

Celebrating Endurance at Paris - Brest - Paris 2007

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My wife calls it my "restless leg syndrome": As far back as I can remember, I have always been attracted by bicycles and by long distances. At least, I stayed realistic during most of my lifetime. When I read for the first time about Paris - Brest - Paris, some 40 years ago, I instinctively knew that those 1200+ kilometers were out of reach for me. But I enjoyed riding centuries and the occasional 200 km distance, and appreciated the atmosphere of camaraderie and competence in some 200 km brevets I eventually included in my ride calendar. It was on one of those early brevets, only three years ago, that I was intrigued by all the PBP jerseys worn by riders like you and me. And when I made them talk about it, I heard "Yes, you should do it, too. It's only moderately painful." - So I decided to do it. I needed a big goal for the years after my 60th birthday anyway; and the power of T.S. Eliot's quote "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go" became irresistible. After a month or two of letting the decision sink in silently, I casually mentioned my new goal at home in the family. Much to my surprise, my elder son Sebastian said "Me too."

In the end, on Saturday August 18th 2007, nearly the whole family came together at the hotel Amarys in Guyancourt to send off father and son in style on Monday evening, and to be at the finish on Friday afternoon. Dad had bought two extra "Northern California Randonneurs" jerseys for the daughters Valerie and Fabienne. They would use Sebastian's rental car (while he was on the bike and didn't need it) to drive out to the controls of Loudeac and Brest and provide support in family and randonneur spirit. Wearing the matching jerseys should give them extra visibility - and it worked!



Before the start: Sebastian, Fabienne, Ghislaine, Valerie and Joseph

I felt very good at the start. By arriving on Saturday only, Sebastian and I could still use our jet lag to facilitate sleeping on Monday afternoon and to ride through the first night without getting sleepy. My preparation for the big event was spread out over the last two and a half years and went according to plan - mostly. Only some massive and stubborn sinus infections prevented me from racking up the additional brevets and miles planned for April (where I didn't ride at all) and much of May. Nevertheless, I had a pretty good Brevet Week in Wisconsin with Sebastian, end of May, where we covered over 1200km, including our required 600km qualifying brevet; and I added the Santa Cruz 600 just six days later while still under antibiotics. Later in June I finally got rid of the infections and could build up quite nicely for PBP, although the overall mileage was well under the level mandated by conventional wisdom.

After a long, long wait on the tracks of the "Gymnase des Droits de l'Homme", we finally got on the road in the very last wave at 11:15pm in the evening, under the cheering of big crowds and spectacular fireworks. As advised by more experienced "Anciens", we stayed relaxed towards the end of the pack and really enjoyed a pleasant and charming ride through the night. I joked "Don't know what the fuss about PBP is all about: it's so easy!"

At km 70, in Tremblay-les-Villages, just in front of the Boulangerie - Patisserie, the road was blocked by stopped cyclists: Everybody was happy to take advantage of the free bottled water generously distributed by owner and employees of the boulangerie. Can you believe that? This meant thousands of 1.5 liter bottles (for over 5000 riders) and a corresponding substantial amount of Euros they had spent to celebrate the event, not to mention staying up all night, without anything in return other than our "Merci"!

Barely eleven kilometers later, we stopped again: we knew from e-mail lists that Annick and Fred of the "Bar des Sports" in Chateaufort-en-Thymnerais wanted to salute the participants by staying open all night. So far, we had made good time, slightly exceeding the projected average for this early section, and could afford the additional break to demonstrate that this event really is more about the people than about the bikes.

We didn't know yet that soon afterwards, the pleasant and charming night-riding through the French countryside was over. It started to rain, heavier and heavier, and the wind was in our face. Just before, on one of the more strenuous hills, I had announced to Sebastian and our friend John that I would from now on pursue the ride according to *my* optimal pace which was well below theirs. They should not be penalized by waiting for me, and I couldn't really take advantage of drafting them now that the terrain got hillier. We had talked about this before and agreed on it: I needed to hedge my bets for this adventure into the unknown distance and couldn't afford to overextend myself by attempting to stay with riders too strong for me.

