

**Paris Brest Paris 2007 – Trip Report – Jim Logan – Pittsburgh, PA –
Frame #4874 – RUSA #3730**

Who am I and Who Likely will be Interested in this Trip Report?

2007 was my first year as a randonneur. This trip report is a pretty dry overview of both my qualifying brevets and PBP, given a newbie's perspective. It's also pretty anal, and focused on equipment and what it took to succeed.. So if it is the fall of 2010, and you are a geeky mid-aged (47) randonneur wannabe that lives 4+ hours from a qualifying series, and you are wondering that if you learn all that is learnable from printed materials, the web, and yearbook trip reports, whether you can succeed at PBP, even in a difficult year? The answer is yes, but you will suffer more than you can imagine. However, it is worth doing, all things considered. This is not the trip report for you if you are looking for humorous stories of interacting with the French people and other riders.

I will likely do it again.

Introduction

Randonneuring is a sport of details, and managing the details well. I learned a lot in the last 10 months from trip reports and other printed materials of RUSA and the UMCA. This trip report focuses on the details that mattered to my successful PBP (88:05)

This trip report is organized in three sections:

1. Lessons Learned – Logistics and Equipment
2. PBP – Experiences –Details from each Stage
3. Qualifying brevets – Experiences

1. Lessons Learned – Logistics and Equipment

Paris – Traveling to PBP

I decided to go the easy route, and traveled with Des Perez travel, the group travel agent for RUSA participants. One of the surprises was that the buses didn't move until most of the flights were in. So the DC contingent sat on/near the buses for 3-4 hours. For me, the PBP excitement started when we all arrived and starting assemblies our bikes at the hotel (Holiday Inn Express).Also, the bus tour of Paris was uninspired. However, after the event one of the US riders also reported he ended up in the hospital, and Claus from Des Perez went way above and beyond supporting him, coming to the hospital. That counts too. All in all, I would be likely to travel with Des Peres again – I like all the details being dealt with.

A Wee Problem before the Ride

Packing in Pittsburgh, I noticed a frayed rear derailleur cable, so I replaced it when packing my bike in Pittsburgh. On arrival, it worked for a bit, but it wasn't tight enough, so it slipped. The net result was my chain jammed hard under my cassette, and broke a spoke. First, I carried my bike a half mile to a local sports shop, but they couldn't help me. So I carried it back. Then I noticed the tour company had posted a bike shop, "Cyclomundo", about 10 km away. I got a taxi, and the shop was great. They fixed my bike, replacing 9 spokes, and even improved my fender mounting without asking (my initial set-up used big honk' in cable ties, which must not be the European way). I spent 2 hrs in the shop (the mechanics helped me nearly right) away, and I found great stuff – A small set of light panniers – just "right sized" for PBP, a pair of Santini leg warmers that match my Vocollect shorts, and a windproof underwear top

Paris – Before the Ride

I stayed at the Holiday Inn, and had a great time. Some Australians had been there for some days, and several of us from the DC Randonneurs started riding with them, meeting them at happy hour, and going out for dinner. Early on, I swapped an American jersey for an Australian jersey with Dave the Aussie.

PBP - Experience Overview

I weathered the rainy first evening ok – It was 50s and wet, which is April in Pennsylvania. I was packed for 40s and wet (March in Pennsylvania). Early my outlook was iffy due to mechanicals - I had 4 spokes break one at a time in the first day - 3 front, 1 back. At one point I was running with a fiber spoke plus a second broken spoke in my front wheel, and that was spooky. After the first front wheel spoke broke, I suspected I would have more (see first item under "what didn't work" why I suspected why), so I decided to abandon my front stainless steel fender so I would have no chance of the tire rubbing when running with crooked wheels. However, I didn't have pliers to remove a nut. So for 10-15 minutes I said "pliers" to every rider that past as I sat on the rode doing my fiber spoke fix. Eventually Mark from Florida came through for me. Thanks Mark! Figuring my bad karma would be spokes and not tires or tubes this ride, I abandoned my spare tire with my fender, plus a wet wool undershirt for good measure too (was too heavy wet).

