

PARIS-BREST-PARIS – 18 to 22 August 2003**Keith & Gillian Helyar****(Received 26 June, 2004)**

At last our report on the Paris-Brest-Paris (PBP) ride 18 to 22nd August, 2003. We arrived in Paris on the 18th July so had a month to train for the event after our hectic departure from Wagga, Gillian travelling direct to Paris after consigning the bikes as unaccompanied baggage and Keith going via Brazil for a conference 2 weeks prior. During the month in France we were able to get a lot of training in (1500 to 2000 km) that included about 300 km of the PBP route and rides up to about 300 km in one day. This took us to somewhere near the fitness level we had achieved in Australia for the qualifying rides in about mid-April. Some of this period was very hot in France, some days up to 40 degrees and many above 35. However we had learned our dehydration lessons from last year and did not suffer greatly, although we did some lying around under trees from 13.00 to about 17.00 on the hottest days and did some night riding. The latter was good training for the ride and a good test of our lighting system.

So much for training. The ride started on Monday night 18th August. After a good sleep in the afternoon and a cafeteria style meal put on by the organisation, we had a shower and went to the start point in the hope of seeing the specialist bikes (recumbents, tandems, etc) start (scheduled for 21.45). We missed them however because we had to take our place in the line-up for our own start. As it happened we were scheduled to start at 22.00 hrs but our group of about 400 - 600 riders did not start until 22.45, three other groups having started at quarter hour intervals ahead of us.

Statistics and route:

The official distance was 1225 km but our speedos read more, about 1250 km. The difference may have been due to our speedo calibration or to a peculiarity in the way they calculate the distance; one person suggested that the distances to traverse villages was not included. We have a good record of our progress from the internet site (thanks to Ray Stenhouse) but will not get the brevet cards until they are posted to us in about Feb, 04. After looking over the records we are sorry that we did not record the times we left various control points and feeding stations. This would have allowed us to see how good or poor we were at 'keeping on the bike' and minimising stop times (memory fades quickly, especially when tired!). The route was always on quiet roads and easy to find without a map. There were special arrows (silver reflective heads with pink tails on the way out and blue tails on the way home) at all intersections where there was a change of direction, and 'straight through' intersections did not have arrows. Only the heads were strongly reflective so at night we had to get pretty close to them to ensure which direction they were pointing. This also meant most intersections had to be checked closely where there was not a guiding stream of riders. Near the finish, arrows were painted on the road and were very easy to follow (During subsequent riding in France we often came across coloured arrows on the roads that are used to guide scheduled rides. Different colours are used for different rides and appear to be paper stick-on arrows that wear out over a week or two, so are not a long term problem).

During the ride the scenery was constantly changing and there is a particularly good view from Roc Trevesel onto the coastal plain near Brest. There were some short, hard climbs and some longer climbs, but these were at a good gradient. Overall the flat spots were rare, most of the route being rolling.

The start of the ride was very pleasant, a temperature of about 20-22 degrees (the hot weather had been left behind just in time, that is within the last week) a buzz of excitement and a Police escort for the first few kilometres where there was plenty of scope for taking the wrong road. The first 10 or so km actually were somewhat different from the route described in our guidance material so the escort was great. At the start the pace was good at about 25 km/hr. After the start there were no difficulties with the route for the first 450 km to a place called Loudeac because

there was always someone in sight during the day and a string of tail lights in front during the night. Apart from that we had ridden much of this section during training.

Our first stop was at Montagne au Perche, a scheduled food stop that was very welcome but introduced us to line-ups that often meant that these cafeteria style food halls meant a stop of at least 1 hour to check in, eat and get going again. It was sometimes also tricky to find toilets, showers, sleeping places, and food halls efficiently. Any fiddling about consumed minutes rather rapidly so this is something to get on top of if one is to spend least time off the bike. Most of our stops were at least 1 hour which was much longer than we were used to on previous rides.

Sleep:

We rode the 452 km to Loudeac (arriving at about 00.45 on Tuesday night) before attempting a proper sleep - we wasted 30 mins or so in a line up for a bed before deciding that we should curl up on a patch of lawn with our thermals and our space blankets around us. This was quite successful and we had about 2.5 hours then got going again, after breakfast and getting fresh clothes from our bag in the Australian support base, and riding into the dawn. We had had one 15 minute power nap" before Loudeac, and we had another the following morning but were able to get to Brest and nearly back to Loudeac before we had a second power-nap before we stopped at Loudeac for our second substantial sleep. This time we scored a bed - a stretcher with a blanket in a hall full of sleeping bodies - and had about 2 hours again (Wednesday night). On the last night we had about 1 hour - on a mattress in a hall this time - at Montagne le Perche. We were cutting the time a bit fine then if we had problems with us our bikes so were not comfortable spending more time sleeping. We had about 6 of the 15 minute power naps" over the whole period, and found them extraordinarily effective - we stopped if either of us was getting a bit hazy, and it was certainly better than dropping off the bike!! Gillian became a bit dopey getting on the bike and fell over 3 times getting on! (partly because the bike pedals overlap the wheel which becomes a problem at low speeds)

Physical problems:

We were amazed that we were not more fatigued, and in fact after we arrived back we stayed up and went out to dinner on Friday evening!!!! We slept pretty well that night though!! Gillian had a painful knee at about 200 km which persisted for 100kms, and which had never been a problem before. It went away within 5 minutes of taking a 'Neurofen'" so the psychological power of this pill is worth bottling! She also had some nausea on the last morning but this was probably due to the constriction around the stomach of 2 sets of nics and one set of longs, and disappeared once it was warm enough to dispense with the longs. The 2 nics were for the sore bum problem which was bad enough for "paxyl" but better than she had dreaded after bad experiences on the qualifying rides (longest being 600 km). Keith had problems with his gut over quite a lot of the ride, but was better than on some previous rides. His gut liked fruit, rice pudding and sweet things but unfortunately objected to too much bread and pasta, etc. However this problem did not force him to stop eating which could have forced him to withdraw. Keith only had one persistent episode with his arrhythmia which settled at a lunch spot but kept our speed lower than usual for Thursday morning. We both have had some persistent foot numbness since the PBP, but it is gradually resolving and has been interesting more than disabling (nearly totally gone by now - 27th November or 3 months later, but including a further 4500 km riding in that period). We never at any stage got to a point of feeling we should pull out.