The difficult conditions immediately slowed down everybody: uphill, we had to carry the additional weight of water that soaked our clothing (not to mention the headwind), and downhill, we could not compensate for the time lost on the uphill. The lack of visibility in the rain at night was terrifying, and none of us was inclined to take risks. By the time we arrived at Mortagne au Perche, the first stop set up by the organizers for refueling, it was nearly 6am. I was surprised to see Sebastian and John still around in the huge shivering crowd. They didn't seem to be in a hurry to get back on the road as long as it was pitch dark and raining. I myself was looking for some solid food. A long baguette loaded with a fat paté was precisely what I needed - together with a beer which hit the spot. After all, the first 140 km under the given conditions felt like a

solid day of work, and with the 9 hour time difference my biological system was still tuned in to dinner time.

Unfortunately, I don't remember much from the next 80 km to the first control in Villaines-la-Juhel. They must have been difficult because my brevet card got stamped at 10:59am only. Sebastian and John were 40 minutes ahead of me at that point. I remember buying (after some frustrating standing in line, made more annoying by someone pointlessly complaining about the high prices) a large coffee, a pain-au-chocolat and a chausson-aux-raisins which were delicious - and which I swallowed instantly.

Similarly, I would have to go back on the roads through Fougères (km 310) and Tinténiac (km 365) to Loudéac (km 450) to recall noteworthy details. I am pretty sure the conditions continued to be difficult (rain and headwind), and I remember riding often alone. Other riders either were too fast or (more rarely) too slow for me. However, I felt good, was well equipped for the meteorological adversity, didn't have any apparent problems, and often recalled my mantra "Celebrate Endurance". If only I could have been a little faster. The numbers show that I kept losing time in comparison to Sebastian and John: more than 45 minutes to Fougères, an additional half-hour to Tinténiac, and (surprisingly) only 15 minutes on the remaining 85km to Loudeac. We had planned to arrive there well before midnight (maybe as early as 10pm?) for a comfortable sleep break in the reserved hotel room. But even Sebastian and John only arrived after midnight, and they were asleep by the time I arrived and recognized Fabienne who was waiting for me in the rain to guide me through some labyrinth to the control, and from there to the hotel. Valerie was there, too; and after a shower, while eating and drinking, I couldn't stop talking excitedly about the first 26 or 27 hours of my first PBP - until Valerie reminded me that I better get some sleep, now! I had to make up for being slow on the road (and talking too much) by being fast in bed: less than an hour of sleep, and it was early breakfast time for me. I intentionally let Sebastian and John take off ahead of me to demonstrate again that I was following the beat of my own drum.

My careful pacing and my predilection for riding alone allowed me to feel strong. And I was perfectly happy about the absence of any and all of the dreaded items of discomfort so eloquently described in many other long-distance ride reports. This was going to be the best, most thrilling, most satisfying and most rewarding ride of my life! At the Carhaix control (km 526), around 10am, I was only half an hour behind Sebastian and John - better than expected. I don't remember how long I stayed at that control (it was always much more than planned). But I do remember from then on the children at the roadside offering to refill the bottles, to sample their crêpes and cookies; and I was happy to have some RUSA pins for them in exchange. I also remember stopping at a bar in a little town between Carhaix and Brest, shortly after noon, for a big ham and camembert sandwich and a beer (the latter very much frowned upon by my American table neighbor who must have been a believer in the virtue of prohibition. But I explained to him that for grown-up Bavarians like me, beer is one of the fundamental food groups and has particular value on long distance rides).

In addition, the rain had stopped, the clouds diminished, and we got to see more and more blue sky. The wind was still unfavorable; but I hooked up with a nice (somewhat heavy) Frenchman who was just as slow as myself on the uphill and much faster on the flats and downhill. He soon understood that my demonstration of good will by trading pulls on the flatter portions didn't bring him any benefit, and so he just kept going and pulled me along, while I entertained him with my chatting. He seemed to like it enough that eventually - on the long wide open downhill

after Roc Trevezel - he challenged me to try to stay at his rear wheel. This brought us quickly to the control in Brest where we checked in at 3:45pm. Sebastian and John had arrived about 45 minutes earlier, but were still hanging out in the sunny and celebratory atmosphere.



