

A Week Awake

Paris Brest Paris 2007

1233km all for Fun

By Tom Milton

Very few would be writers actually have special gifts that give readers something they cannot put down. I am not one of the fortunate few, but do enjoy a decent sense of observation and suffer a bad case of wanderlust. Perhaps this literary effort will entertain momentarily. It may put you to sleep.

I've always enjoyed history, am fond of good books on the subject. I remembered a favorite nonfiction piece that reads like a novel and took place centuries ago in the region PBP route traverses. I reread it prior to embarking to Europe so that the places of interest might pass my mind as I rode through.

I recommend the book for its excellent scholarship and subject matter. The female main character, (a good man has to admire and love a good woman) was wife and confidant to two warring kings, a Louis, then a Henry, mother of three kings, two queens, and grandmother to two saints. She was a leader who governed her people as well as any man or woman before or since. She was not all good..

The woman and the book is; *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, by Alison Weir

What about the French?

Spend a few weeks wandering the countryside on a bicycle without full time companionship of other Americans and draw your own conclusions. We love to hate them and hate to love them. France by bicycle provides one with an appreciation of the beauty in their culture.

These wonderful folks have a much-undeserved reputation for shunning foreign travelers, especially non-French speakers. This is not so in actual practice. It is but a myth in America. Do what you can to speak a word or three of their tongue and you will be rewarded.

The French are a wonderful culturally distinctive people with passion for cycling that is unsurpassed in the world. Stalwart citizens were on the road and open for business along the PBP course 24 hours a day for the week. Citizens stood for hours in rain, wind, cool temperatures and darkness this year. Citizens of all ages were out to cheer, support, and nurture riders at every turn. Their passion for cycling seems to be a distinctive cultural birthright. It is difficult to imagine or explain.

The French have embraced cycling like no other European nationality. They are passionate at all ages and in all locations along the course. You will not likely ride in any country where motorists are more understanding, courteous, and forgiving of cyclists. In and of itself, that is a singular reason to attempt PBP or go cycle touring in the country. Motor vehicles of every type simply wait their turn and pass cyclists in polite succession.

There seems to be one singularly important PBP preparation nobody talks about. Among the piles of information consumed and folks talked to in advance, nobody seems to mention the ancient towns of Europe. Settlements were built on the highest hilltops in the region for defensive purposes. The PBP route passes along lovely rural byways

through the center of every village and city along the course. One passed through towns every 10km on average.

The PBP route is one long rolling hill with some steep pitches here and there, a few enduring climbs, and a few small mountains. The course is comprised substantially of rolling hills with only one or two memorable flat sections, which are all too brief in either direction.

This seemingly trivial historic observation means that riders are constantly going up and down. Go with a triple crank, a compact, or standard double with an 11-30 cassette or better, and remind yourself constantly to enjoy the scenery and the companionship of newfound friends. You will be happy you did both.

Many foreign countries are represented by large contingents of cyclists in tell tale clothing. All these folks speak English by degrees and are really a pleasure to ride and visit with. I was surprised by the number of foreign riders had been to the USA with their bikes. In some cases to ride scenic places we take for granted or simply have not seen.

PBP is not something to do on a whim. It is an endeavor well worth the years of training and planning required. It is a long way and costly excursion to make without having prepared to Finish At Any Cost.

I heard of and talked to folks this year who barely got started only to suffer bike and body mechanical failures that could not be fixed in France. There were others with seemingly impossible mechanical repair needs far down the PBP road who did find a way to jury rig a repair and make the finish in time. These are certainly future Hall of Fame members. They will no doubt have the most memorable tales to tell, such as the stoker wife who walked through hours of steep, dark hill country after 70 hours on the road while her husband limped into the Controle with severe bottom bracket problems on their tandem. They finished and most likely needed time after the fact to realize the monumental nature of their accomplishment.

Don't use components on your bike that are not readily available in France such as US made parts that require special tools for disassembly. You need the best mass produced components to ride PBP.