Great tail wind blew me up the mountain out of Brest, and I needed that help. One of the highlights for me was being the focus of a photo shoot by the Velo magazine truck (I was wearing the "Randonneurs USA" retro wool jersey). The favorite part of the ride for me was the exodus out of the controls in the hr before they closed - that timing clumped people together. I really came to appreciate the beauty of bicycles making left turns around a round-a-bout.

My biggest challenge was saddle sores, and managing the pain thereof. The first day riding wet got things off to a bad start. I used Advil for pain relief from Tuesday on. At Villaines on the return, I went to the doctors, and got my butt massaged and slathered. That helped.

Usually PBP trip reports highlight the great support the ride and riders get from the French. That certainly was there - due to the weather more subdued than reported in the past. But clearly there were even single people standing witness and clapping at all hrs of the day and night. I interacted less with the locals than many people, as I worked to stay goal focused. Also different from the United States – many car drivers used their horns – but they were honking in support of PBP riders, rather than in annoyance.

What worked?

- Traveling “heavy” – which also meant prepared – with panniers, rear rack, and fenders – 2007 was a historically rainy year.
- Fiber spoke – It worked as advertised
- Using wheels strong enough to run with one broken spoke – with a total of 4 broken spokes, I put in a good fraction of 100 miles on wheels with broken spokes.
- Perpetuum – my base fuel – I used a 4 hr bottle every leg. The 15 minute sip cycle was a useful distraction. I didn’t get a sour or upset stomach the entire ride. I didn’t ever tire of Perpetuum for the first time either.
- Camelbak + two bottles. Camelbak for water, one bottle for Perpetuum (4 hr), one bottle for blue (raspberry) Accelerade (1 hr bottle) – the latter for a change of taste and was my emergency supply. Plus a gel flask and some bars for variety. I finished dry on at least two stages, including the first one. And on several stages I had to take on more water. So this strategy worked well for me.
- Hotel room for two nights in Loudeac. It was worth it to get warm, dry, and a place to sort through equipment. On the second night, I was in pretty bad shape, and recovering in the room was great. On the first night I got 1 hr sleep. Two hours the second night.
- Leaving as the last rider in the first wave of the 90 hr group from Paris. I think I missed the worst of the issues of the 90 hrs group – weaving riders and such, doing this. It meant most riders I saw were faster than me for the first 8 hrs. Once I started breaking spokes, I was still comfortably in the bell curve of 90 hr riders. Also, since I was in the first wave, I didn’t have to do math in my head on control closing times – the published times were based on the first wave.
- Wool cycling cap – Kucharik – Worked great keeping my head warm enough in rain, and I could even wear it in the sunny day.
- Double wrapping handlebars with gel inserts – did it the Sunday I left after I didn’t like the double wrapping job my LBS did. I wore thin gloves (my Santini Vocollect gloves), and for the first time didn’t get bicycling stigmata and lingering pain in my palms.
- Arriving in Paris on Tuesday - PBP started the following Monday – I enjoyed the ambiance of the Holiday Inn before the ride. The Aussies were great to pal around with. They gave me a few faced I knew on the road.
- A bike fit at UPMC sports medicine two weeks before I left – It identified my seat had snuck down on me.
- Rainlegs (A brand of high tech rain half-knickers that roll up into a belt)– I only used them the first night, but they helped keep my legs warm enough in the deluge.