At the control in Brest: Joseph, Fabienne, Valerie and Sebastian

I myself at least felt like celebrating (again and always); my son, in contrast, received me with a statement to the effect that he has had it and that he was packing it in. His hands were getting numb and tingling painfully, with shots along the nerve paths into the forearms. I didn't ask what else was wrong, but I suspected the pinched nerves were only part of the story. Luckily, my daughters (while waiting for us) had made friends with two local gentlemen who knew what to do and what to say. They had rushed home, came back with bubble-wrap and tape, and prepped Sebastian's handlebar such that he had no excuse any more for not continuing. John wasn't lucky either: he had trouble with his pedals and needed to have them replaced, which didn't go as smoothly as the presence of the bike repair shop suggested. Eventually (after some lengthy and very pleasant chatting, eating, drinking and relaxing in the grass and shade) we set out for the way back to Paris. I don't remember the time, but it was later than it should have been. In hindsight, it was not particularly smart to use the best and sunny daylight hours for resting and then be condemned to slogging through the night to make up for the lost time. But then again, the half-way point provided an excellent reason to celebrate; we certainly deserved the rest, and "it's about the people". Should I reveal that the two gentlemen who fixed up Sebastian's handlebar also brought a bottle of wine and a bottle of champagne - together with flutes! - which they urged upon the daughters to take along for the celebration at the finish?

The return route led back over several up- and downhills to the long but very moderately inclined climb to Roc Trevezel. I felt more and more enthusiastic about the whole experience, now that the difficult conditions seemed to be behind us, and strongly believed that we would bring the

nice weather of Brest back to Paris. We encountered more and more supportive and cheerful roadside support groups where people offered all kinds of food and drinks. It was hard not to stop: their joy and excitement was overwhelming when they realized that the guy with the Californian jersey was fluent in French. And it was too hard to refuse the special offer of a glass of excellent wine!

When I tackled the lengthy climb to Roc Trevezel, towards the end of the afternoon, I finally started feeling some preliminary signs of sleepiness. I knew that I could fight it off for at least another hour or two, but sooner or later I would get into the situation of so many others who desperately needed to take their inevitable power nap on the roadside (often in wet grass). At this point, I noticed a rest area with picnic table and benches, hundred feet or so off the road. Sleeping for 15 minutes on the bench was much more attractive than later, probably in darkness, on some unproven ground; and so I went there. I set the alarm, but forgot to remember at which time I laid down on the bench, left foot casually high on the table.

Next thing I know, I woke up shivering, and completely disoriented. Clearly, I had not heard the alarm. For how long had I been asleep? It was still daylight, but the sun was down already. For the time being, I didn't see any other riders on the road, and panicked that I was now so far behind everybody else that I had no chance of still finishing within the time limit. Besides, where was I? Which country, which event?

Luckily, I remembered the direction in which to continue. I was mad at myself; but with my refreshed legs (and some tailwind I suppose), I was able to storm uphill, to catch up with some other riders and pass them, all the while trying to reconstruct the situation I was in. My state of mind normalized gradually on the following long downhill and the following nicely rolling roads to Carhaix (km 699), on which I felt strong and left many other riders behind - this was the only section of the whole ride where this happened!

This was also the section where I had decided (against my heart - or should I say against my stomach?) not to stop any more for any of the generous offerings by those local PBP enthusiasts. They called out from darkness the list of what they had to offer, and I called back "Merci - mais j'ai tout ce qu'il faut, et je suis pressé!" Until I passed by the last house of that village where another little table was set up, with an elderly woman sitting next to it, lonely and silently. "Don't stop" I said to myself. And then, 200 feet beyond, I hit the brakes, turned around and greeted her "You are all alone out here tonight?" She was clearly happy to offer coffee (and water for my bottles), and requested that I take a piece of the cake she had made and which she protected under a sheet of plastic from the drizzling rain. I noticed that she didn't have an umbrella, not even a rain coat; but she didn't mind and looked comfortable. "I have been doing this nearly all my life long", she said. "But I am not sure I will be able to do it again the next time. You see, I am 83 years old now, and will be 87 ..." - I spent some more time with her, until finally another rider stopped and kept her company for a little while.