I recall the first time I read about PBP. My initial thought at the time was, "I might want to do that this year." Silly me. I was only properly prepared after years of finishing the most challenging long distance riding events at home, purposeful cold rain winter riding in the mountains late at night, and lots of time spent working on my bikes all of which helps prepare one for the impossible challenges of PBP.

Now to my PBP adventure.

I had my laptop along for business purposes and found that the Microsoft Streets & Trips AutoRoute 2007 European edition WITH optional GPS receiver to be a truly remarkable tool. I've never made a better travel tool investment in years of globetrotting.

I'm accustomed to traveling around the world with paper maps. This takes tremendous effort and energy to plot and memorize routes everyday while on the move. This work is especially tiring in strange lands and foreign languages. The AutoRoute map and GPS is too good to be true. I simply plotted each starting point and destination, which the application does with an address, name or right click on a location. It is easy as pie. You hop in the car, fire up the laptop on passenger

seat, plug it into the power converter you bought for use in the car cigar lighter, plug in the GPS receiver, which I left looped around the rear view mirror, turn on GPS tracking and off you go.

The program gives accurate instructions in bold letters, mileage to go to the next turn, time to destination, speed, and more. You can zoom in or out to any magnification and keep the map view automatically centered on yourself while on the move. The application will also record and display your trail, which is especially helpful when unannounced detours and missed turn mistakes the driver will inevitably make send you astray. It was painless. Time and energy saved, usually devoted to tiring navigating made for cheerful, fun, worry free travel days across eight international borders during four weeks.

If you go off course, the cursor arrow and red text across the bottom of the screen warn instantly. Text instructions are on the money, consistent with every road sign seen along the route. The program is utterly magical. I had no fear and nothing to worry about driving from Zurich to Paris to Alpe d'Huez to Lake Constance back to Zurich including some very out of the way places during a month of driving in Switzerland, France, and Germany.

The \$125 cost of the AutoRoute application with the GPS receiver represented one tenth of the cost the rental car company wanted for a car equipped with inferior GPS. The in car systems are not nearly as robust as the Microsoft application.

I arrived in Switzerland, rested, and enjoyed a leisurely drive to Paris.

I forgot that France is closed for business Sunday's, which reminded me of a more relaxed lifestyle in post WWII America. A PBP sojourn should include all important final preparations, shopping, and rest on Sunday, Monday. I was rudely awoken when out to shop in Paris on Sunday for PBP groceries. Among other things I planned to carry good meal for a Monday night dinner while riding. The Monday afternoon nap planned was but a nice dream because I had to shop Monday. I ended up resting as much as possible Sunday.

Back to USA momentarily. My special Calfee Design PBP bike suffered an ignominious failure the weekend I was doing my last training rides and packing to embark for Europe. We fixed the bike at the Calfee factory in California working through Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. As a result I was preoccupied in the extreme once in France the week before PBP.

With decades of carbon fuel burning racing experience I know that the smallest forgotten preparation detail can lead to catastrophe. France is literally and figuratively a very long way to go to fail for a trivial reason. A treasonable offense. One planning to spend the best part of a week riding, eating, visiting, nursing, in essence doing everything but sleep, should be prepared.

The human body is a remarkable operating system. If you take care of it, it will most likely see you to the finish, albeit a bit worse for wear, psychologically and physically battered. There will be moments along the road that reveal more of yourself than you imagined.

I enjoyed a day drive from Zurich to Paris Novotel hotel situated at the Paris National Golf Course. This is an idyllic setting in the countryside with no surrounding noises other than crickets and breezes. We slept peacefully each night with windows and patio doors opened

wide. I roomed with a riding friend from Fresno. She and two of her pals were to do PBP in the 84-hour group, on a mission to stay together and beat the course up! I planned a leisurely pace in order to meet as many fellow travelers as possible.