- Duct tape in my drop bag – The back on my headlamp broke and I needed the duct tape when I replaced batteries. Though the medical tape I carried on the bike could have done it too.
- Catching 30 minutes sleep in Villaines on the return. Better than nothing. I barely made it to the end, so I am glad I got this much. I had a bit of trouble sleeping in the dorm, and woke 15 minutes before my wake time.
- Advil to manage the pain from saddle sores; Bag Balm in my Loudeac drop bag.
- Heart rate monitor to recover from a bonk on wed – I forced my heart to stay in zone 2 or less until power returned (I have trouble with racing heartbeat when bonked).
- Successfully rode through and recovered from the bonk after I shift to calorie replacement – eating large meals at EVERY control from there on in, in addition to my Perpetuum.
- Redundancy
 - o Lost one computer for a while
 - o Needed my “backup headlight” as a third light watching the right side of the road returning to Loudeac with bad visibility the second night and my glasses spotted with rain.
 - o The reflector on my E6 secondary light just fell off and the bulb fell out. I had a spare bulb, and the replacement worked fine.
 - o I lost my cleat covers the one of the first days, but I had spares in my Loudeac drop bag.
- The French mechanics, of which I had three visits – they were great. I never had a long wait.
- Insulated (spring weather) Gore-Tex shoe covers I bought in France – I never had cold feet.
- Kitchen timer as my wake up clock
- New “windproof” long underwear tops I got in France – totally synthetic – didn’t absorb water. Worked great under a wool jersey. Better than having my waterproof layer on top if it wasn’t raining hard.
- Sealskin (waterproof) gloves worked well the first night keeping my hands warm. However, returning to Loudeac, it was really too warm for these gloves, and I think the over-warm wet environment inside them contributed in my losing motor control/strength in my fingers and wrists.
- Conserving strength on both the flats and downhill. I was definitely learning from watching other riders here. My natural tendencies were more like a club rider – changing my power output in response to riders around me – bad idea. The final bit getting into Loudeac from Brest was rough – it was rainy, visibility very bad, rolling hills. I used my spare battery light swung right to illuminate the right road edge. I used my legs up staying in contact with a group that could actually see, but at least I had legs to use up.
- I created an entirely new bike position to descend in which nothing hurt. Standing on my left pedal, heel depressed. Waist pressed forward, back arched down, head up, hands just touching the handlebars. Completely offloaded my rear-end and the hot spot in my right shoe. Sort of felt like being on a scooter.

- Planning for two changes of clothes for each segment between drop bags. I used most of them.
- “Just keep moving” – the mantra of randonneurs. I used it a lot on myself. I fiddled a lot since I could – I had clothes I could put on and places to put stuff I could take off. I reminded myself of the mantra whenever I could.
- Generally buying all randonneuring equipment I needed – wheels, lights, etc, from Peter White (<http://www.peterwhitecycles.com/>) I just called up and he helped me specify things.
- My Santini leg warmers – I wore them every day but one. Perversely, I wore them on the “sunny day” too (most people had their legs covered that day). Since I had my arms and legs covered on the sunny day, I had minimal issues with sunburn – I notice my face warm that night, but didn’t need to take any action.
- Complete absence of any intestinal or stomach issues – and I didn’t do a great job on cleaning my hands with the alcohol wipes until 2-3 days in. Fenders likely helped, keeping road spray off my bottles.
- I used a handlebar map case: on the top side I kept my nominal plan (~87 hours), though I got the start times wrong. I used the plan mainly because it had the distance between each control. On the bottom side of the map case, I kept the control information distributed by ACP – I used the control closing times as a primary planning tool.
- Caffeine when really sleepy. I used caffeine pills twice – once the first night, and one some other night. I also had cokes at numerous controls. I don’t usually take caffeine, so it worked well for me. Twice I remember resorting to counting from 1 to 50 out loud as a last resort to keep myself awake.
- Speedplay X pedals and cleats. They never fouled. At times I had a little trouble clicking in, but that was more feedback of my impaired motor control. However, from foot swelling my left big toe-nail died and fell off after PBP, so I’ve bought bike sandals for 2009. (As of 13 Jan 2008, my toenail has about ½ grown back in).
- My Schmidt generator hub with an LED primary light and an E6 secondary headlight and a wired tail-light. I had no lighting problems.
- Apple cinnamon Hammer Gel. I got to sample all the Hammer Gels at Gator Hell Week in Dec/Jan, and I was most surprised apple cinnamon was my favorite (since I am usually a chocolate guy). Throughout my brevet series and PBP, if I was down, needed energy, or wanted to reward myself, I had some apple cinnamon gel. Like an apple pie in a bottle. Pure goodness. I normally carried one 5 serving flask per 200k. That means I carried two flasks from Loudeac to Brest and return.
- Having a hotel room the day PBP started. I laid down for two hours that afternoon. I perhaps slept an hours. This rest likely made a big difference over the first 24 hours.
- Cyclo-Core, Cyclo-Zen, and the associated off-season training plans. I used these to transition from a club B- to A rider over the last two years. I’ve succeeded in the 12 week off-season plan both years. However, I’ve never had success using an in-season plan: I would rather just ride in season. However, I use the recovery yoga in Cyclo-Zen once or twice a week in season.