I arrived in the Carhaix control at 10:25pm, one hour and ten minutes behind Sebastian and John. Could have been worse! I wish I hadn't again wasted too much time there looking for food and drink (the lines were long and the service slow), because I still had 76 km to go back to the hotel room in Loudeac.

First, soon after leaving Carhaix, I had trouble recognizing that the road was flat when it was flat. It appeared to me as constantly going uphill, with the red taillights of riders ahead of me high in the sky. At some point, I had to get off the bike: I desperately needed to figure out whether the road was actually level or not. - Then again, this was as close as I ever got to hallucinating: quite a disappointment! (Other ride reports I had read in preparation for PBP talked about hallucinations of wild animals, or bikini women at the side of swimming pools ...). Now that I am thinking about it: If I saw the red taillights of riders ahead of me "high in the sky" even though the terrain was essentially flat, maybe the illusion simply came about by my head slowly sinking downwards while there were no other reference points in the darkness?

Soon after that, it started to rain again. I could deal with it, but was nevertheless disappointed: this really was going to be harder and slower than expected. I did remember some of the geography from when we covered the same route in the morning in the opposite direction, but not nearly enough; and I got impatient during the last hours before Loudeac. I always tried to keep track of my progression, distance- and time-wise. But under the given conditions, the mind played another trick on me and made me read a "18" for a "10", just so that I announced by cell phone my arrival in Loudeac for about half an hour too early. The theory of doing the Loudéac - Brest - Loudéac portion as a nice double century in about 16 - 18 hours on this Wednesday was just that: theoretical. It would take me nearly 23 hours, with an arrival time at Loudeac around 3h45 on Thursday morning (about two hours after Sebastian).

This was the first time I missed my goal of leaving each checkpoint before the official closure time for the first 90-hour starters. I really needed some sleep, asked Fabienne (who obviously sacrificed her own sleep for the second night in a row) to wake me only after Sebastian had left, and set out for the last 450 km on Thursday morning, some time after breakfast - and probably close to 8am. (Note: According to Fabienne, I had asked to be woken at the same time as Sebastian. She then added ten minutes on her own, and let me sit in my bed with a coffee, contemplatively, while Sebastian got ready to leave. Hmm - funny how my mind likes to correct history).

I am embarrassed to admit that, again, I don't have any memories from the leg to Tinténiac (85 km) where I arrived at 12:45, precisely an hour behind Sebastian. I must have had lunch - but I don't remember anything about it. I do remember a pretty good experience on the following segment to Fougères (only 55 km): a group of six frenchmen caught up with me, all from the same club, and they let me join them for over an hour of wonderfully precise group riding. We worked together like clockwork, efficient in a tight formation yet relaxed, talking, and without undue effort or stress. At some point (it was at the base of a major hill to climb) I decided (yeah right) to let them go; and a little later I found them all together off the road relaxing at a convenient place while I continued towards Fougères. One more violent rain storm, and I arrived there at 3:50pm and met Sebastian and John again.

As I learned since then, members of our extended families in France and Germany as well as friends and coworkers in California followed the progression of father and son on the PBP web site's rider tracking and were literally cheering when my passage at the Fougères control was posted: it appeared as if I was catching up with Sebastian and John. However, even though I had a pretty good ride to Fougères which I thoroughly enjoyed, I felt that I should allow myself another rest before the upcoming longer stretch to Villaines (88 km) which would take me again late into the night. Against the original plan of driving back from Loudéac directly to the finish, Valerie and Fabienne had offered to also come to the check points in Fougères and Villaines. So I

could take a nap in the car and benefit from all their support for the other necessities. Due to the substantial distances between control set-up, parking and facilities, as well as some more chatting (remember: it's about the people!) it all took longer than desirable, but I figured it was worth the delay.

