

Aidan and Mieke's PBP 2007



All photos Mieke Muyllaert/Aidan Brosnan except where credited.

Prologue

Ten minutes should do it. Aidan watches the clock while Mieke curls up for a nap. It's the third night at about the 740km mark and we're somewhere between Carhaix and Loudeac. Mieke's started to fall asleep on the bike. This is her second attempt to stave off the noddies for long enough to get to the next town. Normally she wouldn't sleep too well squatting on a grass verge at the side of the road in the pouring rain at 3am. This might sound silly, but at this stage we'd seen people asleep at the side of the road, with the bike between their legs and the lights still on.

So here we are. Who's idea was this anyway?! It all seemed so far away in December 2006 when Aidan said "I wonder is 2007 a PBP year?". Our only acquaintance with the event was looking at Irish trike PBP 'ancien' John Dalton's Super Randonneur medals and PBP brevet card on his wall in Belgium, and being told that it's something every cyclist should do once. The concept of cycling three or four hundred k's, never mind 1200, was just incomprehensible. But the first hurdle was to complete a 200km qualifier in March '07. Now, if like us you're one of those people who says to themselves in January "Sure I might do the Wicklow 200 this year..." and then never quite get enough training in by June, you'll understand that getting through a 200 in March seemed almost as bad as a 1200 at any other time. To cut a long story short we did it (and Mieke discovered that trying to keep up with the fast people wasn't necessarily the way to get around a long distance event, and that if you don't keep an eye on the route sheet you'll be in deep sheet when everyone else disappears in Enniskerry and you don't know which junction you're supposed to be at). Like the rest of the Irish audaxers, we also got through the 300 (nice, sunny, don't like the hills in Cavan); 400 (first cycle through the night, so *that's* what sitting on a saddle for 22 hours feels

like); and 600 (good practice for fixing punctures in the dark and the rain, now I know what the noddies feel like, why don't all the drunk people in the 24hr shop in Phibsboro understand that all I want is to buy this chocolate bar and get a receipt so I can keep cycling in the dark and the rain, thanks Conor for the sandwiches). We had funny walks after the 400 and 600, as our local bikeshop, WorldWide Cycles, will testify. We wanted them to see us afterwards, as we figured they had never met anyone who'd done this kind of madness.

So in the space of five intense months it was from zero to hero especially when the medal for the 600 arrived from France, completing the set of four, but...we had qualified for PBP! Darn! Now we have to go! Much logistics, bike-packing, extortionate Aer Lingus fees later, we find ourselves with the rest of the gang in the salubrious surrounds of Mr. Bed City in the suburbs of Paris – like a Quality Hotel in the middle of Sandyford Industrial Estate. A few days and much pasta later we are setting off at last.



From left: Paul, Kevin, Aidan, Dave, Rose, Barney. Lovely weather two days before the start.



Now where does this bit go? Base camp at Mr. Bed, where we were well looked after pre- and post-PBP. Mark is to the right.

0km - Guyancourt

Coralled around the running-track, it's getting dark but the rain is holding off. All the Irish 90-hr starters are together. Paul, Michael and Dave have left earlier in the 80-hour group. We meet Joe and the Swedes, who all have green lights on their backs so they can find each other. The groups of about 500 are let off at 20 min intervals, heralded by fireworks. We eventually go in the 22:30 start. As we're waiting to leave, the rain starts. We pull in and put on our rain trousers, then the firework is set off and we're off out along the dual carriageway.



Rose and Kevin at the start; waiting around the running-track at Guyancourt.

It's easier to stay together than I thought it would be, as the groups sweep by. Everybody seems to be going faster than us but we stick to our pace, remembering Kevin's words of wisdom not to go out too fast and Paul's advice "You have to ride your own PBP". We start to go through villages with traffic-calming, and some climbs which must have been the forest of Rambouillet, though it was too dark to tell at the time. Despite the rain, the streets are lined with people shouting encouragement, or warning us about corners, kerbs and roundabouts. Then out into open country with lights visible for miles ahead. We start passing people with punctures, a sight we see again and again. We conveniently got all our punctures over with in the days before the start, and end up not getting any on the event. The rain gets worse and it's lashing by the time we get to Mortagne-au-Perche (140km). We go inside to warm up and eat rolls from our bag, and meet a French guy who's on his eight PBP, and says this is the worst weather he's ever seen. We stay for 45 mins, about 30 more than we had planned. Nobody wants to venture out into the lashing rain at 2.30 a.m.

We leave and it's still dark. Eventually light breaks, the rain stops, and by the time we get to La Hutte we decide to stop for a coffee. Onwards to Villaines-la-Juhel (222km), our first control. There is a big inflatable arch set up, and an MC giving commentary, like the start of a big race.