What didn't work?

- Letting n LBS meddle with Peter White built wheels (they cranked the tension up on them).
- Not checking until departure day if my heavy clothes fit under my raingear – they didn't. Concerned on cold weather, I used my travel raincoat the first night instead of my bike raincoat – Though I left my travel raincoat and my warm layer in my drop bag at Villaines. I never did use my warm inner layer.
- The Velcro holding my headlamp on to my helmet “stripped,” as I frequently ratchet that light down and up to see my computers and road respectively. Despite the safety hazard, I used cable ties to hold it the light to my helmet after Loudeac on the way back.
- Skipping my planned power nap in Druex on the advice of a local – my cognitive ability quickly plummeted to embarrassing levels on the last leg.
- Riding with handlebars too low since I started with a raised seat. – I lost feeling and ability to grasp the handlebars returning to Loudeac – I raised my handlebars then, but the pain never really left after that.
- My GPS – I had it working the first stage, but I accidentally deleted the other stages at the start. I would have appreciated it on the return to Loudeac in the storm, but survived well without it. I left it in my Villaines drop bag.
- My half step plus granny triple crankset. Such gearing makes sense for centuries and rides like Gator Hell week when I am often riding at speed. And when shifts to the granny were behaving. Neither was the case at PBP. I would have been better off with a smaller middle ring, so shifts to the granny would be much smoother.
- I lost the cover off of one of my two battery powered tail-lights. I wrapped a plastic bag around it, and that worked well enough. I never needed this backup during PBP.

What I didn't use (which was very little overall):

- Sealskin socks – I had them in a drop bag for reserve, but fenders and booties were warm enough the first night. I suspected it was too warm for them anyway
- Electrolyte capsules – I was stocked for hourly electrolytes, but only used them once – that was on the way back from Loudeac and I was bonked – I took everything I had, including vitamins, at that point.
- Bataclava – It never got that cold, and my wool cycling cap worked great.
- I carried a few too many bars at times, but emergency food is never a bad bet. I left some in the trash in Loudeac and Villaines from my drop bags on the way back. I threw away an almost full 26 serving bottle of Hammer gel. I used about 30 servings of gel across PBP.
- Suntan lotion – had one sunny day, but I stayed covered up that day.

Mechanicals after the ride:

- I knew I had a bad click somewhere in the bottom bracket area the last 30 miles, and it turned out to be the bearings in my left pedal. When I unpacked my bike in the

states they barely turned. The right pedal bearings weren't in that good of shape either. On the ride, I just ignored it, and just followed the mantra – just keep moving.

Health issues after the ride:

Amazingly few. For example, no knee problems, unlike on some of my brevets. What I did have:

- Some areas of the bottoms of my toes were white on both feet, with some lack of feeling. The left foot got better over some days, but the right if anything got a bit worse. A week later, I still have a bit of nerve damage in my right foot. Note this is a relatively common occurrence, due to feet swelling in the shoes. As of Jan 2008, I don't quite have full feeling back in my right foot. But almost.
- Feet swelling on the flight home and the drive to Pittsburgh. For the first time, I've had significant foot swelling on a flight (many of us did).
- I lost some forearm, wrist, and finger strength and motor control, but a week after the ride, most of it is back.

2. PBP – Experiences – Details from Each Stage

My memory is a bit hazy, but here goes:

Arriving 5 days early:

I found this timing great. I had time to deal with unforeseen problems. It helped I found people to pal around with, plus ride a little. I managed to get a good hero shot photo when scouting the start of the course at a PBP advertising sign:



I also represent the complete contingent from the Western Pennsylvania Wheelman and all of southwest Pennsylvania.