I took off in company of Mike from Anchorage, another one of those fine young randonneur fellows who already know what I mean by "celebrating endurance". He graciously pulled me through some headwind and stayed with me on the first lengthy climbs, even though he was much stronger. When I finally urged him to move on, I didn't expect to see him again. Yet there he was, maybe half an hour later, relaxing and enjoying life in company of some people on the left side of the road!

Needless to repeat, I still didn't believe I was in any trouble. However, riding in complete darkness on unmarked, often winding and narrow roads, mostly under rain, became more and more stressful and wasn't conducive to maintaining proper nutrition. I must have been "running low" on the last hours before Villaines. In addition, there were long climbs I didn't remember from the way out, and they appeared harder than I could comfortably manage under the given conditions. I found that I started slumping down on the bike and easily drifted to the left if I didn't pay attention. Even just keeping balance on the steeper and very slow portions of the climb became difficult with the complete lack of visual reference points in the pitch dark night and the rain which disturbingly reflected the beams of helmet and front lights. Also, for some reason, I didn't look ahead high enough to feel safe. So I decided to walk for a while, maybe as much as a mile on the sustained uphill, to clear the head. When I finally arrived in Villaines (the stamp on the control card documents 20 minutes past midnight, over three hours behind Sebastian and John) and met Valerie and Fabienne, I was finally ready to admit for the first time that this was "hard".



Another little rest, at the control in Villaines: Joseph, Valerie

It was time to take another rest - the night was still long. I looked around and just barely found a single space under a table to lie down: everything else was covered with seemingly lifeless bodies of damp randonneurs. The girls did all the right things and made it easy for me to get re-stored. I slept for less than 45 minutes and woke up all by myself, refreshed and ready to continue. They urged me to eat well before leaving. Fabienne was excited about working as a translator (French - English - German) for the doctor on duty since they arrived in Villaines. She had seen many distressed and endangered randonneurs there, who had gone beyond the edge of their bodies' capabilities. Now she insisted on letting the doctor have a look at me before I left. I presented myself in the best possible posture, with a firm voice and purposeful stride, and promised solemnly and repeatedly that I would never take the slightest risk (just as I had had to do to my wife before the start). Some more photographs before the gigantic sign that indicated 223km to Paris, and I took off shortly after 2am, with an incredibly renewed energy. "Let's go!", I shouted to some other unknown riders who I passed. I had 15 hours left for the remaining 223km and honestly thought it was a "piece of cake".



Only 223 km left: "Piece of Cake!" says Joseph

Over the next two hours, I slowly changed my mind. There were again the hills with the rain on unmarked roads; there was again the slumping down on the bike and the unnerving drifting to the left if I didn't pay attention; and I didn't pass many riders any more - quite the opposite. If only it became daylight, soon. I was not even sleepy, and the legs felt relatively good. If I was slow, it was only because I felt uncomfortable and stressed out due to the lack of "look-ahead" on the road. Suddenly, it occurred to me: what if I used my left hand to hold up my chin? - That's it: Shermer's neck (insert a couple of Bavarian swear words here)! I had read so much about it since I became interested in ultracycling, thought I knew everything about it, talked about it, and emphasized how I was lucky that I had such a strong neck: I never had the slightest indication on my longer distances (including three times a 600k, after all) that I would be at risk. But now there it was; and I knew it would not go away before I stopped riding. I also knew that I would

not be alone with this condition, and that many, many others had finished PBP in the past holding up their head, either by hand or with all kinds of improvised contraptions - or they finished without looking ahead, just following the wheel of another passionate participant while dangling their head downwards. I could do any of these; and there would not be much of an excuse for *not* finishing because of this condition.

