

The Mad Badgers ride PBP 2015 - Paris-Brest-Paris...or Pasta Bloody Pasta?

Paris-Brest-Paris – a 1200km cycle ride from Paris to Brest, and back again, to be completed in under 90 hours. Now organised by Audax Club Parisien this is the oldest and most prestigious audax randonneuring event in the world. First started in 1891 the event was held every 10 years until the 1930s as a professionals + amateurs event, and then, after World War II, every four years as a purely amateur event. The 2015 event was the 18th edition in its current format. Just to qualify and enter the Mad Badgers, Richard and myself, had to ride a 1000km event in 2014 and 200km, 300km, 400km, and 600km events in spring 2015.

Sunday August 16th, the start date, was soon upon us. We stood outside the French National Velodrome in St Quentin-en-Yveline in the southern suburbs of Paris in the company of over 6000 other cyclists. I've never seen as much colourful lycra in one place before. A blur of brand logos competed for space on tops and shorts with the national flag colours of 54 different nationalities. The variety of bikes nearly matched the ethnic diversity. Tandems, tridems, three-wheelers, three-wheeled tandems, Bromptons, recumbents, fold-ups, bullet bikes, steel, aluminium, titanium, carbon... Cheered on by thousands of spectators we were set off in waves over the space of 5 hours from 4pm, giant peletons of 300 riders at a time; an intermingling, five abreast snake of riders behind a lead car for 10km before stretching apart into more discreet groups of adrenaline fuelled randonneurs.



We'd loaded the route onto our GPSs for navigation purposes. We needn't have bothered. Every junction had arrows pointing us in the right direction... and we just followed the cyclists in front...the long, long line of cyclists, some in groups, others solo. As it got dark it was like being part of an infinite string of red fairy lights. Looking back we were dazzled by the array of super bright LEDs chasing us down. Our planned "steady away" start was blown away as usual by over zealousness, fast roads and some exhilarating peleton riding. We were sucked along at 28kph with 200km passing in just over 8 hours

despite brief stops for food. On through the first night feeling great until the pre-dawn. A strong coffee kept us going and we pedalled on as the sun rose.

Jane had booked in a campsite just near the 365km mark. We joined her an hour earlier than our conservative schedule and bagged a couple of hours kip. Away again into our second night of riding and the pace slowed and minds wandered. In the small hours both of us, while still riding, fell asleep briefly and experienced “waking up” in the saddle, fortunately not while on a bend. Whether asleep for a few seconds or microseconds we’ll never know but this is definitely the most dangerous aspect of long distance audaxes. Another hour and a half’s fitful sleep curled up on the floor of a school hall, 88km before the half way point, did little to shake us out of our mental lethargy. On, On...at 5am on pitch black forest roads we persevered. While more coffee, Pro Plus tablets and chocolate coated coffee beans gave us a short lived buzz, it was the second sunrise which finally induced wakefulness, if not increased pace.

The biggest hill of the ride was a long gradual up and over with a snaking descent to the River L’Elorn estuary and the pedestrianised Albert Louppe Bridge over to Brest. Through mid-morning traffic we weaved our way to the half way checkpoint, cheered in by big crowds. We were hungry but were faced again by a lack of choice of food. Pasta, pasta or pasta seemed to be the main menu of every checkpoint. We felt lucky to get rice at one stop. Unlike UK events you had to pay for all the food and drink. Not at extortionate prices but over three and a half days riding the cost soon mounts up. While counterbalanced by the relatively cheap entry fee, with any profits from food going back into the communities hosting the checkpoint, I still prefer free food events...and will no doubt be unable to face another morsel of pasta for the foreseeable future!

The support from the French public throughout the ride was amazing. Outside every one of the 18 checkpoints the crowds were there to shout encouragement. People stood at junctions and old boys by the side of the road in the countryside. Women leaned out of first floor windows and families with children gathered outside their gardens as we rode past. Every one of them cheering and whooping, “Allez allez, Bon courage”. The kids all put out their hands for high fives as we rode past. Some had set up little stalls by the side of the road with water, juice, coffee, cake and biscuits...for free. Amazing.

Although the big hill we'd ridden down now had to be re-climbed it felt easier, no doubt due to the psychological effect of reaching halfway and now riding for home. The day wore on and with it the sleepiness returned. "You fancy half an hour's kip?" I asked. "You bet" Richard replied. We spotted a grassy roundabout with a tree to shade us and were soon snoring. Waking to our half hour alarm we found ourselves in the company of about 10 French folk, cheering on the never ending line of riders. They asked us where we were from, how we were feeling, and why did we do it? We replied in our best pigeon French. Then, looking quizzically at me, they asked, "And how old are YOU?"

Our third night in the saddle brought culinary redemption when we spotted a pizzeria. They appeared to take the arrival of a locust swarm of cyclists ordering les grande pizzas in their stride. A few hours down the road disaster struck. Just after midnight my rear cassette gear cable snapped and the chain dropped onto the small sprocket. Pedalling now became exceptionally strenuous, particularly up any sort of incline. Standing in the pedals I managed to ride the 5km or so to the next checkpoint only to find that there was no mechanic. Despite fuddled brains we managed to get the chain fixed onto one of the larger sprockets by lashing the broken cable to my back rack. I managed to "single speed" the 26km to the next checkpoint where, to my relief, a mechanic replaced the offending cable in 20 minutes. We rejoined Jane on the campsite at 865km for a very welcome shower, three-hours sleep and bean stew for breakfast.

Another day wheeled past. The distances between checkpoints visited on the way out had somehow grown. "Are we there yet?" became an unuttered mantra. The focus on pain from ass bones was occasionally dispelled when we roused ourselves to jump on the back of peletons, and be pulled along by the train. A couple of close calls on roundabouts highlighted the need for complete focus on the riders' wheels in front and to the sides. Any aberrant deviation in line could result in a major pile up. Such concentration and the sudden high accelerations needed to hold the line kept us awake better than the cocktail of caffeine we'd been taking. However, at 4am, having reached the penultimate checkpoint with 65 km to go, and with eight hours to do it in, we grabbed an hour and a half's sleep on a gymnasium floor. Despite the deep sleep of the well knackered I still woke up 10 seconds before my watch alarm

went off. Weird how the mind is not going to let you miss the looming deadline of the big event of your year.

Six hours to ride 64 km. Piss easy...or so it should have been. We'd aimed to finish by 9am when there'd be a decent crowd to cheer us in. However, with 30km to go, just as it started to rain heavily for the first time on the ride, Richard's quad finally gave up in protest at the ludicrous distance we'd ridden. Unable to put any power through it he laboured up the often steep hills pedalling with one leg! The last 20km seemed to be stuck in a time warp with the 5km markers taking an age to materialise. At last, we saw the velodrome, and 88 hours and 15 minutes after our grand depart we rolled over the finish line to the cheers of hundreds of bedraggled onlookers. PBP was in the bag... our third mega-ride in three years. "Never again" we agreed as we shook hands and patted each other on the back. Knackered but euphoric, we were welcomed into the velodrome for the post event meal...you guessed it... bloody pasta!

Phil Hodgson & Richard Leonard

– **The Mad Badgers**