

## **PBP-15 – Here we go again...**

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As I checked my suitcase and bike box at the Halifax International Airport for my trip to France this year, I recalled with certain trepidation all of those times when my bike box or my suitcase did not make it to its destination – four years ago exactly, as I travelled to Paris to ride Paris-Brest 2011, my suitcase did not show up in Paris until the day after the ride began... causing, shall we say, significant mental turmoil as I had to replace all of the carefully chosen equipment at the last minute, the day before the ride began. (Said suitcase did, in fact eventually show up in Paris, waiting for me when I finished the ride). Ah well, what's to do? One gives one's precious bicycle and gear to the airlines and leaves it up to the whimsy of the baggage handling establishment to actually get one's stuff to one's destination. I proceeded thru security and boarded the plane for Toronto.

There, during a three hour stopover, I met up with my long-time riding buddy Michael Thomson, originally from Halifax but now resident in Toronto oh this last sesqui-decade or so. We had unfinished business to conduct. We were supposed to ride PBP-11 together, but a little incident in New Zealand during a 6.4-Richter earthquake in Christchurch in February 2011 left Michael with an eight-inch titanium plate in his femur and spoiled our arrangements. Michael was back, strong as ever, and looking to complete his third PBP – so this would be my fourth. We caught up on the news and gossip, then boarded the plane and shared the trip across the Atlantic overnight to Paris and tomorrow.

The 777 landed without incident, and we were both somewhat bemused when both bikes and luggage actually showed up on the conveyor belt. We secured a cup of coffee and a pastry then boarded the Air France shuttle bus to Gare Montparnasse. At the Gare (train station) we bought tickets on the RER line to St-Quentin-en-Yvelines, the start community for PBP. As we disembarked the train, we found a station wagon taxi awaiting outside the train station, and with sotto voce jokes about "planes, trains, and automobiles" wove our way to the Novotel hotel, our temporary home for the next several days (on and off...) We were there by 1PM Thursday August 13th.

We met up with the other two Maritimers who were attempting PBP-15, Dave Ross and Tony Kelly, at the hotel, along with ex-NS-Rando Ole Mikkelsen, now living in Denmark. There were lots of other familiar faces at the Novotel as well, as most of Randonneurs Ontario was staying there, along with a number of friends from the USA. Bikes reassembled, we headed out for a shakedown ride down to the Grand Frais grocery store for some supper supplies and a couple of bottles of French red wine.

Friday dawned sunny and warm. We broke fast at the hotel then mounted up the bikes to meet up with a large group of RUSA riders for the traditional ride out toward Gambais from the Campanile hotel. We rode with the group for ten k or so, then headed back to the Velodrome Nationale, the new start location for PBP, to get our bearings. A nice relaxing day.

Saturday also dawned sunny and warm. The Maritimers headed off to the Velodrome to attend the mandatory Bike Check and registration kit pickup. Unlike the day before, today the scene at the Velodrome was pretty hectic. We queued with hundreds of riders to get into the bike check then parked the bikes and walked up into the Velodrome for kit pickup. The queue was probably 45 minutes long; first getting the bag with frame number plate and brevet card and chip timing ankle bracelet, then another queue to pick up the reflective vests (which were included this year in the registration) and the jerseys we'd ordered. We wandered

downtown for a bite of lunch then returned to the Velodrome for the scheduled 2:30PM All-Canada group photo, which was a lot of fun. After hanging out chatting with various Canadian acquaintances for an hour or so, back to the hotel for refueling and more red wine.

Sunday – finally – Sunday – the start day for Paris-Brest-Paris 2015! We all lounged in bed banking all the sleep we could, jetlag permitting, before breaking fast in the dining room. There was a whole bunch of hurry-up-and-wait all morning and early afternoon as we killed time, watching riders fussing over their bikes, and watching Tony repacking his gear for the eighteenth time. Finally, mid-afternoon and time to head off.



The four Maritimers and Ole posed for a group photo then headed off to the starting line. Michael was riding in the 80-hour start, in the fifth wave to depart, so the other four found a strategic street corner to watch (and photograph) his departure wave. At 5:02PM, some three hundred riders were led out of Paris by a motorcycle escort to much cheering, Michael amongst them. At 5:15, the first wave of the 90-hour contingent, the "specials" (the tandems, recumbents, tricycles, tandem tricycles, velomobiles and antique bikes) headed past us, quite a sight. We watched one more wave of riders depart then headed off to the Velodrome for our moment in the sun.

