

PBP for dummies

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Who does not know what [Paris-Brest-Paris](#) is about? If you're in that odd case, please learn that it's probably the most popular long distance cycling event, held in France for more than a century, with, this year, 6000 riders on the start line, only 2000 of them being French. The rest of them comes from the entire planet. Time limit is 90 hours, it's not a race it's a "randonnée", but to finish within the time limit, one needs either to push strong on one's pedals, or not sleep much, sometimes (very often) both.

I was there [in 2011](#) and I found it so great I told myself "hey, I want to do ten of those!" and as it's held every 4 years, I need to be riding until 2047, included. By that time I'll be 72 years old. Complicated but well, I think I can do it. At least I'm going to try. To do PBP, I gave up participating in the [6 jours de France](#) organized by my friend [Gérard Cain](#). PBP is important for me. It's not the hardest stuff I've done, but it's a strong symbol for me. I can't miss this. This is why when [I fell on a qualifying 300k](#), breaking my collarbone in April, I felt really stupid and depressed. I still managed to qualify by riding two 600k in June ([Mours](#) and [Flins](#)) instead of one. So in this August, Sunday 16th 2015, I'm here on the start line! I start at 5 pm, I expect myself to achieve the same kind of overall time than 4 years ago (slightly below 60 hours) and arrive in the night between tuesday and wednesday. Might prove hard, but hey, let's give it a try.

Other members of my cycling club [UVA](#) are starting later. Their names follow (hope I didn't forget anyone) :

- Dominique LEFEBVRE

- Alain SCOUARNEC
- Eric ARUTA
- Christian DURAND
- Christine DURAND
- Yves CARTIER
- Ludovic VAYSETTES

Sunday night fever

Start is quite fast, according to my standards. I thought that by starting with the E group (5th group), the last of the "below 80h" series, I would be more or less in a calm, quiet area. Wrong, they are pushing it strong in front. Or maybe I can't keep up because I'm too weak and slow. It's true that with my May month "off", I have less than 3000 miles since January 1st, including everything, the qualifying brevets and my daily 7 commuting miles. It's not that much, even considering I run and walk a lot.

On the first 30 miles, I witness three crashes. A stupid guy trying to pass people on the left and fell in the middle of nowhere. Another one who has been pushed right in the ditch on the side of the road. A third one, an American from Seattle, gets stuck by the fellow before him, who tried and failed to switch gears while climbing a short, yet steep, local climb. The American (I will meet him a couple of times from now, but do not know it yet) has lost his rear red light. I pick it up and handle it back to him. He wouldn't have noticed, should I have not been here. Still, a light can prove usefull at night...

I'm disappointed as Nigel, with whom I'd been riding the [400 Flins](#) could not be here today, because of health issues. Damn.

I try to stay within the main group but soon I feel I'd better give up with that tactic. Yeah right, I'm going to loose some efficiency by riding alone with the wind in my face. But at least I won't be permanently at a strong, draining pace. If I insist on keeping up with the group, I might just overdo it and explode. We'll see later, anyway giving my start time, there are plenty of

groups behind me, I can easily find other ones.

Arriving in Mortagne feels different from last time. A lot less people. I think I really must be a backpacker at that time, the main group is ahead. Oh well.

It's a little chilly at night, I wish I had taken one more warm layer. In the middle of the night, in a village, I see a group of youngsters, and I feel so sleepy that I offer them a deal : "do you have a watch?". Yes. So I just let myself fall asleep on the sidewalk, asking them to wake me up 5 minutes after. At their signal, I'm back on the road again. They ask me for a water bottle as a souvenir. I would gladly give one to them, but **after** all this is over, because for now, I do really need it, as I have no assistance whatsoever. Those 5 minutes help me concentrating, stay alive on the road. During my qualifying brevets, I didn't want to fall and risk to jeopardize PBP. Now that I'm doing PBP I think of the [48h in Royan](#) or, even more important, the [6 days in Johannesbourg](#). So, I'm very cautious.

To Brest

It's easy to divide a PBP in chunks, as it's nothing more than two 600k back to back. The way to Brest is OK but really, I can not ride in groups. 4 years ago I was with my friend Emmanuel Conraux (with whom I did the [Raid 28](#) this year in January), I thought we were riding strong but loosing much precious time at checkpoints. This time I try to be quick and efficient at the controls, but in between... well pretty much everyone is passing me but as they go idle at checkpoints, I always ride with more or less the same people.

During the first night, I manage to get lost. Well, **we** manage to get lost, as a group. We were riding quite strong, a big dozen of us, then "hey, it's on the left!". Really? And then, I follow the others. My GPS was stopped to save batteries and because, you know, everyone is aware that "it's impossible to get lost on PBP, especially at the beginning". In fact, there was no left turn, the correct route was straight ahead. This we realize after 3 or 4

miles, when we can't see any more signs. At this point I check with my electronic device and... yeah, right, we're off the official track. This is no big deal but still annoying. A little later I do another blunder, alone this time. The scenery and possibly fatigue too distract me from my duties and I miss a right turn. I lost another 4 miles. Well, I'll survive.

My right brake lever is getting loose. What a crap. It never causes any trouble and now, right on D day, it decides to offer me some extra challenge. As I have think extra cushioning on my handle bar, there's no real risk that it falls apart, but still. In Loudeac, I stop at the mechanics for a quick fix. It was harder for me with my small all-in-one tool. As a side note, I think it's stupid to take 4 spare tire tubes as did, as they are some for sale at every check point. This is PBP, not a lonely 1000k in the middle of nowhere.

