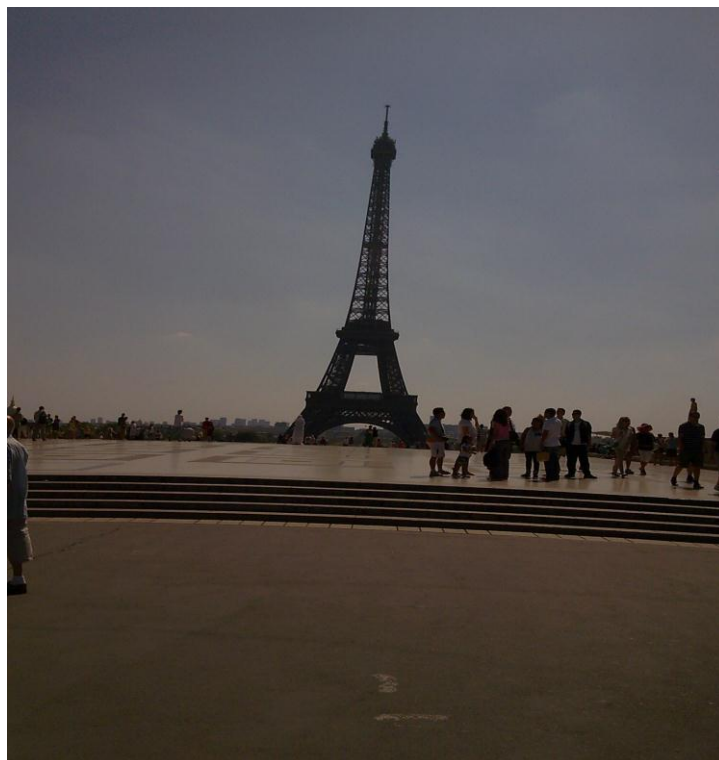


## 17th Paris Brest Paris Randonneur August 2011

by ~~Mark Cranshaw~~ Nigel Hood (ever so slightly plagiarised)

The Paris Brest Paris 1200km Randonee is now so popular around the world that pre-qualification is advisable so in June 2010, although not being anywhere near full fitness I completed a 400Km Audax ride to Spurn Head. At this stage I was just keeping my options open but I knew that I was not capable of doing 1200Km. In September 2010 I had a breakthrough, during an unbelievably tough 200Km ride something in my back clicked back into place, while not being a complete recovery this at least gave me back full control of my right leg and I could start rebuilding the muscles. By January 2011 I decided that PBP was on and I paid my deposit for Baxter's sporting tours to take me there. Now all that was needed was the completion of the four qualifying rides; 200, 300, 400, and 600km. Half way round the 400 I could have given up cycling but that was before a 40 mile stretch with a roaring tail wind and the first 10 downhill.

Fast forward a couple of months and I am in the basement of a French hotel with twenty odd other cyclists (or is that twenty odd cyclists?) putting our bikes back together. I had opted for the 84 hour start and that meant that I had an extra day before my start. Friday was spent checking out the opening kilometres of the event, supposedly to make it easier come the day but a complete waste of time in my opinion as the event is so well marked and the opening kilometres are marshalled as well, but it also gave a chance to make sure the bike was OK. On the Saturday the 90hr riders had their bike check so I teamed up with another 84hr rider, an Aussie called Rod, and caught the train into Paris. The last time I rode PBP there had been a parade ride through Paris scheduled for before the start but due to some bombs going off it was cancelled so this time round I was determined to do



the touristy thing and see the sights.

The train station is 100meters from the Eiffel tower so that was where we started, then it was along the river to the bottom of the Champs Elysées and a quick blast through the

finish line (nothing actually visible), getting on to the Arc de Triomphe was a breeze and we wondered what all the fuss was about, we found out when we tried to get off again. After a detour to get some lunch it was on to Notre Dame.



As you can see from the photos it was a glorious day and with my sat-nav estimating that the hotel was only 35Km away we decided to ride it. Somehow we managed to go over a mountain pass on the way back.

### **The start**

The evening before the start was spent looking at the fools doing the 90hr start, one of the guys from our hotel had already drunk all his water before he had got to the start line. After watching a couple of groups set off we retired to the local Italian restaurant where we bumped into some of the old hands of the 90hr start avoiding the queues.