The scene around the Velodrome was wonderful chaos, with a couple thousand spectators lining the course and riders forming up for the next departure waves. We followed the queue through the marshalling yards, Dave and I in Wave "L", Tony in Wave "M". We had all agreed that we wouldn't attempt to ride together as it's just a little too crazy to try. Each of us was to ride our own schedule. Dave and I heard the crowd cheering off the 6:15PM departure wave, then our group made its way to the starting line.



Adrenaline's running a little, but not so much, as we've both done this before. It was a funny combination of anticipation and stoicism, knowing the magnitude of what we were about to attempt. Finally, the countdown from the announcer; "cinque – quatre – trois – deux – un – Depart!" and we were off! This is a precious moment, but one to be cautious of; many over-eager riders have gone down in crashes due to too much enthusiasm. The motorcycles led us out of St-Quentin at a controlled pace, all of the intersections controlled so we could roll through red lights unimpeded. Thousands of spectators lined the route, clapping and cheering.

After eight or ten km, the line-up was beginning to spread out a bit. As we entered the first of the farmed fields on the outskirts of the city, the riders began to settle down, riding mostly two up, passing and being passed. It was a warm comfortable evening – and for me, a bit of a switch, as my first two PBP's had begun in the dark, and the third PBP in 2011 only had half an hour of daylight. In '11, I had opted to wait until the last departure wave of the 90-hour crowd, as I had a hotel room reserved in Loudeac at the 455km point. As it was, that year, I arrived there in daylight (~8PM) so, this time, Michael and I had decided to push on further past Loudeac to the town of Carhaix (525km) to get further up the course. With Michael leaving a couple of hours ahead of me, and riding the faster 80-hour timeframe, we anticipated that he would just be leaving the hotel room as I arrived there. More about that later.





After three hours or so, darkness fell and we stopped at Chateauneuf-en-Thymerais to put on reflective vests and arm and leg warmers. Dave and I parted ways and re-met and parted ways a couple of times, then on my own again. As "on one's own" as one can be, surrounded by several thousand other riders on the course! The long night began. The course went through farmland and small towns and farmland again, hour after hour. Dave and I met up again. We stopped in a small town at a bar that was open to get a couple of cups of coffee, then continued on, through the night. The countryside began to roll a bit as we entered the Perche district – I found myself being passed by riders on the flats only to pass them again on the uphill. This was to be a trend that continued for the entirety of the ride, for some reason, which I found strange, as I am usually not much of a climber.

At the 140km point, the town of Mortagne-au-Perche had an organized stop for "ravitaillement" (food), and we stopped to refuel. Back on the road in the darkness, kilometer after kilometer, through the night. The night was chilly but not cold, it went down to +9c, with no wind. I was dressed perfectly for the conditions and comfortable on the bike. Eventually the first official "controle" or checkpoint – Villaines la Juhel – was reached at 4:14AM. At the controle, riders docked their bikes and went to the controle where their chip-timing anklet was read by a sensor, then each rider presented his or her brevet card to the volunteers who placed a stamp ("un tampon") on the card and wrote the time of day on it. The paper card was the final proof of passage – as the timing system could break down, but ink on paper was infallible. After a coffee and pastry, off into the night again.

Gradually the gloom lessened, and the first rooster was heard to crow. Almost on cue, I began to see weary riders, rolled up in their space blankets on the side of the road, sleeping. I have always found this quite amusing, and once the first rider was spotted asleep, it was almost like an epidemic of weariness as more and more riders were couchant in the grass, or on benches, or inside doorways or ATM nooks. The sky behind me lightened up, and riders began to turn off headlights and taillights. It was daytime, 275km done, only a little under a thousand km to go.

Now that one could see it, the surrounding countryside was quite pretty. We passed through towns with romantic names like Lassay-les-Chateaux and Ambrieres-les-Vallees, La Tanniere and Le Loroux. As I approached the next controle, at Fougères, it began to warm up. At the controle, organized chaos ensued. Riders coming and going, filling bottles and eating. I opted to get my stamp at the control and headed off through town to find a restaurant. I quickly chanced upon a creperie, just opening for the day. I sat down and had a fantastic breakfast crepe, jambon et oeufs avec champignons et fromage. Heavenly! By the time I left, there were sixteen bikes piled up outside the window. As I headed out of town, I stripped down to daytime riding gear and applied sunscreen.

