

Paris – Brest – Paris 2003

By Mark Beaver

The atmosphere was electric. Two thousand six hundred cyclists stood with their bikes in the queue in the stadium in St. Quentin, France, eagerly awaiting the 10pm departure of the 15th Paris – Brest – Paris 1200km randonneur ride. Another ten minutes went by. We all shuffled forward another ten feet. An Australian cyclist, passing by the queue on his way to the end of the line-up, spotted some of his club mates, standing just behind me. He waved and yelled out, "Aussie – Aussie – Aussie!" One of the club mates waved and replied, in a loud voice, "Oy – oy – oy!" He yelled again, "**Aussie - Aussie – Aussie!**" This time a dozen Australians, throughout the crowd, yelled back, "**Oy – oy – oy!!**" Again, the call, "**AUSSIE – AUSSIE – AUSSIE!!!!**" And the response reverberated from throughout the crowd from the throats of the forty or fifty Australians present, "**OYY – OYY- OYYYYYY!!!!**" The shout echoed from the walls of the stadium. A couple of thousand of the world's keenest cyclists laughed in response. We shuffled forward another two feet.

We were all here to participate in the world's oldest organized cycling event, the Paris – Brest – Paris, or "P-B-P" as it is better known. Since its inception at the dawn of the cycling era, in 1891, the PBP has been synonymous with the pinnacle of the long-distance cycle-tourist's calendar. It's the Mount Everest of endurance cycling. There are longer rides, such as the Race Across America, but there is no other ride on the planet that attracts four thousand cyclists from twenty-five countries to cycle 1225km in ninety hours or less. We were all assembled, ready for the challenge and the experience. Some, like me, were first-time participants, and some were beginning their third, fifth, or even eighth or tenth PBP. Given that the event takes place every four years, many of these wiry veterans around me had been cycling for several decades.

We heard the announcer from his podium on the starting line announcing, in French and in English, the countdown for the departure of the first wave of cyclists, at 10pm. We were the ninety-hour group. There was to be another group departing at 5AM the next morning, the eighty-four hour group. We, the ninety-hour group, were to be sent off in groups of five hundred at a time, every fifteen minutes, beginning at 10PM. Many of us had witnessed the departure of the "speedy" eighty-hour group two hours earlier, at 8pm, Monday night, August 18th. There were a thousand of the eighty-hour riders, some of whom would be finishing their ride at about the time that most of us would be reaching the halfway point. They had left in the brilliant sunlight of a warm late summer's sunset. Two hours later, under the lights of the stadium, we heard a roar that went up from the hundreds of spectators who had come to see the riders away on

their adventure. The first group of five hundred of us was on their way! We shuffled forward another two feet.

The day before, the eighty-one Canadian riders had met at the mandatory bike-check and registration in the same stadium, the Gymnase des Droits de l'Homme in St-Quentin, on the western outskirts of Paris. We assembled under the arch of the start line for a group photo, all in our red-and-white Randonneurs Canada maple-leaf jerseys. Forty from the BC Randonneurs, twenty from Randonneurs Ontario, a few each from the clubs of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Montreal, and little old me, the sole representative of the Atlantic Provinces. We felt unified in our national jerseys as we posed for photo after photo after photo. Tonight, as I looked around me, I couldn't see any maple leaves, but jerseys of the Spaniards, the Danes, the Randonneurs USA, the many clubs of France, and many other riders, undistinguishable under their reflective vests. All around me were conversations in a dozen languages. I chatted with the Aussies behind me. We all shuffled forward another two feet.

We had lined up beginning at 8:30 to get into the stadium, taking an hour or an hour and a half to make it into the gates to the stadium with its hundreds of bike parking stands. We then queued up to enter the Gymnase itself, to have our checkpoint cards stamped and our magnetic cards swiped into the computer system which would keep track of our progress across the twelve hundred twenty five kilometers to Brest and back. Recovering our bikes from the parking stands, we then were queued up again to be let into the departure area at the starting line. We heard the announcers count down the 10:15 departure group, then the 10:30 group. Finally nearing the head of the line-up, volunteers marked our control cards with a coloured marker, to designate our group's departure time, which would be adjusted so as not to penalize the later departures. I was to be in the 10:45 departure. We exited the stadium and proceeded to the starting line.

There were still hundreds of spectators watching the riders prepare to depart. The announcers kept the crowd amused. A couple of musicians playing traditional medieval instruments played for the crowd and the riders. Finally, the announcers began to make their final announcements and instructions to the riders. We were to be led out of the city by ride marshals on motorcycles, to control the pace for the first fifteen kilometers to spread out the group and prevent accidents. The countdown! Cinq! Quatre! Trois! Deux! Un!! Hundreds of shoes clipping into hundreds of clipless pedals make a cacophony all around me. We were off! The crowd was screaming and cheering, but I was too busy watching the other cyclists all around me as we swung around the first turn and headed out the divided boulevard. We soon spread out into a long homogenous group, two or three abreast and five hundred long, as we whirred out of the city by generator lights. There were gendarmes at all of the intersections controlling traffic, allowing us through. Crowds of local citizens lined every street corner and overpass,

calling, "Bon Courage", "Bon Route" and "Allez Allez!" The anticipation in the air was palpable, yet we were all calm and cool, knowing as we did that we had a long night and another longer day ahead of us before we would sleep.