I assembled my repaired bike in relative calm (very few riders there yet) the morning after arriving at the hotel and reconnoitered the ride from hotel to registration starting finishing area. I took the bike completely apart down to a bare frame the weekend before to repair a problem and did not have time to do a road test before departure to Europe. Peaceful test riding in Paris the week before PBP was very important. I chose not to do any long rides in the days leading up to my Monday night start time. I know from experience that rest, time off the bike, is an important part of any long ride preparation.

I used other time I would have rested at the Novotel to shepherd lost souls around town in my car. The GPS was an excellent savoir.

The leader of our all tandem (4) one fixie Fleche pulled a boner and was bumped off his flight to Paris. His sight-impaired (legally blind) stoker phoned my hotel room from the front desk on her arrival in need of an escort. I was all too happy to indulge her needs. We went out to meet up with new and old friends and enjoy a social evening. I was pleased as punch to escort two good looking women, one on each arm, as a dinner group formed up. Thank you Liz and Pam.

We spent the next day driving out to the airport to collect the lost soul tandem Captain, only to discover the airline misplaced their tandem! All available time that day and next was devoted to driving to area bike shops working on back up plans for this tandem team and one solo rider who lost his bike because he failed to check it all the way through to the Paris destination!

With no good news of the tandem whereabouts and nothing else to occupy agonized bodies & soul's Saturday morning we reconnoitered the hotel rooftop quite early awaiting news of the lost tandem. I am sure we are the only soul's who came home from Paris with panoramic rooftop photos!

More than 60 worrisome hours after the Captain arrived sans bike the tandem arrived. Add insult to injury, it seems to have taken the airline overnight to get it across town to the Novotel. The lost solo bike also showed up at the hotel at the last possible minute a day later. His bottom bracket failed 150 kilometers into the ride, ending four years effort. His ride ended because nobody in France had the special tools required to disassemble the American made bottom bracket to see what failed and if it could be fixed.

Moral, do not go to PBP with queer bike parts.

We helped the tandem team assemble their bike and rode late from the hotel to registration inspection, beaming in relief. Thank goodness, rain compelled the organizers to cancel the bike inspection, which seemed to throw registration appointment times out the window.

The tandem team completed PBP on the late arriving bike with some drama, realizing the stoker's life long ambition. Her captain is a saint, someone I would follow anywhere on a bike at a moments notice.

I went to France with only one goal; FINISH PBP.

It is my habit from past racing travels to spend as much time as I can at foreign events with the louder, fun loving, foreigners encountered.

This was no exception during PBP. While I enjoyed riding with and meeting new American friends, I particularly enjoyed small groups and individual encounters with Brazilians from Rio de Janeiro (different and more fun loving than other Brazilians), Germans, folks from the British Isles, French, Italians, a lone Hungarian on fixed gear and others I don't recall.

I enjoy each nationality's culturally distinctive attributes. The French cultural attitude toward cycling and cyclist's is so special I found riding alone with French entrants a great pleasure. We may have struggled to communicate but thoroughly enjoyed riding together.

I encountered a lovely and strong woman Thursday. Soldiering on solo, I made a determined effort to catch her once I saw her alone up the road. She seemed to be keeping a good pace in very hilly terrain so I thought we might ride together for a time. It was a challenge to catch her. If she spoke any English, she chose not to use it. We rode together for a long time, trading the pull routinely. We rode side by side at times struggling to communicate including hand signals to make points. I used very limited French, German, and Italian in an effort to talk. She suck to French. Riding together was delightful and invigorating. At one point she pulled along side to explain that I needed to slow down going uphill or the Paris finish could be in jeopardy.

She is one of many foreigners I regret not being able to see at or after the finish.

I rode through Friday dawn and early morning with Michele, a lovely Frenchman. He spoke a couple words of English to my equally comprehensive French! We rode along side-by-side talking, using simple words and phrases to converse. We were brought to tears at a point on passing an elderly Frenchman who was struggling to keep riding with a severe case of Shermer's Neck. This elderly gentleman had his right hand on the drop, left elbow on the bar top, and chin in his left palm, bald head shining in predawn mist. At that, he was barely able to see the road surface ahead of his front tire. He was moving slowly, looking weary and determined.