And so I debated within myself, with an angel sitting on my right shoulder reminding me that I promised multiply not to take any risks, while a little devil on the left shoulder tried to trick me into adhering to the popular randonneur ideology which postulates that not finishing is dishonorable. This went on for several miles until I came into the little town of Saint Rémy-du-Val and found dozens of stranded riders on the road, outside of a bar which stayed open all night for the occasion. This was at least a good reason to stop, refill bottles etc. At the entrance of the bar was a big sign "Couchages gratuits - Free sleeping". It took me five more minutes to look around, look into the faces of some zombie riders, look into the dark sky, drink some water, until I knew what I had to do. One final hard look into whether I might regret my decision later - no, it's all right. I will take advantage of the "free sleeping" and wait for daylight. Of course, this will throw off my schedule and I will not be able to finish within the 90 hour time limit: so be it! I had plenty of good reasons of being satisfied already with how well I performed on the first 1000 km of this ride, how I didn't suffer from any of the other usual troublemakers on long distances, and how I was still in much better shape (my neck excepted) than many of the other participants around me.

I explained my position to the manager of the bar who showed me where he had set up the "free sleeping", but only after requesting my brevet card. While I was bedding myself in the nearly empty room, I heard him call the next check point in Mortagne-au-Perche to communicate my dropping out, with frame number and first and last name. This was not something I had asked for (I still intended to continue my ride by daylight at least until Mortagne and tell them there myself), but I wasn't upset about it either. By serendipity, precisely at the time when the call came in, Sebastian and John just got up from a short sleep break in Mortagne and asked a control official if they had any news about me!

When I woke up (around 7:30am - I hadn't cared to set an alarm), the room was filled to capacity with riders in deep sleep. I sneaked out, drank a hot chocolate at the bar and left a message for my daughters on the phone to inform them about my whereabouts and that I expected to be in Mortagne by 10am. Maybe they could come and pick me up there? After that, I happily continued my way on the bike in daylight. The neck was still weak and didn't get better, but without rain and in daylight, it felt safe enough for me to ride. I caught up with some other riders; but none of them were inclined to ride with me and I left them behind. On one of the more substantial climbs, I even pushed as hard as I could, only to get an idea of how strong I really was, still (or, rather, just for fun: how much of the screaming of my quads I could still tolerate). I felt free from all pressure, now that the official part of the ride was over for me: no worry about control closure times, only joyful riding through a fresh morning on dry roads.

When I arrived at the control in Mortagne-au-Perche, the workers started tearing everything down. I called my daughters again, and they replied that they were less than a couple of minutes away! This was more than perfect. I talked to another rider whom I had passed not long before. He was happy to explain that he was going to finish the ride, regardless of how long it would take. I envied him a little; but given that I and my family had to leave on the next morning al-

ready for the airport (you can tell I had planned to finish well under 90 hours), it would not have been practical for me to insist on going the whole distance. Also, given that the neck clearly had been solicited too much already, it was more reasonable to let it rest and recover, rather than risk more permanent injury by pushing it deeper into trouble.



Mortagne-au-Perche, km 1080: I won't finish PBP, this time

It appeared to be a long drive to the finish (about 90 miles), and I felt guilty of making Valerie and Fabienne make the round trip to pick me up. But they were extremely supportive, and everybody was happy to be at the finish for Sebastian and John who arrived together shortly before 2pm, with over three hours to spare. From what I gathered at that moment at least, it appeared I was the only one of us to affirm that this was just the beginning: not only would I be back in 2011 for the next edition of Paris - Brest - Paris (already looking forward to it!), but I would do many more other 1200s and 1000 km brevets until then. I cannot wait ...

Obviously, it is fair to suspect that I'm in denial about my limitations. I was willing to "risk going too far to find out how far I could go", and it turned out I can only go a little over 1000 km. Even without the incident about my neck giving out, it is quite plausible that I would have been hard pressed to finish within 90 hours. While I found that I still enjoyed riding my bike after 1000 km, it is also true that I was slower over the first three days than I should have been. There is a limit to making up time by sleeping less - and I had pushed that limit pretty far already (which provided that other satisfaction of tolerating sleep deprivation much better than anticipated).

But all of the above only makes me more determined to prepare for the next big distances in 2008 and beyond - and to continue cultivating my "restless legs"!