Creature Comforts:

We changed nicks at Loudeac each time but otherwise wore the same clothes the whole way, partly because we liked to display the Australian jersey. Gill found the absence of a bra was most comfortable. The space blankets proved very effective and were quite durable (In fact we have been using them since as a groundsheet under the tent floor and the second one under our sleeping mats inside the tent, with still only a small tear in the one used for a groundsheet after three months camping. This has been very effective in keeping us dry in the rain and on very wet

soils.). It was also good to carry some warm clothes for the cold nights, baby wipes for a face and hand washer and supplementary snacks such as glucose lollies and your favourite snack bars.

We had only one cold shower at Tintineac on the trip out (Wed. am). We had some saddle soreness but minimised this with liberal doses of silicone and eventually Paxyl (antiseptic and anaesthetic) on the return journey. Wee stops by the roadside were preferable to fighting for a position in the often grotty toilets at the check points. In general food was good at the check points. Brest was a bit average and Montagne was especially good. Along the way there were villages with bars open 24 hours and some bakeries were open at most times also. The village of

Psychological:

The French people were most encouraging, even at ungodly hours we encountered people beside the road calling 'courage' and 'ali ali' (go, go). Gorran made a special effort with lively music playing along the route and lots of encouraging signs and spectators. Other Australians, especially volunteers who looked after bags and us in general at Loudeac, Montagne au Perche and Nogent Le Roi were greatly appreciated. Phil Bellette saved Keith a lot of worry by lending him a tyre and tube as a backup for the last day when he had a slow leak that he couldn't detect when the tube was removed. Chatting with other riders from different countries created a 'family' atmosphere and the camaraderie before and after the ride kept the spirits high. The country of other riders was often easily guessed because many wore their national jerseys and this helped opening conversations. We did not experience any post-ride depression, rather we enjoyed a good rest and lots of food.

Weather:

In short the weather was magnificent. There was no rain or fog, it was not too hot in the day and there was virtually no wind. The mornings were cold and the nights cool but having adequate thermal socks and shirts, longs and full fingered gloves meant we did not get cold at any time.

Progress report:

The first 450 km to Loudeac went very well and took us nearly 26 hours, so just into Wednesday morning. The ride from Loudeac to Carhaix-Plougher on Wednesday morning was pleasant, up-hill generally and on back roads. We needed to take care with directions on this section because the stream of riders was getting sparse.

Carhaix - Plougher to Brest was up hill then down but not difficult anywhere. We passed Peter Dixon, on his way back from Brest, about 20 km before Brest. We had a very pleasant ride down to the harbour and across an old bridge reserved for pedestrians and cycles. The final 6 km from the harbour to the check-in point was an unexpected killer, mostly a quite significant climb that was worse because we had not been expecting it. We arrived at Brest control only one minute inside the official schedule time but were happy and Keith enjoyed the free beer.

We had an inefficient changeover here , partly because of the relaxing effect of the beer, partly because Keith thought the extra 10 hours for the return trip meant we were in good shape and thirdly because just after getting going again Keith got a puncture. So after arriving at 14.45 it was not until near 17.00 before we were flying again. The ride back to Loudeac was easy to Carhaix-Plougher but more difficult to Loudeac with navigation a little difficult on the small roads with many turns and little other bike traffic. We arrived there about 03.20. After 2 hours sleep Thursday morning saw a good ride to Tintineac, arriving 11.39. We found that fatigue was not really becoming a problem till Thursday night when the climbs between Villaines au Juhel and Montagne au Perche were a challenge. On this section we picked up Tim and the three of us kept each other awake and alert. We had 2 tiger naps, one just after La Hutt and a second between Mammers and Montagne. A coffee at a cafe just before Mammers was also good for dousing our fatigue.

Friday was a day of managing fatigue after only 1 hour sleep at Montagne (4.30 to 5.30). We started at about 6.00 am at Montagne au Perch and were approaching Senonches before we had our first power nap for the day, leaning up against a bale of hay on a space blanket facing the rising sun. This was a magnificent and memorable 10 minutes, a great way to warm up as well as to get a brief sleep on this cold morning. Our last meal stop was at Nogent le Roi after a good run on the relatively flat section from Senonches. Here we were looked after by one of the Australian voluntary helpers (???) who guided us efficiently to the food, toilets and water points, convinced us not to take an hours sleep, and got us back on the bikes quickly. The last 50 km or so involved one more power-nap at the edge of a forest (Gambai) and a ride through territory familiar from our training time. We were both consuming lollies and Keith was drinking chocolate that his stomach did not object to. Adrenaline kept us going in this period so no more sleep was needed. We finished on a 'high' with the police escorting us through red lights over the last few km and we were both quite emotional after we checked in and realised that we had actually successfully completed the ride in 88 hours - 2 hours to spare!

We still stayed up till about 10 pm although Keith only picked at his lunch and dinner while Gillian gobbled food with relish. It turns out Gillian is by far the toughest of this pair.