The theory of the 84hr start is that you get a good night's sleep before hand but you try it. I hardly got any sleep before getting up at 3am to eat some breakfast etc. 4am and we were on the road, a motley group of 5; one pensioner, Rod, myself and an odd couple who weren't really a couple and had only just ridden the Audax version of the PBP a few weeks earlier. The closer we got to the start the more cyclists we saw and by the time we got to the running track it was no surprise to see hundreds of cyclists in front of us. We ended up in the last third of the second group and it didn't seem that long before we were sent on our way.

If you have never ridden in a large group then make sure you get plenty of practice before you turn up for the PBP because being part of a group of 500 riders is something else again. I had promised myself that I would not do any unnecessary work in the group so settled in behind the Audax Aussie (the male half of the odd couple). Despite my best intentions it was not long before I found myself near the front and when the rider in front of me swung off I told the welsh lad I had been chatting to that I wasn't going to work and tucked in behind him. At this stage we were in sight of a large group about a hundred yards or more in front. The two foreign riders, that were in front of me and the welsh lad, were intent on bridging the gap and were working so hard that our group had dissolved to just the four of us. On realising this the Welsh guy dropped back to the Brit group behind and almost immediately one of the other riders punctured. Now with just two of us stuck between two larger groups I decided that it was time to bite the bullet and help bridge the gap. It didn't take long and as I threaded my way through this new group it soon became clear that this was the front or lead group. I was not using my computer at this stage but as we passed one of the recumbent cycles that had had an earlier start, I looked at his speedo and it was showing 37Km/h, this group was flying and it felt great. As we approached the first official food stop it started getting hilly and I decided that a wee stop by the side of the road was needed as the group was starting to race for the control. This first control is not a control (?) so your card does not get stamped and you don't have to stop but I was ready for something to eat.

### **Stage 2: Mortagne Au Perche – Villaines La Juhel (82km)**

I agreed to set off with Andy Southworth, an old touring buddy from my ABC Centerville days, and after a few false starts we settled in to a sensible pace that saw our group swell from just the two of us to nearly twenty before I finally bonked up and decided that it was still to far from the control and had to stop and eat a load of sweet stuff. By now the weather was already starting to close in but for the last 20k to the control I managed without my coat. As I rolled into the control I was warned that I would have to wear my reflective jacket and I latter wished I had taken it and my coat into the control.

8h19	26.6 km/h
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### **Stage 3: Villaines La Juhel – Fougères (88km)**

the Villaines La Juhel control is on one side of the road with the restaurant and dorm's on the other and after collecting a tray full of food I made my way to the dining room that gave the impression of being underground. When I finally emerged it was chucking it down and I stood with several other cyclists under a shelter looking out and trying to muster the motivation to get on my bike again. A quick dash to the toilets was enough to convince me that although I was about to get very wet it was still quite warm. It was on with the cape and reflective vest and on with the lights as we were treated to a spectacular lightning

display. As I departed the control I heard the familiar sound of someone hitting the deck, I looked back to see a cyclist sprawled on the ground, these were not good riding conditions.

With 5000 riders in the event riding on your own is something you do for very short periods. Although it felt like I had left the control on my own it didn't take long to find tens of other riders in front of me. I eventually settled in with a couple of German riders that were aiming to complete the ride in 60 hours. One of them was massive and riding on his wheel was like riding behind a truck. 10km before Fougères we rode through the storm again, I was wearing my sunglasses to cope with the spray coming off people's wheels, at one point I was fourth in line and the spray from the front rider was going over the top of the next two riders and hitting me full in the face. The joys of riding! It was around this time that I had my first little mental wobble, contemplating finding the support coach to retrieve my heavy rain coat and possibly giving up for the day if not the entire event.

4h15	20.9 km/h
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#### **Stage 4: Fougères – Tinteniac (55km) and Stage 5: Tinteniac – Loudeac (85km)**

The food at Fougères was excellent and I was able to relax as the storm caught back up with us. I had been counting the gap between the lightning and the thunder as we rode along and it had been keeping a consistent distance of about 2km away from us but as I tucked into my food there was a direct hit on Fougères that shook the buildings and caused all the lights to go out for a second.

My aim was to get to Loudeac to sleep, I have tried going without sleep in the past and for me it does not work. 400K in 20 hours is about right for me and I worked with whoever was going at a similar pace.

2h50	19.1 km/h
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Tinteniac

4h43	18 km/h
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Loudeac

#### **Stage 5: Loudéac – Carhaix (74km)**

Still wet from the rain I made my way to the dorm and paid for my bed, asking to be woken at 4:00am with the idea of being on the road by 5 having forgotten that it was still going to be dark. Carhaix was where the second coach was parked and this time I was going to find it so that I could change clothes. Just before I reached the control I saw the coach and retrieved my bag.