Registration:

Bike inspection was cancelled because of the rain (computers couldn't be used outside). I got into the DC Randonneurs group picture as planned – I wore my WPW jersey for this photo. I lost my helmet mirror leaving registration. Since I am not flexible enough to turn behind me and see (with the glasses I wear), that means I literally missed half of PBP. I didn't have a clue what was going on behind the entire ride.



Pre event meal: PBP had a pre-event dinner. I arrived about 30 minutes early, and I am glad I did. That put me at the start line perhaps 2 hours before the start, but I enjoyed the ambiance. And the line quickly lengthened after me. I ended up in the first wave of the 90 hr group.

This is what my bike looked like at the start:

Tools in the seat bag, items like sunglasses, suntan lotion, friction crème, electrolytes, Advil, and bars in the Jandd frame pack. Clothes and Perpetuum in my panniers. My panniers looked bigger than they were heavy – My spare clothes with in individual gallon zip locks, though I likely did start with maybe a couple more pounds of clothes than I ended with as I learned. To power my Edge 305, I had 4 AA batteries in a module

strapped to the horizontal part of my handlebars, which I plugged into the charging port on the 305.



Saint-Quentin-En-Yvelines – The ambiance at the start was great – crowds, barriers, big signs, it feels like a real event. Started in a drizzle that got worse in the night. I noticed two open establishments to stop during the stage, seemingly in the first half. The second was a sports bar. I skipped both, but I ran dry before arriving in Montagne. Because of the rain, less people were along the side of the roads cheering and clapping. Still, there were isolated people doing so up to 2 AM. It turns out that my handlebars were angled for an uncomfortable braking position – I was tense riding in groups. Sometime in the night, I stopped and changed my handlebar angle. The waves started I think 20 minutes apart. The first riders from the wave behind me caught up to me after 1.5 hrs. I caught up to the last riders in the wave before me (recumbent), after 2.5 hrs. I started with a second 4 hr bottle of Perpetuum in my pannier. That worked well, and I remember being glad I did.

Montagne-au-Perche – Only a food stop. Locals set up a food and water stand before the real control – I stopped there, not knowing any better. I remember it was raining. I bought a sausage sandwich and some water. The real control was another ½ mile further on in a school. I didn't need to stop, since I had refueled.

Villaines-la-Juhel – The first US bag drop. I changed out of the clothes I used for the first 200k, since they were soaked. Still living on Perpetuum. Unfortunately, I was in

backup clothes for the official photograph leaving Villaines. Probably started taking Advil by this point for the pain from my saddle sores, and continued the rest of the ride.

Fougeres – I think my first two spokes broke before Fougeres. Fortunately this happened when it wasn't raining. Still living on Perpetuum.

Tinteniac – Another spoke fix here. Still living on Perpetuum. I stopped for sausage and fries within an hour before Loudeac to get some ambiance, but I rued the time when I realized it would eat into my sleep.

Loudeac – Arrived here in pretty good form the first Wed evening. Immediately ate a meal in the cafeteria, then found my hotel, got a shower, got one hour of sleep. Cleaned my saddle sores with alcohol wipes (ouch), then put on Bag Balm. Leaving Loudeac, I wore my WPW jersey for the day. Even wore it on the outside a bit – I wore my rain coat less than most that day.

Carhaix – I don't remember much here. Probably just in and out, filling up bottles as I worked to get some time banked. So many riders were delayed due to the weather, the ACP started signaling controls were staying open 2 hrs longer along the route (but not extending the whole route time limits).

Brest – Side winds turned into headwinds as we approached Brest. The return riders going uphill were going faster than those of us going downhill. Beautiful arriving in Brest. Fierce headwinds crossing the bridge. My Garmin 305 reports I spent about 27 hours in the saddle getting to Brest (though I believe clock time was about 40 hrs, slower than my eastern PA 600k time). Leaving Brest, I was cheered by the petty observation that there were many riders behind me still working to get to Brest (Even though some of them started up to 2 hrs later than me). I had a great tailwind on the climb out of Brest. In this section, I gave away my reflective ankle bands to a San Francisco rider who lost his reflective vest.

