something has really been achieved. Dave arrives and we follow Pam through the check-in for an emotional reunion. He looks pretty spaced out but is still smiling!

Back in the hall we meet Jack Eason: he has been knocked off his bike at Fougères and needed four stitches to a cut on his head. Apparently he was out cold for a short time and they took his brevet card away so he couldn't continue. He seems rather put out so Noel and Bob try to persuade him to take a bed in the dormitory but he's having none of it... Well, would you try to tell Jack what to do? Skip and I make tracks back to the flat as it seems unlikely that Mark Bertini or John Paul Lambhorth will be here before daylight. Manage to get lost: must ask the organisers to signpost our route home!

Friday 22nd August 06.30 CET

Crikey, here we go again. On way to Guyancourt – have abandoned thoughts of going out to grab more 'road' stuff. Skip thinks we have enough already and I can't face another day of driving... so professional! Arrive at Guyancourt and set up. Riders we are waiting for now are: Mark Bertini, Mark Stockdale and John Paul. Shoot loads of stuff of folk arriving (how come so many Danes?!?), emotional reunions, injured riders etc. Noel Simpson drops by to tell us that Jack Eason's daughter arrived to take him home, he must be such a worry...

The sun is very hot and I am getting burned. Skip, surprisingly for an Aussie, is suffering to. He keeps disappearing into the shade so I get a chance to do a bit of filming. Pam turns up to tell us that Mark Bertini has packed. Not sure where but it seems his neck went and he couldn't continue. Neck trouble appears to be the injury of the event – many riders are coming in barely able to look up due to collapse of their shoulder muscles. Ouch... No sign of Mark Stockdale but John Paul arrives with an hour to spare. We call out to him as he sweeps in and, bless his cotton socks, he pulls up and gives us a lovely interview as more riders stream by. The bump on his head has turned into a corking injury & his eye is sporting a real shiner... but he finished, what a hero!

We continue filming to the cut off point for the 90hr riders and decide to call it a day. A slap-up feed in the restaurant tent is very good and very welcome.

Tiredness & sun have taken their toll today and we are certainly in need of a rest. We wander over to the shade of some trees with our cans of fizzy drink only to discover Mark Stockdale relaxing with a couple of AUKs. Turns out he got in at 3am and there was only a couple of people to see him in so he went back to the campsite, showered, slept, changed into clean kit and rode in in daylight with a group and savoured all the glory from the waiting crowds! We chat for a while and they tell us that they'd heard a rider had been killed on the route. Find Noel who confirms this which puts things in perspective.

Head back to the flat where Simon and his lady have arrived to join us for a celebratory meal. A bottle of Champagne seems appropriate and with all the energy expended over the last week it doesn't take long for me to fall asleep at the table...

So, as they say in the film game, "it's in the can" – 23hrs of shot material that needs to be condensed down to about 1hour. It's this next stage that fills me with trepidation! However, I have managed to attract the interest of a real editor and hope to have the final film ready to screen at the Denmead Annual Reunion. I think I'll ride PBP in 2007, it has to be easier!