7h15	10.5 km/h
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### **Carhaix – Brest (88km)**

At the control, having had my card stamped, I went in search of the showers. What seemed like 10 minutes later, having walked through every area available I asked one of the volunteers and was sent on a half mile trek to the opposite side of the campus. It was well worth the effort. Nothing beats the feeling of being clean and warm again. I applied some Savlon to a strange graze I had on the front of my thigh quite near the groin but otherwise I felt in good shape.

The leg to Brest is a bit more hilly and with a slight head wind it was time to integrate into another group. I soon convinced a group of French riders that I was worth riding with and we had an excellent run into Brest, so much so that I hardly noticed the wind or the hills and once again a group that started off small grew and grew until we were nearly twenty strong as we crossed the bridge into Brest.

Unfortunately all the rain had resulted in my bottom bracket making a horrible clicking noise.

5h06	18.2 km/h
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### **Brest – Carhaix (85km)**

In the control I went straight to the mechanics but half an hour later and €25 poorer the noise was still there. Oh well, more food and a quick massage of the shoulders and then it was back on the bike.

The route back to Carhaix felt a lot easier as it takes a less hilly and more direct route. A tail wind made the long drag over to Carhaix much easier (totally robbed from Mark's report).

4h34	18.6 km/h
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### **Carhaix – Loudeac (79km)**

I had another massage at Carhaix but this was a proper one and very good. Done on a massage chair rather than a bed but that didn't stop me from getting some virtual shut eye. It was just the back and shoulders that I had done but these are the muscles most likely to cause you problems as they get held tense for long periods and as the ride progressed I saw many riders who were no longer able to hold themselves upright on the bike.

As I ate yet more food there was a loud crash as a rider passed out in the queue and including a recumbent rider who fell over when he went too slowly uphill that made three that I had heard but there was talk of one rider who had been killed on the way out to Brest.

On the run in back to Loudeac I once again caught up with Denise, a 90hr rider from the hotel, as it was already dark and I was going to reach the control earlier than I needed to I slowed and rode with her for a while. We became the proverbial hare and tortoise, she riding slow and steady while I raced between rest stops.

5h24	14.6 km/h
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## Loudeac - Tinteniac – Fougères

Time to sleep again and I paid my fee and was lead to a camp bed, it was nowhere near as comfy as the mattress I had used on the way out. No matter how hard I tried I could not get to sleep and indigestion was killing me. I got up and went to the medical control, basically their advice was that if I felt sick then I should make myself sick. I knew they were right and after the deed was done I went back to the dorm. This time I asked for a mattress and of cause a later wake-up time. When I finally woke I was being shaken from side to side, the volunteer had obviously had quite a job to bring me round.

When I emerged from the dorm I was shocked by the change that had occurred, when I had arrived the control had been packed and I had struggled to find somewhere to park my bike, now it felt almost desolate in comparison. Still, there is always time for breakfast and although I did not feel like eating, it at least gave me a chance to finish waking up. Before I left I noticed the odd couple and had a quick chat. Before the event they had been quite obnoxious so I was smiling inside to see the suffering etched into their faces.

Back on the road and it was the part I like best, effectively near the back of the event with the slow riders but riding at the pace of a fairly fast rider. Every few hundred meters I would overtake someone and there was always more riders in sight waiting to be caught. I linked up first with one American then with a German and an American. The second yank, Lee, was riding at constant power which fitted in nicely with me and my constant heart rate and we only broke this partnership when Lee waited at an intermediate stop for his father.

10h23	8.2 km/h
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Tinteniac

3h16	16.5 km/h
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Fougères

## Fougères - Villaines La Juhel (88km)

There was a regrouping at the control, with Ryan the first yank and Lee and myself sitting together to eat. Ryan was dead on his feet and we left him to get some sleep at the table, Lee went to meet his father and I bumped into Rod. He had been told that I had packed by our tour guide at the support coach! While at the control I saw the following rider arrive and leave:



when I had seen her riding into Brest I had thought it was just one of the locals out for some shopping who had got caught up in the event.

When I caught up with her I asked if I could take this photo, she is a gentle reminder that 12000Km in 90hours does not have to be taken too seriously as long as you're fit.