Carhaix – Probably in and out again. I think I was short Perpetuum for this segment, and the lines in the cafeteria were long – so I left without eating – relying on my gel flask and some bars – I found a place to buy a ham sandwich on the way out of town, and ate half of it. I was in a bad way returning to Loudeac. It was raining, perhaps warmer than the night before. Fewer riders around me follow. I turned my LED spare headlight on and used it to watch the right side of the road, since I couldn't see the road itself. I used my legs up staying with other riders to Loudeac. I raised my saddle in the two weeks before PBP, but not my handlebars. My forearms got very sore, and I lost the ability to grip. This may have also been to do to my Seal-skin gloves – it was too warm for them, and they were hot and soaked from sweat inside. About 10 miles out from Loudeac, I ate the other half of my sandwich. The sandwich wasn't in good shape, and neither was I. I ate a bit of paper, and didn't look quite human as I leaned over my pannier eating it. A bit primal experience. With water on glasses, I didn't see many route arrows.

Loudeac – I was in pretty bad shape arriving in Loudeac. I immediately ate a meal, helmet on, dripping wet, and all. Then I repeated my routine at the hotel, except getting 2 hrs sleep this night. I couldn't find my way back to the control from the hotel, so I had to ask garbage men for guidance. I had a bad shifting problem on the way into Loudeac. I went to the mechanic (perhaps 4 AM) as I was preparing to leave. I was lucky – no line. He found a frayed cable, which he fixed on my front derailleur. We also discovered a broken back spoke – I heard it go sometime during the day, but just rode on it. He repaired it. I meant to leave an hour before the nominal control closing time – due to the mechanical, I left 15 minutes before control closing time. Leaving many controls meant climbing big hills. One or both ways out of Loudeac, I remember the line of red tail-lights up the mountain – it is a great experience to have.

Tinteniac – I used myself up getting into Loudeac the night before, and I bonked bad this stage. I ate what I had, plus vitamins, plus electrolytes, and decreased my power output. Fortunately, a relatively flat section. I started eating meals at every control, as well as my Perpetuum 4 hr bottles between. I remember that after being so tense on down hills the first night. I felt much more comfortable and relaxed on my bike by here, with a much more relaxed upper body.

Fougeres – I think I recovered after eating here.

Villaines – I really started to wilt coming to Villaines – though I had more flexibility in clothes than most with my panniers – and I suspected others were too hot. My butt was in so much pain from diaper rash, beyond the 3 Advil level.. I was feeling sorry for myself, thinking everyone around looked better and riding better than I was. Then I noticed we were all riding about the same pace, with the same cadence. Although they looked good, they probably felt like I felt. That made me feel better, that I wasn't an outlier.

I probably had about 3 hrs in the bank since Loudeac, and I used them up here. I am afraid I made a scene in the cafeteria, my fork dropped to the floor and the volunteer carrying the tray put it back in my food. I made the cafeteria give me new food. I got a shower, and tried to get an hour of sleep in a sleep room. However, I tossed and turned, got at most 30 minutes, and left 15 minutes before my wake time. Luckily, while we had some sprinkles during the day, the one real storm of the day happened while I was at the control. After leaving the control, the stars came out, and wonderful sweeping rises and descents. Though I started to struggle a bit on this section.

Mortagne-au-Perche – The stage between Villaines and Mortagne I remember as being brutally hilly (given my condition), in that they were long rollers, with hundreds of feet of elevation change on each one. I planned to take a power nap here, but didn't. Did eat a full meal. Leaving here, this is the stage “where riding into the Paris sunrise lifts your spirits and keeps you awake”. It likely did, but I started interpreting reality wrongly on this stage. I became convinced I would have trouble finishing. Also, my cognitive ability started to plummet. I rode a bit in pace lines, but we were of too different

strengths and too few of us wanted to pull. Also, I stopped and fiddled a bit, and lost the riders close to me to ride with.