The locals are lined up behind the barriers, clapping and cheering all the cyclists as they arrive and depart. We get our first taste of the queues and follow Paul's mantra to "stamp your card first". On to Fougères (310km), one look at the restaurant queue and we decide to seek food elsewhere, which we find a few hundred metres up the road, just along the route. A pub/shop is doing barbeque and rolls, which we eat on a bench in their yard, with an American who's been to Ireland before. We leave at about 16:00.

Dawn on Tuesday morning, with cyclists as far as the eye can see.

Tuesday 19:30 p.m. Tinteniac 365km

On the way to Tinteniac, it becomes apparent that at our current pace we can't take much more than one hour's sleep. At this point, any plans we had are gone out the window – things like "we'll go to the control at 400km and have 4 hours sleep". We get some food. While trying to figure out our times, an English chap advises us that we should allow for a secret control along the way. We decide we have to sleep and shower, so we get soap and towels and book ourselves into the dorm. We end up in the same room as a Japanese couple, the woman is practically fainting with tiredness. We have a shower, put back on the same clothes, then collapse on the bed for an hour. In hindsight you'd say why bother with the shower, but Mieke has some vague recollection off shorts/saddle issues and thinking that basic hygiene might be a good idea to avert disaster later on. We'll never know, but by Brest whatever issues there might have been had worked themselves out. We feel pretty good after the shower and are asleep within seconds.

Someone calls us an hour later – it feels like 5 minutes later. In a half-dream we gather our bags, stumble down and knock back a bottle of coke, before strapping on the bags and heading off, at about 21:30, into the night – not ideal! For anyone who's read *The Third Policeman*, this was it in action. Forget 'Lost', try 'PBP'. Mieke spent the first few hours between Tinteniac and Loudeac being at one with the bike – she didn't know where her hands and feet ended, and bike began. It wasn't the noddies, she felt in control, but it was like an out of body experience with the bike on autopilot. Conversation after so little sleep is like talking to strangers after a few drinks (or few drinks too many). You are really friendly but not really listening to the other person.

Along this section we meet Alison, an American woman, who seems to be in a similar state. Between the three of us we have a suitably disjointed conversation, until she gets dropped on a long climb. We meet later and find out she was feeling sick. Further along we come on a coffee stand set up at the side of the road, a welcome sight in the dark. We stop to revitalise and meet Mark. Somewhere on this section we meet the fastest bunch of the 80-hr starters (les vedettes) coming back in cavalcade with motorbike outriders. Sickening – we're struggling out looking at another two nights of this, and they've already been to Brest and are nearly back. By now we're in uncharted territory, the most we've ever done is ride through one night. Cycling in the dark is intense for one night, but realising you're halfway through your second night and have two more to go is a bit depressing.



Loudeac, Tuesday. Nobody's too fussy about where they sleep.

Eventually in the wee hours we make it to Loudeac (450km), where we have some food and 30 mins sleep with our heads on the table, beside a rustling alien in a survival bag. The place is full of sleeping cyclists, some in dreadful places like drafty lobbies or the front porch of the school canteen. At some point in the event, and this is as good a place as any to re-live it, Mieke said to Aidan "I'm not enjoying this at all, and I never want to do it again" – a reference to Paul's advice to "Enjoy it" and "Use the time". He possibly meant to use it for sleeping and/or eating, not standing in queues or worse – footerin'.

A while after leaving it starts to get light. In St. Martin des Pres there's a good coffee stall but there's a delay and we decide we don't have time, so we keep going. As it turns out, the secret control is a few km down the road at Corlay. We feel a bit short of time so we run in and get the cards stamped and depart quickly. We meet Paul in this section, on his way back. Nice to see a familiar face, though we wonder how it's going for him as we thought we would have passed him in the previous night.

Wednesday 10:00 Carhaix 525km

In Carhaix we meet Dave who's on his way back, and Mark again, who's at about the same stage as us. Having given up the control food as a bad job, we go to a boulangerie on the road out of town, where some fresh quiche and buns make a welcome change. The sun is shining as we head out the road, where we meet Michael on his way back to Carhaix. Further along we also meet Kevin returning – a wave across the road, and we are gone, heading in our separate directions.



Recumbent descending Roc Trevezel.



Sur la pelouse à Sizun.