Michele later looked at me with a tragic expression and said something over and over in French I was not able to comprehend. We were communicating pretty well by this time having developed a small vocabulary of words that worked. I understand much more French than I can speak, but whatever Michele said at this moment was beyond me and was made more puzzling by the profound change in his facial expression. Turns out his saddle sores were so bad he just had to stop and take stock to see what might be done. You cannot imagine what was passing through my tired mind as he was trying to communicate his desperation. He pulled to the side and sent me on my way.

I enjoyed many different encounters with German riders who represented the third largest contingent behind French and Americans. The Germans by and large speak very good English and we spoke some German around the dinner table as children. The German's were all fun to ride and converse with. Travel, careers, lifestyle, cycling, politics, most any topic made for entertaining conversation.

I nursed one German along shortly after departing Brest. He was suffering terrible GI problems and had no food on board to help. I later rode for a long time with another German who was head of the regional Randonneurs club and the organizer of an amazing pro-am race

program that draws tens of thousands of participants. Yet another who went to the same small university my sister attended nearly forty years ago. I encountered a small group of Germans riding together who were widely traveled in the USA. We talked culture, politics, and travel through hours of miserable nighttime downpour between Carhaix & Tinteniac.

I had a memorable encounter with another solo German rider Thursday morning. We joined up somewhere after Tinteniac. We were moving along side by side yakking. As we sailed past a group of American's one of the riders saw my Selle An-Atomica kit and gave chase to ask if I had anything to do with the company, then to ask an inane question. My German companion understood the nonsensical nature of the question and asked me if we should put the hammer down and return to more serene cycling conversation! Off we went. I was disappointed when he pulled off later at a prearranged location where his German contingent were to regroup and take a meal together.

Brazilian's from Rio are some of the world's greatest fun loving people. I first encountered such group Monday night. I know how to say hello, goodbye, thank you, and lets eat in Portuguese. I also know the music to some of the songs they were singing. It was simply fun to ride with these guys listening to their constant chatter and laughter through the night and coming day. I recall brief contact with the defacto leader a couple days later, the guy who talked most and constantly encouraged everyone in the group.

I am disappointed I did not see more Italians. I don't recall riding with any, only fleeting passing hello's and goodbyes after being accosted by them (my bike) during sign in at the stadium. They can be just as fun loving as Brazilians.

I encountered a small group of Japanese Thursday. I thought, oh goody, lets go use my Japanese and see if we get a rise out of these folks? My Japanese is better than any of the European tongues I murder so I thought it might be fun and help organize my meager European language skills. I said hello, asked after their health, passed the time of day, and said goodbye. We chatted bit more hours later at a Controle.

This takes me back to the French citizens whose lives we invade and enhance for this week. I carried PBP commemorative pins made for riders using our saddles. Before the start, I thought I would also give these to Controle volunteers. I'm embarrassed to say I mostly forgot to do that wanting to be sure I didn't forget a Controle task and be disqualified or forget a body or bike maintenance task from hours before.

The children along the road are another matter. It didn't take long to understand that I should stop every time I came upon youngsters who were clapping and cheering to thank them and gift a pin. I was surprised that many of the kids were eager to talk with an English speaker. These were typically small groups of kids old enough to be without adults. They would shamelessly pool their English skills to have most any kind of conversation, interesting and diverse in nature. It was interesting to observe the dynamics when, if I didn't have enough pins left in my jersey pocket to give one to every girl and boy, I would give them only to the girls, telling the boys to listen and learn...

Tuesday morning, the first daylight experience was something to look forward to. I was amused by a number of folks propped up in the strangest places sleeping. I passed elderly father & son farmer's cheering with bemusement at the foot of their driveway. I turned around, wanting to go back and pass the time and take a photo.