We rolled into the French countryside under a clear starry sky. The riders began to settle into groups, some passing, and some being passed. We began to see the first few flat tires being fixed at the side of the road. What a way to start! Ahead of me I could see a ribbon of red taillights snaking into the distance. From the crest of each hill the red river of lights flowed over the terrain of central France, showing the contours ahead. It was magical. It was a warm night, comfortable in arm warmers and knee warmers. We rolled through relatively flat farmland and occasional towns. An hour passed. Then another. As we entered each small town, with its stone houses and looming cathedrals, small groups of residents called to us from the roadside. Riders cheerfully replied back, "Merci! Bon nuit!" We rolled along through the night.

At about two-thirty, passing though yet another small town, I espied a small cluster of cyclists stopped in front of a brightly lit café – bar. There was a brightly lit bicycle mounted above the doorway, with a mannequin in cycling garb and helmet on it; an electric motor turned a chain, slowly rotating the mannequin's pedals and legs. Bikes were leaned up against walls on both sides of the street, and cyclists sat on the sidewalk sipping tiny cups of that potent French coffee. It was too much to resist. I dropped out of the river of riders and circled back to the bar. Inside, the proprietor and his wife were bustling about, refilling tasses and demi-tasses with that rich French cafe. I ordered one and sat outside, raising my cup as group after group of riders passed by. Seeing me, many like-minded individuals peeled back to caffeinate. Finishing my cup, I gazed wistfully into the bottom of the cup, then went back inside and bought another. Nothing has ever tasted so good! I soon resumed my position on my saddle and headed off into the darkness.

Riding at night is a unique experience. Riding at night, knowing you have another four hundred kilometers to go before you will rest is even more unique. The stars were fantastic. The Milky Way was brilliant. Ahead of us, the moon rose over the horizon and hung low in the sky, orange and gibbous. Mars twinkled brilliantly in the east. Most riders had settled into a rhythm, finding a small group to ride with. One does not ride as fast at night as during the day. We cruised along at twenty-four or twenty-five km/h. The caffeine boiling in my veins, I accelerated. Steadily passing small groups, the moon casting a moon-shadow, I turned off my twin generator lights and rode by moonlight. I began to play a game, to keep my mind amused, spinning along at thirty or thirty-two km/h, overtaking groups of riders, clicking on my twin headlights several feet behind the last rider, throwing the whole road into white illumination as I blew past the riders, then clicking the lights off again. A few times I heard jocular comments behind

me, calls of "Vite! Vite!" I chuckled, feeling wonderful, the moon and the caffeine bubbling in my veins.

The terrain began to become hillier as we entered the Foret de Logny. Descending at speed with my twin headlights was wonderful. The pavement was marvelously smooth, seldom a patch in the road and potholes unheard of. Climbs at night are deceptive as well; you don't feel the gradients without the visual context. At about five AM I reached the first organized checkpoint, at Mortagne-au-Perche. This was not a control checkpoint, merely a stop for "ravaitaillement". I parked my machine and went inside. Purchasing more coffee, I got into line for the cafeteria. Hundreds of riders sat at the tables, chattering in a quiet hubbub. A little dismayed at the chicken-a-la-king and the pork chops being offered, I purchased some mashed potatoes, pea soup and haricots and sat down to eat. Finishing, I left the fluorescent lights and conversations for the dark quiet road ahead.

The food sat like a stone in my stomach for an hour or so. I regretted stopping. Soon enough, though, the sky behind me began to lighten, and the first birds began to sing. A rooster crowed in the distance. Several riders around me chuckled. Looking behind me, the wispy cirrus clouds in the east were glowing pale pink in the pre-dawn light. We rolled on. The sky gradually brightened. A few automobiles began to appear on the roads. It was morning. We had been on the road for seven hours and were a hundred miles from Paris. The sun appeared over the horizon, casting a warming light on us. It felt wonderful. A little later, looking off to the side of the road, I spotted a bicycle, taillight still glowing, and a rider, wrapped up in a space blanket, curled up on the ground for a few minute's kip. I chuckled. Suddenly, every five minutes or so, as if the first sleeper had triggered an epidemic of weariness, I began to see sleeping riders, singly and in two's and three's, crashed out on the side of the road. It was funny.

Rolling though the countryside, I was now able to see around me. There were gently rolling hills and fields, hedgerows and small farms. It was very pastoral countryside, settled for thousands of years. Small towns were scattered every ten kilometers or so, a tight cluster of old stone houses lovingly maintained, with window boxes of flowers and walled gardens bursting with colour. The names of the towns were very romantic, names like Freshay-sur-Sarthe, Souge-le-Ganelon, and St-Remy-du-Val. Old women carrying baguettes fresh from the patisserie waved as we passed.

