

PBP 2007 via Tandem

By Bob Waddell 9/5/2007

I've been hearing lot's of tales of woe from PBP. It certainly ended with a significantly higher DNF rate than in previous years. The weather was probably the most detrimental factor for riders. Not that the weather was that severe, but it can be a serious demotivator. Anyone that finished certainly had to convince themselves that it was easier to ride to the end than to find alternate transportation back to the start.

Patti Von Niessen and I had a great ride. We decided to do the pre-ride meal at 6:30PM thinking that we would have plenty of time to get to the start after eating. We waited in a long line for 40 minutes as we stared at the rain clouds moving in. During supper, Patti was able to trade her girly Ontario jersey for another equally girly jersey with a former Brit that is now riding with a French club in the Loire region. She was elated. Since we were riding our tandem, our start was 30 minutes ahead of the first wave of 90 hour starters. We rushed to the start, getting lost along the way and then finding 3000 90-hour single bikes were already lining up. We had to fight our way through the crowd to check in and find the starting line. Panic time! We made it. It was a good thing we didn't need to go through a thorough bike check. As we stood in line, ready to start, I realized that, in the rush to get to the starting line, I hadn't filled my water bottles. Patti had 2 full bottles so we decided to worry about it later. Seeing so many riders waiting to ride and thousands of spectators at the start and lining the streets for the first 15km of the ride was a real rush. We saw Don and Phyllis Hamilton and Paul Rozelle at the start cheering us on. As the starting gun went off, the sound must have been just enough to pierce the rain clouds. It seemed to be the signal to start the rains that would prevail for the better part of the next 80 hours. As special machines of all sorts jockeyed for position on the route to Trappes people cheered us on as we followed the motorcade through Voisin, Montigny, Elancourt, Trappes and on to Monfort. As we rolled through one of the villages, we heard one of the first casualties behind us. A faringed recumbent (banana boat) must have struck one of the cobbled medians. All we could hear was the scraping of fiberglass as it slid along the road and the clash of other bikes we imagined must have been tangled up in the crash. We moved on hoping that everyone was unscathed. Stopping would have surely created more problems.

That was the start. As the pack thinned out, maintaining control became less strained as the rolling hills of the forêt de Rambouillet. As we approached the tee at Gambaiseuil a group of cyclists came to a stop as they searched for the reflective directional arrow. It wasn't visible. A motorcade driver motioned to go left. We sped off in that direction with a group of about 20 special machines. Something felt strange about this direction. I was wishing that I had my GPS which I left behind for the sake of the weight, battery hassles and peace on the tandem. As we approached an intersection we discovered a PBP marker indicating an acute left turn. Very strange, basically back in the basic direction we had come from. I did a double check to make sure it was an outbound arrow and the whole group followed it. At the next intersection we ran into a group of riders that we assumed must have been some 80-hour riders that had strayed off course and were correcting their mistake. After trying to converse in French and Dutch with a few riders, we determined that this must be the first wave of 90-hour riders outbound on the correct

path. We had been given a bum steer. The route must have been too short for us, so adding an extra 17km seemed appropriate though unnecessary. ☺ Back on course, we descended through the forêt once again. Déjà vu. This time we made sure the turn at Gambaiseuil was in deed to the right towards Gambais. I discovered the arrow about 20 feet to the right of the intersection. Later we missed one other intersection, but it only cost us 2km. The rest of the ride we were very cautious about following other riders like lemmings off of a cliff. As we rode into one town, I noticed a group of villagers cheering riders and supplying water. This was a welcome oasis. They were very generous and we were very gracious to have our water bottles topped off so that we could make our way to Mortagne au Perche without the worries of a shortage of liquids.

Prior to PBP Patti and I had ridden with a group of tandems in the States and one of the rigs was equipped with a bell. Patti had to have one, so I found a nice sounding brass bell to mount on the stoker bar. We found that the tandem was like a locomotive on the downhills and Patti would ring the bell incessantly to warn the upcoming riders that they were about to be passed. On the way up the inclines the tandem suddenly reverted to freight train mode, chug, chug chugging toward the summits as the bikes we had just passed regained their status in front of us. We made a game of this maneuver for all of the 1246km of the event. We would smile and chuckle as we heard riders exclaiming, "Here they come again".

We didn't look forward to the rains, but we didn't let it get us down either. We were prepared for it and kept our cores warm even though there was no hope of staying dry. We spent lots of time in the controls socializing, refueling with big meals and slathering with Assos cream. Fortunately the temperatures did not drop very much at nights. We kept a steady pace along the route and were able to build enough time to sleep 3 hours each night in the controls. We must have been slightly ahead of the largest mass of 90 hour riders as finding showers and beds was relatively painless. When we woke from our naps there were bodies everywhere, sleeping on the floors, under tables, in chairs, anywhere. It looked like a refugee camp, especially at Loudeac.

We experienced one flat tire as we approached Fougère after riding through glass at a round-a-bout. We thought we had made it through but after 2km we found ourselves embracing tools and pumps in the rain just 2km from the control. After the turn around at Brest we discovered we had another slow leak and decided to change the tire rather than risk losing another tube. We were fortunate to not have any serious mechanical issues. We did use a lot of chain lube and adjusted the timing chain once. Neither of us experienced any serious saddle or foot pains although I ended up with some numbness as a result of the extended time with pressure on some vital nerves on roads with coarser aggregate than we are used to in the US. The wounds will heal with time. It's a small price to pay for the experience of riding PBP.

We had a fantastic ride. It was great to chat with other riders on all types of bikes along the way. We shared stories and occasionally helped to pull a group of weary riders to the next control. It is always fascinating to see the people in the towns at 3AM in the morning in the rain, serving café and cookies and providing encouraging words of "Bon

Courage.” That alone is enough motivation to plod forward into the headwinds and rain. For me, the worst part of the ride was the last 5km into Saint Quentin. The traffic lights and mid-day traffic made for a very slow finish at a time when we wanted to barrel into the finish. Those thoughts vanished as we made our way around Rond Pont des Saulles, where the crowds of spectators cheered for us even though we didn’t have an impressive finish time. It was just before 1PM as we rolled up the wooden ramp to the gymnasium with so much exuberance that I forgot about the length of the tandem and bumped the large chainring on the curb. Luckily there was no damage. This was one of the few times during the event that we were able to ride without rain jackets. WooHoo! Our official time was 88:00 hours by the time we made it to the control station. For this event, that’s perfect. The pleasure of the journey is so much more important than the speed.

This was my second PBP and Patti’s first. Riding it with Patti on the tandem was truly a great experience. Thank you, Patti, for being there with me.

The attached finish photo was taken by Peter Grant . Thanks, Peter. It’s so much better than the rain gear clad riders in all of the official photographer’s photos.

Bob Waddell