Druex – Convinced I was having trouble finishing and evil forces spaced the last controls to make people fail or at least succeed only under extreme duress, I rode into the control at very high speed. I was used to filling my water bottles in the bathroom sometimes. OK, every year some American has to mistake a funky urinal for a sink. I decided to pitch my water bottles and Camelbak. I stopped and purchased a couple bottles of water. At this point I was obviously impaired. I have gaps in the time sequence of my memory, and I had to use my cycle computer to judge those gaps. One time, I ended up going the wrong direction. I tried to reach out to several riders to have them help watch over me, but none of them spoke English. I kept my mind focused on the simple tasks of following other bikes and watching for route arrows. If both conditions weren't fulfilled, I would stop until they were. My mind started to not only interpret the present wrongly, but started to re-interpret my whole recent life wrongly. It was not a pleasant time. As we neared San Quentin-En-Yvelines, there was a good bit of traffic and construction – we weaved through it. At the last roundabout next to the finish is the first wrong turn I made, with about 10 people following me. We sorted it out and got to the finish. I looked good finishing – a friend from Florida said so – I finished in a RUSA jersey.

San Quentin-En-Yvelines – I processed through the control and purchased my on route pictures – but once again bypassed the bar (there was one at every control, and I think we had a free drink at both Brest and Paris). And I bypassed everything else – I knew I was in bad shape, so I returned to my hotel ASAP, got a bath, laid down and slept several hours in the afternoon. I wish I was in better shape so I could have stayed at the end for a bit – maybe next time. The end had a crowd of hundreds cheering all the riders in.

3. Qualifying Brevets - Experiences

I started with my qualifiers (and my randonneuring career) in DC on St Patrick's Day with a 200k. It was supposed to be a day the route went over the Appalachians several times, but the snow wasn't plowed on the West Virginia side, so there was an alternate route with rollers. A good day, except I rode too hard the first 100k, and paid for it the next 100k (will be a recurring theme). The highlight of the day was a quarter mile of packed blown snow coming off the ridges, and so strong side winds I felt myself leaning my bike sideways into the wind.

I then did another 200k in Ohio. Two highlights: (1) low 40's, and the rain increased as the day went on, and (2) a bridge out about a third of the way in – we had to pass our bikes down the ditch and back up. I lost feeling in both feet and one hand. However, I figured since the temp was above freezing, ice crystals couldn't form in my body, so I wasn't at risk of frostbite. Perhaps hypothermia, but not frostbite. I finished with the RBA, so that made me feel good.

The next week I rode my first 300k in DC, and I learned at that point I couldn't recover in a week. A brevet from hell for me. DC has a strong ultra culture – posted centuries both Saturday and Sunday each weekend, and they are fast. I immediately got dropped. I hadn't recovered from the week before. Also I got off route, and lost about ½ hr or more. I didn't get the route correctly in my GPS (I forgot the local detailed maps, but I did have the controls as waypoints, which is how I got back on course). About 4 PM I arrived at a control, and the earlier riders had not only left the remains of gallon jugs of water (typical), but also suntan lotion – that means they got there early enough to need suntan lotion – that depressed me a bit. At that point I was the last rider, and the next-to-last rider asked my name, so he could report my name when he got in – that wasn't a good sign either.

However, the course flattened near the end, I recovered from the bonk, I passed him, and caught up to two other riders – Clair was escorting a rider that was diabetic and not in the best shape. I stuck with them. Before riding with them, I discovered at night if I looked down at the cue sheet, I could ride off the road into a ditch (the peripheral vision thing doesn't work at night when you have a light on your head). Fortunately, it was a gentle ditch, and lesson learned. I wasn't the last rider in – I passed the gentleman that asked my name previously, and that was the theme of my qualifying series – don't be last stupid – which I succeed in.

I was signed up the next week for an Ohio 300k, but lesson learned on recovery, so I skipped that.

I then had a scheduling problem, since both the DC and Ohio 400k/600k series conflicted with the Pittsburgh MS150 – I am an MS150 team captain, and can't skip that. I seemed to have two choices for a 400k – New Jersey (flat) or Eastern PA (20k ft climbing). Fortunately, the choice was made for me, since the New Jersey ride was sold out. So I rode my 400k/600k in Eastern Pa. In retrospect, I am glad I did.