There's lots of climbing in this section, the first long drag through woodland is probably worse than the feared Roc Trevezel. As we are pulling along the relative flat we gather a group behind us. Eventually a Scandinavian comes up to give us a break, and pulls us a good bit of the way up the Roc, where a cross-wind is making it interesting. He drops us on the descent and we stop for a breather in Sizun. After that it seems like a long haul of never-ending hills to get to Brest. At least the sun is shining and the bay looks great as we roll across the old bridge. We stop for a photo even though we don't really have time. One last hill up to the control, then check in and get our free can of Coke to celebrate. Our idea that at Brest we would magically have time for a proper sleep was long gone. Arriving there felt like we were finished (well, at least for a few minutes).

After the initial relief and sense of achievement, it dawns on us that we have no time for such frivolities as sleep. We have our celebratory shower and change of clothes and sort out the bags for the return.



Crossing the Pont Albert Loupe into Brest.



Having our celebratory free drink at the control.



We leave Brest in the early evening sunshine into a strong headwind and an unending series of hills, in the knowledge that we are going to be mostly climbing till we get back over the Roc. Climbing the long drag up the Roc, we pass cyclists still heading for Brest. As far as we were aware, these people were outside the time limit. We were to hear later that the control closing times had been relaxed due to the bad conditions on the preceding two days. We see the mast on the top of the hill, and as we get to the top the PBP TV van drives down, filming in the twilight. It's time to turn on the lights as we start to descend a very fast section into Carhaix. This section was a bit weird - after a day and a night of meeting oncoming cyclists, the roads are eerily quiet, partly because some of the homeward route is different, but mainly because we are near the back of the bunch.

Wednesday 22:20 700km Carhaix

We once again join the queue for the ubiquitous spaghetti bolognese, conscious that every minute in the queue is one less of sleep. We try to sleep with our heads on the table, but the canteen is too noisy and not being particularly tired, we decide to head out and hang on to the time cushion that we have in the bag. It's 00:00 and we have 7 hours of darkness ahead. As we set out, the rain has stopped, the night is mild and we feel quite upbeat as we start to tackle the minor roads that are a feature of this remote section. Up till now, we've been meeting Mark at most controls. At some point after Brest we get a text message from him which sounds like he thinks he won't finish. In hindsight that probably wasn't what he was saying at all, but not much was making sense at that stage.

After about an hour, the drizzle starts, gradually growing into full-on rain. The lack of sleep over the past couple of days is starting to catch up on everyone, as we pass cyclists wobbling precariously near the ditch, or worse, the middle of the road. The small rolly roads are hard going, particularly for recumbents. We pass one of these on a hill, trying to clip back into his pedals from a standstill, while practically rolling backwards. There's probably a good reason for recumbents, but it's not the hills of Bretagne.

The rain is relentless and the sleep deficit starts to catch up on us. Mieke starts to get the noddies, half falling asleep then jerking awake further along the road, while Aidan starts to hallucinate in his peripheral vision. Mieke has to stop as she's afraid she's going to wander into the ditch or the path of a car. As there's no shelter to be had, she has to crouch on the wet road verge in the rain to sleep, while Aidan tries to time 10 minutes, conscious of the time we're losing. Mean while the wobbly cyclists we passed earlier pass us again. Hoping that this nap will be enough to get us to the next town, we set off - but after about 20 mins the noddies strike again. For the sake of not having a proper sleep at the last control, we are losing lots of time. It's the worst section this could have happened in, as there's only one village of any size in the whole section, and practically no other houses. By now Aidan's hallucinations are making cycling difficult as they are starting to take up more of his field of vision. Eventually we wobble in to St Martin de Pres, where where Mieke conks out on a chair outside a bar, while Aidan tries to get a coffee. This takes about 20 mins as it's the only place open. The bar is full of cyclists in various states. The sleep and the coffee seem to work and we roll out around 4am.

Even though we are getting near Loudeac, the small windy roads seem interminable, trying to follow the signs at every junction while the raindrops on our glasses make seeing things a little bit more difficult, combined with more and more ludicrous hallucinations for Aidan. We're just thankful that, being France, there aren't any potholes to worry about.

Arriving in Loudeac at 5am, we're too tired to eat so we head straight for a bed. This has to be booked with the volunteers in the lobby of the school gym, who have the most complicated-looking spreadsheet ever set up on the desk, with cardboard numbers assigned to every mattress. You say how long you need, they find a space, give you your number, and show you your space. As this happens for every cyclist, we found ourselves waiting in line as the minutes ticked by. The dorm consists of at least 200 mattresses in rows on the floor, like something at a disaster relief centre. The main sound is rustling, as people arrive and leave as quietly as

possible. We take off our wet shoes and rain gear and drape them over some random furniture in the lobby area – the bad weather and highest-ever number of participants seems to have slightly overwhelmed the controls, which don't seem to have drying-rooms or coat hooks. We shuffle into the darkened hall and when we are shown our allotted spaces, Mieke discovers she's beside Rose and Barney, who are about to leave after a luxurious 3-hour sleep. Mieke's garbled account of how we are fixed for time (badly) and sleep (worse) and possibly her general air of bewilderment, elicits such a look of pity from Rose that somewhere in Mieke's brain a little voice says "this is all not quite normal". She gestures to Aidan to come over to say hello but he barely manages to nod. Two minutes later we're asleep.