On and on, through small town after small town, each with spectacular stone church and wonderful old stone buildings like something out of a fairy tale.



And in each town, small groups of residents out cheering on the riders with calls of "bonne courage" and "allez!" Many people had set up roadside tables giving out coffee and water, and cookies and cakes and snacks. You couldn't stop at all of them, you'd run out of time! I would pass each stop with a wave and a cheery "merci" and continue on down the road.

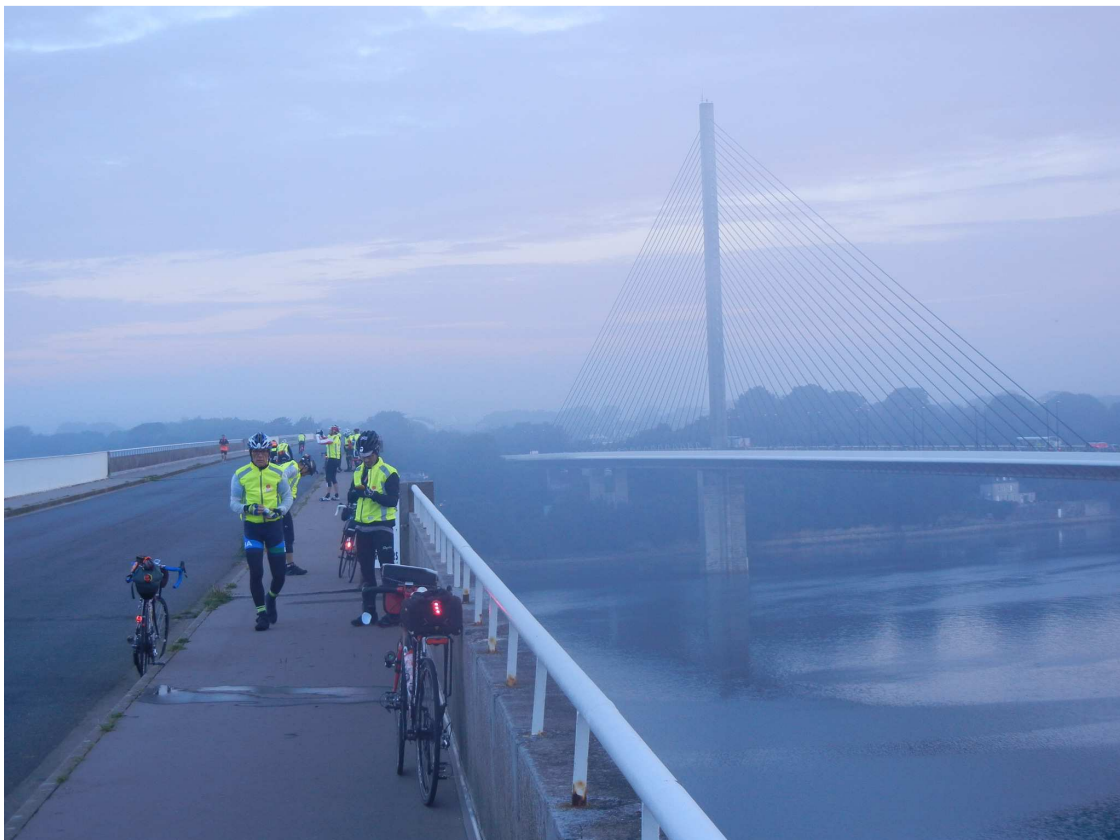
On and on – Fiens, Dingé, Quebriac, to Tintiniac, the next controle. On and on, through a day perfectly comfortable, about 21 degrees with just the faintest hint of wind, as calm as I've seen it in a long time. Medreac, Quedillac, St-Meen-le-Grand, Illifaut. Morning shifted to noon shifted to afternoon. On and on. The terrain began to roll a bit as I approached the controle town of Loudeac. The huge wind turbines on the ridge at La Cheze were mostly still in the calm air, just the faintest hint of a headwind all day. I arrived at the controle at Loudeac at 16:04 in the afternoon, where I had had a bag drop bag delivered. I collected a change of clothing for the next day, and toothbrush and toothpaste, then had a bite to eat and headed out toward the next controle, Carhaix-Plouguer. But first, there was the first of two "secret" controles on the course (to keep you honest!) at St-Nicholas-du-Pelem, where I happened to meet up with Dave Ross again.