I rode diligently throughout the course. Had one flat Tuesday afternoon and a front fender drama Friday morning. Otherwise, I was able to stay focused on body maintenance when riding solo. Reminded myself and anyone I may be riding with during daylight to enjoy the landscape, even when it was pouring buckets. It was delightful to stop away from Controles to eat, rest, and visit. Encounters with shop owners, citizens, and riders provided unknown pleasures.

At one such stop in a small town I sat with a French or Belgian rider enjoying coffee, chocolate, and pastries. He excused himself at a point to phone someone on what sounded like architectural business. Patrons and shop owner in the bar laughed out loud when I asked for a coffee and hot chocolate and wanted them unceremoniously dumped in a water bottle. No cups & saucers thank you. More laughter when I asked that the bottles be filled either with hot milk or hot water on top of the coffee, chocolate blend.

Their pleasure and willingness to enjoy life was self-evident. I was using as much French as I could, getting better with passage of time. As I struggled to make myself understood on the water bottle blend desired, anyone in this little establishment whether at the bar or a dining table chimed in, in English and or French to aid in the interpretation. It was a very good old roundhouse brawl of sorts.

I am sure the patrons are still talking about the crazy American who put the odd blend in a water bottle. I recall asking the owner if he had cognac or Armagnac to top up the fuel mixture, which brought yet more boisterous merriment from the locals!

Perhaps unknown to every other PBP rider, there was a TV celebrity sighting as I sat outside this small establishment enjoying food, drink, and conversation. Rick Steves, the travel writer PBS guy, appeared on bike with his wife and two kids. He was evidently surveying the little village center, map in hand. I debated asking him if he was aware of the cycling event taking place and chose not to. He had the presence of an excited kid, working a map, traversing the town center looking at, for TV camera angles no doubt.

My original PBP plan and training was to ride without sleep to Brest, make the turn and then begin scheming a more leisurely return to Paris to include an impromptu nap in a peaceful locale. Weather put the kibosh on that plan. I rode comfortably into Tinteniac in hard rain on the outbound leg and decided to eat a big meal, shower, wash the clothes I needed to keep wearing, and sleep for three hours.

I passed through the cafeteria line piling the food high, going back and forth to the beer and wine a couple times, deciding not to indulge eventually. I had so much food on the tray when I sat down my immediate thought was whether or not I should return some of it and get my money back. Silly me! I ate and was shocked to get to the bottom of each plate without feeling stiffed.

With only one set of warm clothing I put those items on the shower floor to rinse, wash, pound under foot while bathing in unsatisfying

tepid water. I wrung the rinsed clothing and spread them out in darkness next to my cot. It was not too bad putting on damp, cool, wool knee socks, knee warmers, leg warmers, and windbreaker after the nap. It felt good to be dry, warm, in fresh bibs and jersey while eating another huge dinner meal before taking off in darkness and light rain.

Having rested in Tinteniach rather than continuing the mad sleepless dash from the start to Brest, I began to contemplate new plans as I rode in the quiet of the night with fellow silent travelers. I decided on a round trip back to Tinteniach where I would eat, shower, and rest again. That sounded better and better as the rainy night passed.

The Calfee Design Bamboo bike was a real blessing, save the unexpected trip to Northern California for repairs when I was supposed to be packing to leave for Switzerland. Relying on Craig Calfee's comprehensive twenty year career designing cutting edge bike frames, the bamboo bike has very special geometry to accommodate rigors of PBP. Add to that, the natural bamboo tubes provide a wonderfully quiet ride, absorbing a tremendous amount of large and small road noises that lead to muscle fatigue. The frame is as stiff as the best climbing bike wants to be. Furthermore, it carried two loaded panniers. I road self supported with four changes of clothes, one set of foul weather clothes, emergency food, tools, and spares.