4h52
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18.1 km/h
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### **Villaines La Juhel - Mortagne Au Perche (81km)**

There is a real party atmosphere and arriving at this control feels like it should be the finish, the crowds are out and cheering and a commentator is keeping everybody (who speaks French) entertained. I had nearly run out of money and could only just afford the food I had picked up but while in 1995 this was a big problem in 2011 it just meant pulling up at the next cash till. I sat down in the restaurant next to Denise and compared notes, she had

had virtually no sleep and no massages while I was already thinking of my next night's sleep and had just had my fourth massage.

On this next leg I hooked onto the wheel of a crazy French guy who insisted on riding up the hills too hard. I kept trying to persuade him that if he went up the hill a bit slower that we could go faster overall but he was having none of it so we had to keep stopping for him to eat more carbs, it was during one of these stops that Lee came flying by. On this score the French guy took my word that we needed to catch Lee before the next descent and we set off in hot pursuit. We just made it and we were soon engaged in a three up team time trial. For a while we were flying but Lee had no more luck than I did getting the French guy to slow down on the hills and so Lee dropped back. We arrived at the next control much earlier than I had planned but not early enough for me to want to ride to the Dreux control before resting.

4h20	18.7 km/h
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### **Mortagne Au Perche – Dreux (75km)**

Food, sleep and more food. Denise had passed some indigestion medicine to me but my stomach was not happy and food was not a pleasure by now. I hired a towel and took a shower and probably benefited more from this than the fitful sleep that I had.

Today was my earliest start but there was no point in hanging round the control any longer. Not far out I passed a rider who was bonking up and I passed him the last of my jelly beans, 15km up the road I was to regret this act of charity. For the first time on the ride I visited a boulangerie and ate a freshly made cake. It was almost dripping with fat and sugar syrup, the perfect pick me up.

9h14	8.1 km/h
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### **Dreux – Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (the Finish) (64km)**

A plate full of meat and a cup of hot chocolate was enough refreshment. The atmosphere was jovial at this control as all the riders knew that they were going to finish soon. I sat with a fairly large group of British riders and decided that I would set off with them and see how it went.

It did not last more than 10 meters, by the time I had got my shoes back on and mounted the bike they had already left the parking area. I knew that there would be no problem catching them up but when I saw them huddled round the mechanics stand I decided to potter on.

With no pressure to finish I rode the slowest I had done during the event. Any group was good enough and I was just enjoying the feeling of freedom. The only downside was the final handful of kilometres to the finish where we seemed to get stopped by every set of traffic lights.

4h05	15.9 km/h
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## In Conclusion

Overall the ride could not have gone better. Yes, I was saddle sore and my hands and feet were effected by numbness by the end and yes I had a bit of a wobble on day one but by the last stage I was already thinking about when I would ride it next. The morning start makes a huge difference to the way the event feels, instead of a desperate race to ride as many kilometres as possible in the first 30 hours it becomes a fast, extreme tour with a sleep every night.

Note! The timings were done on the entry to each control therefore the time taken for the following leg includes all the time taken at that control.

I did not use my GPS for a lot of the time but what data there is can be found at Garmin connect under the user name nigel24cycling.

## Recommended PBP links:

<http://www.paris-brest-paris.org/>

[http://www.paris-brest-paris.org/pbp2011/index2.php?lang=en&cat=randonnee&page=suivi\\_participants](http://www.paris-brest-paris.org/pbp2011/index2.php?lang=en&cat=randonnee&page=suivi_participants)

[Frame number =8508](#)

**Randonneuring** (also known as **Audax** in the UK, Australia and Brazil) is a long-distance [cycling](#) sport with its origins in [audax cycling](#). In randonneuring, riders attempt courses of 200 km or more, passing through predetermined "controls" (checkpoints) every few tens of kilometres. Riders aim to complete the course within specified time limits, and receive equal recognition regardless of their finishing order. Riders may travel in groups or alone as they wish, and are expected to be self-sufficient between controls. A randonneuring event is called a **randonnée** or **brevet**, and a rider who has completed a 200 km event is called a **randonneur**.

**Audax.** The original form of the audax style involves riding in strict group formation at a steady pace set by a road captain. The group attempts to maintain a pace of 22.5 km/h between stops. The route is pre-planned with designated stopping points. For longer audax events the group may ride between 16 and 20 hours in a day before stopping at a designated sleeping location. The goal of the audax is to finish inside the prescribed time limit with all members of the group present. A support vehicle is allowed to follow each group of riders.