The most we can afford is one hour. Aidan is woken at 6:45, a few minutes before the alarm goes off on Mieke's phone. He sits there briefly contemplating matters – the bed is warm, outside is cold and damp, just like our clothes. At this point it's easy to see how someone riding on their own might want to stop. There is obviously only one option – get up, wake the wife, and hit the road. We struggle back into our cold wet gear, in a bit of a panic that we are cutting it fine for the next control. We have no time for breakfast and have to rely on what's stuffed in our back pockets from the day before. On the way out of the control Mieke's bike comes to a halt – some nylon twine from the parking area has become wrapped around her block and jammed it. We spend about 15 mins extracting it with the penknife before we can get going. This is just what we don't need.

Once on the road we pick up a good pace, trying to make up time on the next control, but also aware that there is probably a secret control somewhere along the way. It's surprising to both of us how much benefit we got from just over one hour's sleep. As hunger starts to become an issue, we pull into a shop and buy the woman's last two crepes and some bananas, which we stuff into our mouths and pockets before taking off. We meet Mark again, delighted to see that we have misinterpreted his earlier text and that he's still on the road and in time. The secret control appears – we dash in and out and in the end, we make good time to Tinteniac (858km). Deciding not to eat there, we keep moving to Digne, about 10km down the road. It's not raining and there are quite a few cyclist around the small square, where a shop and boulangerie have some nice food on offer. We fuel up, then take a nap on a bench, followed by a quick coffee in a bar with Jimi Hendrix playing to wake us up. We stock up with pizza slices and apple tart from the boulangeris, and head on, trying to keep the speed up. Aidan takes the front and we charge along, pulling up the hills and pedalling down. We acquire a bunch behind us, but none of them seem to want to take a turn. Eventually we have to stop to answer a call of nature, and the group sail by, telling us we're "quite a team!" Thanks, lads, anytime!



Wringing out the socks again.



Fuzzy in Fougères – soft focus effect due to condensation on the lens from all the damp cyclists.

Up till now it's been dry, but the rain starts again – did we mention the rain – and the control at Fougeres (912km), like everywhere else, reeks of damp cyclists. Having stocked up on food at Digne, we just buy a cup of tea and retire for lunch. We get chatting to two French guys who are following the event, one is a photographer and gets delegated to take our picture. We also meet some Americans who are having a really rough time with the wet. They are talking about finishing without any more sleep, but we don't think it's a good idea given our previous experience.

Thursday 21:30pm 1000km Villaines-la-Juhel

After Fougeres, it's uneventful but wet. We start to see family stalls set up at the roadside, where kids hand out, usually free, coffee and cake. Somewhere along this section Mieke's Achilles tendon starts to hurt. We arrive in Villaines-la-Juhel in the growing dark at 21:30, soaked. We stamp our cards, then buy dry socks from a stand selling cycling clothes and other necessities. We waste time going back to a café we passed on the way in, which is now closed, before going to eat at the control and changing our socks. Mieke discovers that her tendon is badly swollen but, never having experienced this before, is not sure what exactly is wrong. Aidan discovers that he has bought oversocks, i.e. things that look like socks at first glance but have a large hole where the sole should be. That possibly explains the apologetic face of the woman when she said it was the last pair she had in that size. There's nothing can be done about the socks, and given how little time we have in hand, Mieke decides that the sore ankle is not worth risking a trip to the medical tent, where we could get held up for hours. We decide we need to sleep so we get booked into a portakabin dorm of about 10 people, where Aidan ends up between the two loudest snorers in France – in with the earplugs.



Villaines-la-Juhel contrôle – in every town and village along the route, at all times of day and night, the local people come out to cheer on the cyclists. They make a special effort for those who are alone, or at the back of the bunch. Their obvious admiration and respect for the cyclists is probably one of the best things about PBP, along with the volunteers along the route, keeping an eye on the bikes, providing food and beds, and helping anyone with a problem.