I now call bamboo; "The New High Tech Frame Material." If one asked a group of engineers to design the ultimate or ideal bicycle tube cross section, it would end up looking very much like bamboo in it's natural state. Billions of years of progress is hard to improve on.

It was nice as Wednesday morning passed to see the rain stop and then clouds slowly parting. I actually removed my rain jacket, windbreaker, leg warmers and eventually the knee socks. I originally planned to wear a short sleeve jersey under a special long sleeve model when riding through cool nights. The weather was such that I never took the long sleeve jersey off for keeps. Within minutes of taking it off Wednesday, the cold wind picked up across a high plateau a few hours out from Brest. I regretted having to stop to put long sleeves back on.

The gale winds in Brest were not much fun. I was nearly blown off the bike while attempting to sightsee and take photos traversing the bridge across the estuary.

I saw my Novotel roomy and her Fresno gang for the first time at the Brest Controle, all smiles. They started Tuesday morning in the 84 hr group. They rode through to Brest without sleep. I decided to do my Controle duties and run. Stopped long enough in the bike park to eat the remainder of my Carrefour emergency foodstuffs; good stinky cheese, bread, and fruit. What was missing? A bottle of wine, blanket, beautiful woman, and sunny meadow.

I rode back out of town following a father and his really young looking son. They seemed to be enjoying a lifetime's adventure. I have no idea what language they spoke to each other, but was struck by father's kind tone of voice and continuous riding instructions to his son. Every time I screwed my nerve up to speak to either of them, Brest car traffic intervened. I lost contact with them almost as abruptly as they appeared.

Shortly after losing the father & son, I cried quite unexpectedly a couple times from the realization I would finish PBP. I rode with

several solo Germans through this time. Bless the French, how nice is it to stop anywhere on the roadside to pee without concern.

I rode later in the day with a GIANT Englishman on fixed gear. Turns out, we had quite a bit to talk about so he let his mates take off up the road. By the time we were climbing that longest grade to the windswept plateau our conversation was winding down. Brit looked up the road, saw his mates off in the distance, said thanks, goodbye, and bridged the massive gap effortlessly in mere seconds!

I encountered the crazy guy on an old French two-speed bike with garlic & vegetable strands, leather luggage, a few minutes later. I thought he was an interloper, only to find his bike parked next to mine as I was leaving Carhaix Controle and overhearing folks talking about this famous or notorious British rider and the bike he chose for yet another PBP adventure.

Off into the evening and eventual pouring rain, which covered most of my ride back to Tinteniach where food, shower, and nap were the obvious choice. Two hours fitful sleep this time. I did enjoy the ride for a long time out of Carhaix in spite of the pouring rain due to a small group of Germans mentioned earlier. I was as wet as I have ever been on a bike by the time I pulled into Tinteniach.

It was fun to see my tandem team friends and our Fleche Fixed gear companion in Tinteniach. Tandem captain had two soup bowls full of coffee, one in each hand, wondering aloud if he could take the bowls home and forever drink coffee this way! The human mind and spirit is an amazing thing. I recall that his speech and general presence seemed lucid at the time. Yet on seeing the photo I took at the moment, one can only wonder how this lost, crazed soul could pedal another kilometer, let alone another 450 more on tandem leading and caring for a legally blind stoker who had been battling profound GI problems from the start.

I completely repacked both panniers after my fitful nap as the start of organizing my planned nonstop return from Tinteniach to Paris. In so doing, I left my sunglasses out, forgotten, overlooked. This reminded me at amusement on seeing clothing carnage along the outbound route. I remember thinking, how could someone lose that? I saw a lot of lost clothing along the route but never saw food!

I too fell victim. Somewhere between Tinteniach and return to Tinteniach, I lost my helmet rain cover and visor. I haven't a clue. I was able to improvise rain cover but nothing replaces the raindrop and car headlight stopping power of a visor.

Anyway, off I went from Tinteniach after another good meal and brief visits into the still of the night, thankfully with not much more than mist when I departed even though it was raining steadily when I got up from the nap.