I suffered so much on my 300k, I imposed on my wife Carol to travel to the 400k – it was 300 miles from home after all, then I rode 120 miles away from the car. Eastern Pa (Tom Rosenbaum) uses a hostel for start/end control, and that was a great atmosphere. We had only about 15 riders – something about the 20k of climbing apparently – but with the hostel, everyone mixed. Carol was intimidated a bit when asked to be the food volunteer for early returning riders, but she leaned into it and enjoyed the experience in the end. I rode through the night with Larry from Syracuse – his main lesson was – don't ride alone at night or you get picked off. So we rode together. A rider that is a respected NY randonneur and event organizer was in bad way at Delaware water gap – however, he was outside a restaurant and said he was going in, so that was a good sign. He came in about 3 hrs after us. Coming down to Delaware Water gap, I came close to hitting a deer. One crossed about 100 yards ahead ... then the second one crossed. I missed it. I forgot a layer, so for the first time I got to stuff a newspaper up my jersey for warmth. When I explained why I need a newspaper at the convenience store, the clerk gave me one for free. Two key lessons learned (1) Get your card stamped at the control stupid (I rode 5 miles up a mountain away from a control until I realized I hadn't got it signed) (2) Advil

– the wonder drug. My knee started to hurt about 70 miles (from working to catch up after (1)), and by 120 miles I had sharp pains in my left knee on some pedal motions. I just kept going and took Advil, and within hours, the piecing pain was subdued – magic.

I rode my 600k with Larry too. He helped keep me on track. Including limiting the sleep break to 3 hrs total. My time on the 600k was about 35 hrs. Thanks Larry.

I next rode two back to back 200k's in DC that started on a Friday night at 8 PM in late June – simulating the PBP evening start. I started too fast, hanging with the DC crowd for the first 40 miles – I paid for that during the next 24 hours. I finished the first 200k in good form, but I put at least 10 bonus miles in: My GPS wasn't working this week either – it turns out all that was wrong was the memory card wasn't seated right after I changed batteries. The second 200k had many nasty 10% rollers, which ripped me up pretty good. The start/end control was on the top of a mountain. At the bottom of the mountain at the end of the second 200k something bad happened to my drive-train, and it locked up. It turns out several mounting screws for my granny gear had loosened up and stripped. One of the screws put a big dent in my frame. I walked up the last hill. When arriving originally, I had planned to ride a third 200k the next day – however, I didn't both because of the mechanical, and several more reasons: (1) I got the keys lessons – both what an 8 PM start felt like, and what starting too fast feels like – learned. (2) I would need Sunday to both get home and recover – otherwise I would have missed Monday at work. This trip I slept in the back of my minivan for the first time. Amazingly comfortable – though being exhausted likely helped.

The PA 400k and 600k tore up my knees a bit in May, and the DC back-to-back 200ks in June exhausted me. I rode between 100 and 200 miles a week in July, and tapered the last two weeks before PBP. The Mon Valley Century was the Sunday before I left – I bailed after 70 miles rather than risking some exhaustion – a good plan. My taper seemed ideal, and I started PBP healthy and feeling good.

Changes for the future:

- Move away from my beloved half-step and granny front chain-rings to conventional 1-1/2 step between the big two chain-rings.
- I am going to experiment with bike sandals, which also means I have to move from Speed-play X to Frog cleats. This avoids the feet swelling and nerve damage issue, plus is a more walkable shoe, less prone to fouling.
- A new saddle. I have a Selle Anatomica slotted saddle on order. I was waiting until the reported stretching problems with these saddles was over, but at this point it is worth the experiment.
- Train more for the French rollers. Their rolling hills have twice the elevation gain of Pennsylvania rolling hills.

Final Thoughts:

- I had planned to use a Mobal cell phone, but I managed to destroy it the day before the ride. In retrospect, I am glad that happened. The web reports of my control times made a

much better impression on my friends, acquaintances, and family than I would have – they thought better of me than I would have presented myself.

- I did PBP largely because it is a long epic bike ride with history. However, I was truly surprised how my family, friends, and acquaintances responded to it. It became more special for me because it was so special for them.

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