Photo: Kevin O'Sullivan

After about 45 mins sleep we head out into the dark and the rain, it's probably about 23:30 on our last night. Aidan takes Mieke's bag to take some weight off her tendon. Somewhere in this section Mieke gets the noddies again, and has to stop for a nap. Further along, the rain has stopped and we pull in to eat one of the rolls we bought earlier. Two French lads pull up, one of them is in the horrors. We have a conversation in pidgin French/English, and give them a roll which he devours. By now we are wishing that every bunch of town lights we see is the next control at Mortagne-au-Perche, but none of them are. Less said about this section the better – the main sentiment in Mieke's head every time the control fails to materialise is "where in the name of *!@#* is the *!@!* control!" It appears at last at 5:50. We get pain au chocolat and a bowl of coffee, and sitting down find we are beside Joe's Swedish friends, who are about as cheerful as us. We are delighted to hear that Joe is several hours ahead, well on the way for a good finishing time. A short nap with our heads on the table, and we prepare to head off into daylight on our last day. We get another text from Clare, back at base camp in Kilpedder. She's been checking the updates on the web and sending us good vibes all the way. Even though we don't usually have the time or the brain power to respond, it's amazing how a few words of encouragement can boost the morale. We leave into the dawn feeling like we can do this after all – the last night is over. Mieke takes back her bag from Aidan as her tendon doesn't seem as bad. The wet gear is

stowed away for hopefully the last time, as the rain has stopped. (Best item included in bag – rain legs).

Friday 7am departing Mortagne au Perche, 1082km

This section starts off with loads of climbs and fast descents. On the bottom of one of these we pass an ambulance dealing with a serious crash on a bend. The road starts to level out and for the first time in 3 days we find ourselves on a long flat stretch. We realise that this must have been the flat open country that we went through on the first night, when we could see lights for miles. Along the way we get chatting to an English chap, John, who gives us a draft into Dreux and assures us we are ok for time. There's an air of celebration at the control, but we don't feel that comfortable about our time cushion so we stamp our cards and go. On the way out of town we stop to put our Ireland jerseys on over the other ones, for the last lap into Paris.

The last section goes through flat areas, interspersed with hills, and then we find ourselves in the forest of Rambouillet, advertised in tourist literature as an attractive amenity on the outskirts of Paris, which as its main feature has a series of savage hills. At the top of the last and worst one there's a nice French man ringing a bell, which is supposed to be encouraging. As the forest runs out, we are starting to enter the Paris area and find ourselves mixing it with traffic, traffic-calming, and bunches of cyclists. We gather from the way some of these are barging through that they are against the clock to finish in time.

The last bit in on the dual-carriageway is a bit nerve-racking as tiredness and euphoria make people take chances with traffic, particularly on roundabouts and at junctions. With the overwhelming feeling being relief, we roll up the ramp to the Gymnase, with a shout from Paul who's behind the barrier, and get off the bikes to go to the control for the last time. By the time we have had our cards stamped, Mark has arrived – a 100% finish for the Irish.



At the finish. Top left: Michael, Mark & Aidan. Top right: Mieke, Dave, Michael. Bottom left: John & Rose (Photos: Joe Bruton).

Bottom right: Celebratory barbeque in back garden of Mr. Bed City. We look like we could all do with a few steaks (Photo: Kevin O'Sullivan).

Epilogue

Back home and a few days later, back to work. We find that some people back home had been watching us on the internet on a daily or even hourly basis and had been phoning each other trying to figure out how we were getting on. Over the coming weeks we meet people, but find it difficult to explain the PBP. The pain that had us swearing never to do it again has faded. We reflect on what we have done, and upon examining the control times, it's easy to be critical of one's performance. Too much waiting, queueing or just sitting, when we could have been cycling. As the other accounts start to come out, we start to realise what we went through was typical and that most people finished, like us, between 85 and 90 hours. By all accounts, we probably couldn't have picked a tougher PBP to cut our teeth on. Looking back, it was great that the two of us did all the qualifiers, and PBP, together – not that we didn't have our moments, but despite (or because of?) the hours spent together on the bikes with some stressful moments, we stuck together and worked as a team the whole way through.

Aidan's tip for next time: bring waterproof socks and fit brand-new tyres and brake blocks a few days before. Mieke's tip: cycle faster, and only eat at controls when it's nighttime and everywhere else is closed.

The PBP is something every cyclist should do once. But twice.....



Team Ireland! Back, l-r: Michael Cassidy, Aidan Brosnan, Mieke Muylleert, Rose Leith, Paul O'Donoghue, Barney Devine; front, l-r: Dave McLoughlin, Mark Lassman, Kevin O'Sullivan. The other Irish participants were John Connaghan, Fintan Lyons, Joe Bruton, Alan Vance and James McKee.