I encountered some other English fixed gear riders in the early morning hours and enjoyed easy conversation. A young multi speed guy in this group ended up riding off the front with me through some nasty little climbs out there. I couldn't imagine why an elderly French farmer standing with his big old-fashioned scythe at a roundabout? Whatever obstructed the view up the road went away just as I passed this "grim reaper." I was barely able to yank camera from a jersey pocket and

point it over my back to get his photo. Stinking hill he obscured went straight up from the roundabout.

I encountered other pleasurable riding companions during the day, folks mentioned earlier in this missive. I determined while riding through a downpour Thursday afternoon with a Hungarian kid on fixed gear (just turned 22 years old, which is the PBP age limit for riding without a parent), that I would stop in Fougères Controle and stay long enough to let my feet dry in open air. I did the Controle routine, found a chair, stripped layers, and wrung everything out as much as possible, keeping my feet up on a chair. This left an embarrassing small lake around my chairs.

I made the mistake of tossing a PBP pin at a friend from Northern California who was sleeping nearby, sitting upright. He quickly talked me into departing. He and a fellow from Israel on a Brompton bike were planning to leave the Controle together. I put wet clothing back on, rushed across the street to fill both water bottles with hot soup and get sandwiches, which I munched as we rode in relative calm. We saw stars for the first and only time during the week, later that night!

A sizable group of American friends coalesced in the next few hours so that we came and went this way to Villaines. I ended up riding alone with a woman who usually leaves me behind during double century riding. Our conversations through the middle of this night inspired me and helped keep the sleep daemons at bay. She beat me out of the Controle, couldn't wait while I enjoyed another excellent bowel movement. Don't suppose I need to tell all how important it is to understand your GI requirements over such enduring and challenging distances.

Well, as I picked my bike up to depart the Controle, another of our Tandem Fleche teammates approached on foot with an utterly distraught appearance. She reported that she had just walked the past few hours to get to this Controle. Something had failed on their bottom bracket so they decided husband would limp ahead alone into the Controle to see about repairs or jury-rigging. I quickly realized in a selfish way that I had to say something calming and flee the scene. This was an irrational person in bad need of an anchor, which I could not afford to be.

I took off with two other American friends well known from long distance riding events in California. I lost them almost immediately when I stopped to make a saddle adjustment. Seems the saddle was rotated when I unceremoniously put my bike on its side in the Controle or dropped it on the way out.

So, off I went again, alone into the unknown, in search of new companions, sure that I only had Dreux and Paris Controle to go. Silly me. I rode hard for quite a time thinking I would catch my friends and be home in shot order. Alas, I never saw them again. Michele, French riding companion encountered at dawn Friday, corrected the error of my tired mind by telling me we had one more Controle to pass before Dreux. That realization was a substantial, but momentary letdown.

I don't remember much of the predawn hours Friday. I merely soldered on, singing & screaming aloud when alone to keep my mind active. I did pass the Californian riding companion of 12 hours earlier in the predawn gray. He was standing over his crossbar, head hanging, sound asleep, looking very much like a goner. He did not budge when I passed slowly, shouting his name.

I did what I could to cheer up another American friend early Friday morning. She was suffering terribly (too many ailments and too tired to know), and just needed a friend to talk with for a time. I towed her as long as she wanted and rode off when instructed to do so. I changed into clean and dry clothes at Mortagne, sat on a curb for a time massaging my bare feet and walking in bare feet as long as I was there. Ate yet another huge meal and prepared my mind to push to the finish.

While it was gray, it was not raining. The rain held off until I was in the Paris suburbs when another nice little downpour blessed us.

I rode out of Mortagne with a lovely Aussie gal. She too had some administrative connection with the Randonneurs club in her home country, but more importantly, was a great riding companion and conversationalist. Her husband and kids were along for holiday, not driving in support. They had traveled in the US some and were very observant of our dramatic cultural differences. We parted when I stopped for a change of clothing. I think I needed to peel layers off.