We rode the remaining 50km to Carhaix in the evening light, arriving there at 20:30, with 525km done in 26 hours, an average riding speed of 25.5km/hr. We checked in, then headed up the street to the hotel where Michael and I had booked rooms. After pizza and beers at a nearby bar, we went to the hotel, arriving at the room just as Michael was getting out of the shower after sleeping for a couple of hours. He headed off into the night and Dave and I showered and grabbed four and a half hours of sweet dead sleep.

The 4:30 alarm went off all too soon. We rose and broke fast in the hotel breakfast room, then mounted up and headed out into the night. There were still crowds of riders all around. We settled into the routine of passing and being passed by others. There was a dense fog and a chill in the air. I lost Dave in the darkness. The road had several climbs and descents to the community of Huelgoat, then a quick downhill and a right turn, still in the fog. I was beginning to wonder when I would reach the beginning of the climb up to Roc Trevezel (at 1500 feet, the highest spot on the course) when I looked over and saw the huge microwave tower that was on the summit of the mountain. Climbing feels odd in the night, it's hard to tell if you're going uphill or just going slow sometimes.

I rounded the roundabout on the summit and headed down the descent in the darkness. Halfway down, I began to feel sleep coming on, so I stopped and popped a caffeine pill and plugged my iPod into my ears for something for my mind to chew on. Off into the darkness. I passed through the pretty town square of Sizun in the darkness and continued on. And on. A faint glimmer of light began to appear in the sky and shapes began to take shape around me. I entered the suburbs south of the port town of Brest. The sky brightened.

A quick downhill brought me to the harbour bridge in Brest. This is always a deeply emotional sight, as the route takes us across the "old" harbour bridge which is parallel to the "new" harbour bridge – the old bridge now being a bike and pedestrian bridge. The new bridge is a spectacular suspension bridge, and the rising sun was now visible through the bridge's cables, with the spectacular harbour beneath it. All riders stopped for photos and to savour the moment.





Onward, into the city of Brest. The route took me up a long climb then through a few city streets, then into the controle at a college. I checked in to the controle, had a somewhat unappetizing pasta breakfast, then headed off, only to stop a few kilometers further at a patisserie (bakery) where I consumed some far better coffee and an anglaise-aux-abricots pastry. Rejuvenated, I headed off on the return course, only six hundred kilometers to go! As the sun climbed higher, it warmed up and I began to feel much better. The long climb back up to Sizun was very scenic with the sun's crepuscular rays angling through the overhanging tree branches. Sizun was a bit of a madhouse already, but I stopped anyway, to strip off some layers, apply sunscreen, and scarf back another apricot turnover. The climb back up the Roc Trevezel was a steady smooth climb, and I passed dozens and dozens of riders – with hundreds and hundreds of riders coming the other way, toward Brest, it was a never-ending parade of cyclists. Summiting the Roc, there was a long downhill and forty kilometers of somewhat boring highway riding back to Carhaix. I cleared the control at 13:04PM, and opted to keep on riding, fueling myself from Hammer Perpetuem in my waterbottle instead of yet another meal, and making up for some of the time that I had wasted in Brest.

Onward and onward; a beautiful sunny day with not a breath of wind. Town after town. The countryside between Carhaix and Loudeac is rolling hill country but beautifully spectacular. There was another secret control at Mael-Carhaix, not long after Carhaix. I stopped for the control but did not eat there, recalling a special town just up the road where the whole town sets up a barbecue tent for the riders, at St-Martin-des-Pres; where I stopped for a barbecued saucisse and frites and a coke and had a great conversation (in French) with some residents who were there enjoying the circus atmosphere – although I was ahead of the great “bulge” of riders yet to arrive.

Onward to Loudeac, 17:07 hours. I stashed my dirty clothing at the bag drop and secured a fresh change of clothing for tomorrow, then another saucisse and off again. Onward and onward. Town after town. The evening sun began to set behind me. The shadows became long, then disappeared as the sun set below the horizon. Another day of riding from sunrise to sunset! After Tintineac, full dark descended upon me again. I added a few layers and my reflective vest, and the lights were turned on once again. The terrain here was quite gentle, with mostly flat very small backroads and few towns. At midnight, with 380km on the odometer and only 14k's to my next hotel room, I stopped at a roadside table in St-Saveur-des-Landes for a wonderful bowl of homemade courgette soup – and I glanced over toward the road only to espy Dave Ross stopped, leaning on his handlebars. I called out, “hey Dave – wassup?” and he jolted upright in surprise. We rode together into Fougères to the controle, and went to the cafeteria to have supper, only to meet Michael Thomson, who had already had his two hours' sleep and was about to have breakfast at midnight-thirty. We shared a meal then he headed off into the darkness and Dave and I headed off to my hotel room for a shower and four sweet hours of sleep.