When climbing Roc Trevezel, I ride in front of a group for quite a long time. I did not do it that much until now as groups always ride too strong for me. And as I fight the wind alone the rest of time, I do not feel like it's necessary to blow myself away on such task. But anyway, I'm climbing with a steady rythm, with people getting less wind in my tail, and as we get on top one of them even thanks me for the pace, which was, it seems, well chosen. I'm happy. It doesn't last long. As we go downhill I just feel like I have no energy left, I'm done. What happens? 350 miles and I'm exhausted? I should talk about that to my doctor ;)

Then I'm in Brest. I call [Valérie](#) and give her instructions so that she can call my boss and tell him that no, I won't be at work on wednesday as I initially hoped to. My optimistic side thought it would be possible, before I started. But now, I'm in Brest after a 27:30 ride, it's 8:30 pm as I get to the control. Sure it's even faster than my fastest 600k this year, but it's not enough to get under 60 hours. I just know it, on the way back one needs to

sleep, and the pace is slower anyway. So I decide to sleep 40 minutes now, before climbing back again. Strange, you have to pay to sleep. 4 euros. Oh well, I can afford that. At least there are some available beds. One offers me to shower. Hey, aren't you insinuating that I'm dirty and stink, you fools!

Back to Paris

I get ready to ride again and hear people chating by my side, their conversation gives the impression that the rider they're crewing is a runner who is just trying PBP as a side quest. I might know him. I ask for his name. Gérard Habasque. Unfortunately, I do not have the pleasure to know him personally, but his name sounds familiar, he's a [Trans Gaule](#) runner, and generally speaking, the kind of ultra runner I could typically meet on a track.

Then, we ride together.

He pulls ahead in a small town as I stop in a bar which is closing, but might as well, before closing, server me an ultimate cup of coffee along with a good coke full of fizzy bubbles.

I'm freezing as I go up Roc Trevezel. Yes, really, I needed an extra layer. In the downhill I picture a truck which is going to pass two guys just before me. Meanwhile another truck is going uphill, the other way, and passes riders as well. The downhill truck... finally brakes and dodges at the last time. I dunno wether those two guys realized what happened in their backs but hell, life is a thin rope. And there was nothing they could do better, they were riding on the extreme right end of the road, with lights, yellow jackets and all. Let me think about something else.

In Carhaix, I feel I need a strong sleep before attacking the rest of the road. No need to be a hero, I'm already half sleeping on the bike. It's 2:50 am, I ask to be woken up at 4:45. At 3:25 "wake up!". I just get out of bed, start to get ready and. Wait... this is too early! I hesitate... Oh, and f*ck it, I'm exhausted, and

get back to sleep. At 4:45 am, I get woken up as expected. The 1st time was just a plain mistake. Everyone can make a blunder, bad things happen.

So well, I'm riding again.

It's still very hard to follow groups. It's true I almost did no "standard workout" in a Sunday morning group. My training is just composed of 7 miles to go to work on a fixie in the morning, 7 miles back in the evening, the qualifying brevets, and plain running. That's it. I feel awkward in groups, once I'm in one of them, I'm longing to leave it. I try and match with people who enjoy my intermediate pace, but we always get passed by faster guys, try to stay it, then blow up and end up alone. Oh well, it's not that bad. At least I know why training is valuable. There's some justice in this cycling sport. Especially on long distances. Efforts when training get rewarded. It pays. Conversely...

But I won't complain, I'm happy to be here, and things are going rather well. I might have not been on the start line at all this year. The weather is nice, and the only thing that is being scratched is my ego, but it has been through harsher times. I won't die.

Second night is coming. I sleep in Villaines la Juhel, a nice memorable town, on both ways. The people keep on speaking to me in English. Hey you know I speak French too! Really? Oh yeah, and you speak well! You bet, I studied hard before coming here... ;)

This rest (an hour and a half) has a fantastic, immediate effect. I'm just going super speed, I pass people, groups, even if I'm alone, I don't care and just push it hard. Hey, what about a 66h finish (devilish!) or maybe even 65h? My dreams end up soon. After 25 miles, I'm seized by extreme fatigue, I mumble in the night, feel dizzy. All the people I passed before get back on me. A good lesson to learn, never overdo it. I get awakened by the

rumbling of my bike as I'm riding in the grass between the road and the ditch. Now it's **really** time to take a rest but it's all wet and cold over here, there's no way to stop.

So I push it up to the next town, I think it was Saint Rémy du Val. And then, there's a shop open. It's soon 4 am. I buy a bag of monster munch chips and a pack of four coffee flavored dessert creams. The shop owner is very nice with us. He has set up tables on the sidewalk so that we kind enjoy his products comfortably seated. Then he tells us we can sleep if we want to. Are you serious? I accept without much hesitation. And beware, we're not sleeping just anywhere. No, he's prepared a full room with several inflated mattresses, he keeps a board with who's sleeping on each slot, at what time people need to be woken up. A professional. At 4:30 am I wake up and go. My bike, I could bring it in the shop, for it not to be stolen. When I say "in the shop", I mean right in the shopping lanes. That kind of encounter which makes you think that there are definitely still some cool fellows out there.

Finish

The end of the road is without much surprises, I speed up a bit as a squadron of crazy guys flies over at a speed maybe 10 miles per hour faster than what I would do naturally. It's true this Mortagne - Dreux section has some really fast sections if you're in the right group.

Then I finish pretty much all by myself, it starts to be quite hot now. To beat my personal record, now, it's definitely over, as 4 years ago I arrived at 3 am and now it's already past midday. But still, I did it, finished PBP, and I'm happy with it. It can happen such a bunch of unexpected and frustrating stuff on such an event, that I think I did it quite right.

To do for next time: train and ride faster. And maybe I would even give a try to a late start, maybe even on monday morning. To be challenged. I still have 8 tries to make experiments.