I don't know if I have forgotten or confused the Dreux Controle. I just remember the high plateau farmlands and nasty little climbs with cowbell ringers that got us back into suburban Paris and the finish. I did stop out there for impromptu front fender repairs. The darn thing started rubbing on the tire, making annoying noise. No amount of kicking it while underway had an effect. I had to take the wheel off the redo fender attachments under the fork.

I had spent so much time visiting with spectators along the road, folks in cafes & shops, that I realized for the first time while fixing the fender I might be getting close to my time limit. Honestly did not think once during the entire ride about my time limit. I did some quick (Ha!) calculating and realized another mechanical could put finishing in jeopardy.

What is it about human nature that after all those miles and days, put a bunch of men together and you've got a race on your hands? That is how I rode the last 20km until the traffic and signals stopped us too often for there to be any racing close to the finish.

AND THERE I WAS, SUCCESSFULLY AT THE END OF PBP.

I loitered at the finish for a time wondering if I should not be taking photos, seeking out riding companions, doing something special to commemorate this significant event. I was delighted to see our female Fleche team member come frantically into the Finish Controle with minutes to spare. They somehow managed to find pieces to jury rig the failing bottom bracket on the tandem and limp into the finish with minutes to spare, not speaking to each other.

I went back and forth to the food tent twice, tired mind no able to make any decisions, only to find they had run out of beer and meat and potatoes.

All was not lost for I lost a bet made before the start. I hopped on the bike, rode back to the car park, loaded my bike in the back, changed shoes and wandered into Carrefour to buy topical ibuprofen crème my roomy asked for and an elegant dinner meal for the two of us.

You see, I bet Jeanine a bottle of champagne that I would never have to take my rain jacket out of the pannier. When I saw her at the Brest

Controle, she was delighted to tease and remind me that I had better pay up at the finish.

So, I found her ibuprofen crème after much tired conversation and side trips to two pharmacies in Carrefour center. More importantly, I bought good chilled champagne, foigrois, cheeses, smoked fishes, bread, and fruit. Drove carefully back to the hotel where we enjoyed a toast, a brief meal, and retelling of our adventures before we began falling asleep mid sentence in the comfort of a dry, clean room.

We showered and were sound asleep well before dark. Jeanine awoke in the night, hungry. She ate and read. I slept. She did not finish the champagne in the night so I did with remainder of fish, cheese, and bread, then went to the hotel restaurant for breakfast!

I went back to the Carrefour Saturday and did a massive gourmet food shopping, took it back to the hotel and gathered all the patio tables and people present to enjoy a typical European Saturday luncheon.

Saturday evening dinner with countless other Americans was a pleasure. I was compelled to tease the Fleche tandem team who were at dinner with their young children. It was clear their relations were strained from challenges of the riding and walking to the finish. It was a delight to hear other's tales and painful to observe pains many riders were going through to sit or stand.

I was disappointed to say goodnight knowing the hotel and city would become a ghost town Sunday. I ended up packing, going to lunch alone in the city on Sunday, then driving down to Bourg d'Oisans to follow my plan to ride Alpe d'Huez after PBP. This was an excellent decompression exercise.

The Hotel de Milan in Bourg d'Oisans is the long established standard for cyclists. The atmosphere is old world in the extreme. The owner simply gives you a room key and quotes a rate on arrival, no credit card, no sign in, nothing. She has no language skill other than French and no fear. You drink from the bar, it is self-service if she is not around, eat in the restaurant, and settle your bill when you depart. I stayed four days. She verbally double checked everything of importance (costs) from my stay and sent me merrily on the way once we settled the bill.

Off to Lake Constance, a lovely island village hotel with excellent food grown locally. The hotel restaurant featured fruits, vegetables, and fresh water fish of all sorts from the land and surrounding substantial lake. I was there to attend Eurobike, which is another experience to relate at another time...