The 4:30 alarm was most unwelcome. We quickly arose and dressed, and backtracked 500 meters to the controle for breakfast, then headed off into the darkness once again. Dave pulled ahead of me on a climb and I continued into the now-brightening dawn gloom. The first rooster crowed. The sky brightened. The sun rose. It was day again. Onward and onward, not quite so fast as the previous two days as nearly a thousand k's in the legs began to manifest itself. But as the sun climbed higher in the sky and the temperatures warmed up, so did the legs and the day continued on nicely. I stopped for photography at two of the prettiest towns on the route, Ambrières-les-Vallees with its willow-hung riverbank and stone dam and ancient stone houses, and later at Lassay-les-Châteaux with its 16<sup>th</sup> century castle and reflecting pond. I was surprised that no-one else stopped but everyone seemed to have the same dogged expression on his or her face, eastward, eastward, eastward.



At 10:15 in the morning, the next controle at Villaines-la-Juhel was a happening place, there was already several hundred townsfolk out to cheer in the riders one by one as they parked their bikes. A live announcer kept up a non-stop commentary, tout en francais, and riders bustled around. I collected my tampon sur mon carnet then rolled down into the old downtown to a patisserie for some excellent pastries, then onward. Through farmland and small towns, with wonderful names like Souge-le-Ganelon, Freshay-sur-Sarthe, St-Remy-du-Val. Groups of residents cheered the riders on as we passed through their villages.





The sun began to grow hot as I approached Mortagne-au-Perche (1090km). I caught up to Dave Ross again, or Dave caught up to me, I can't quite remember, and we conversed briefly, then I left him behind. At the controle, I refilled my bottles with my last bottle of Perpetuem, wolfed down a barbecued saucisse in baguette, and headed off. A stiff tailwind began to manifest itself! The next 40 kilometers were very hilly but very beautiful, as the road traversed the forested reserve of the Perche district; the tall trees overhanging the road providing some wonderful shade. After a quick descent to Longny-au-Perche, the road began to flatten out a bit and become gently rolling. The tailwind strengthened, allowing me to cruise at 28 to 29km/hr instead of the previous 24 to 25. I caught up to Dave again, or maybe he caught up to me, and we rode into the last controle at Dreux at 18:06 in the afternoon. We shared a meal at the controle then headed off with only 65km left to go to the finish line. I left Dave texting his wife Cheryl at the control, and pushed off through the now very flat farmland toward St-Quentin.

At this time four years ago, it was after midnight at this point, but today it was only 7PM. Ahead, a large black dispersed cloud began to sprinkle a few welcome drops of rain, enough to cool the air but not enough to wet one's clothing. Onward and onward. I entered the forest reserve of Gambais, where the kings Louis once had their hunting forest reserve, which is still today a wonder forest reserve, with signs on the roadside warning to watch for stags; and I saw where wild boar had been snuffling in the mud in the roadside ditches turning over the sods. I stopped to add a layer of clothing, and Dave caught up with me. We pressed on through Gambaiseuil and Monfort-l'Amaruy and saw the sign indicating fifteen kilometers to go. I felt a burst of energy and pushed off at a strong pace with Dave in hot pursuit. We entered the city suburbs and began to hit traffic lights, mostly red. It was almost dark when we reached the corner where the route took us, with four kilometers to go, off the roadways and onto a wide bike path. We sighted the Velodrome through the trees, and pushed the last hundred meters to the fenced off access where we crossed the chip-timing mat with a most satisfying thin squeal – Done! 1230km, in 74 hours 43 minutes. Dave's wife Cheryl met us at the finish line where we racked our bikes and took the obligatory photos, then walked stiffly into the Velodrome for our final stamp on the brevet card and a welcome pasta dinner and a couple of beers. Dave and Cheryl headed off to their hotel and I climbed back on the bike for the final 8 kilometer ride to the Novotel. It was a warm and quiet night. The light tailwind made me feel strong. I felt like I could just keep on going, but there was little incentive to do so, knowing that a shower, a couple more beers, and a warm bed awaited me.