I entered the town of Villaines-la-Juhel, at 223 km the site of the first control checkpoint of the ride. It was just after nine in the morning. The control was bustling with activity. Groups of onlookers cheered as each of us arrived. We parked our bikes and got out our control cards and magnetic cards and proceeded into the checkpoint to check in. The control was very efficient. After getting my

stamp and swiping my magnetic card, I had a look at the cafeteria and decided not to stop there, but proceeded onward to the next town. I found a small bakery and enjoyed baguette avec fromage, croissants warm from the oven, and coffee. Heavenly! I decided that this was the way to go. As I ate, I watched as dozens of cyclists rode past.

Back on the bike, this set up a rhythm for the rest of the day. Leave a control, grab a bite in the next town, back on the bike, head off. For the first ten km's or so, I would pass riders and be passed by riders, but gradually would meet up with other riders traveling at my preferred speed. I would ride with a group until the next control. From Villaines to Fougères it was a group of five older French club riders, very smooth and experienced cyclists all. From Fougères to Tinteneac, a huge freight-train following a group of fast Spaniards. From Tinteneac to Quedillac, I rode with a tandem couple from Vancouver, Bob and Deirdre. On and on the day went, the sun going from high overhead to lower on the western horizon. The winds were light and the temperature comfortable, in the upper 20's Celsius. The rolling hills began again after the 425km point and I began to slow down a little. The last few hills into Loudeac were long and I was very glad to arrive at the control at Loudeac, with 452km on the computer, at 8pm, twenty-one hours after starting.

I gratefully presented my checkpoint booklet and magnetic card at the control, then found the bag which Michael Thomson and I had packed the day before, which had been delivered to the control. I was glad to leave the hubbub of the control, as Loudeac was the point at which a majority of the riders would stop for the night. Michael and I had booked a hotel room a couple of kilometers away. I rolled slowly to the hotel, checked in, had a wonderful hot shower then found a restaurant and ate a large pizza. At 11PM I hit the sack. I barely heard Michael arrive at 1AM or so; he had left in the 84-hour group that had started at 5AM.

Altogether too early, the alarm rang at 4AM. I pulled on the clothing which I had organized the night before, grabbed my packed seat-bag and headed downstairs to the hotel's breakfast area, where cereal and bread and juice awaited. After a quick petit-dejeuner I retrieved my bike from the basement parking area and rolled back through a still-dark downtown to the control and resumed riding the course. There were already hundreds of riders on the road! Some, like me, arising early, and some riding through the night; no doubt a portion of them from the 5-am departure group still riding from the day before. I began to see the first of the oncoming headlights of the returning riders coming toward me. They had already been to Brest and were on their way back to Paris. I had a hundred miles to go to reach the half-way point! It was a little chastening.

The first thirty kilometers were quite hilly, with some good climbs and descents in the dark. Just as the pre-dawn gloom began to lift, and the first signs

of sunrise began to appear, I came upon the first of the “secret controls” along the route, at the town of Saint-Martin Des Pres. These were, as the name implies, unannounced checkpoints, to ensure that riders kept to the marked course. There was supposed to be two or three of them, somewhere on the route. I pulled off the road and got a quick stamp-and-swipe, then back on the course. The sun rose above the horizon behind me. The morning was clear with a few wispy clouds, and some patches of early-morning fog lifting from some of the small lakes and ponds. The temperature was comfortable. The morning light was that particular rich, yellow-tinged just-after-sunrise light so preferred by photographers and artists, and long-distance cyclists.

After eighty k’s or so, I came upon the first of the known control checkpoints of the day, at Carhaix-Plouguer. This was a busy town, and a busy control! Bikes were everywhere, and sleeping bodies too. It was too busy for me to want to stop for food. After getting my swipe and stamp, I headed through town and found a bakery with good café and excellent croissants. Leaving Carhaix, I headed off into the hills. This morning’s route was particularly scenic, climbing through wooded hills and passing some lovely stone farmhouses. After the town of Huelgoat, the rural sideroad connected to the D764 for the climb to the ride’s highest point (1500 feet elevation), the Roc Trevezel. The climb was not bad, just middle-ring spinning, with gradually more and more spectacular views off to the east. A microwave tower appeared in the distance, that now-universal sign indicating the top of the highest hill in the area. A string of riders ahead of me on the climb reminded me of photos I’ve seen of gold miners climbing the Chilkoot Pass during the Gold Rush. As we crested the summit, applause and cheers broke out from the dozens of spectators and support crew who waited at the top. I stopped to top up my water bottles at the roadside, where two earnest young French lads vied with each other to top up my bottles. They might have been five and six years old. I told them, “Merci du Canada” and they raced off to flag in other riders, waving their water jugs above their heads and crying, “de l’eau – de l’eau!” It’s little wonder that the population of France embraces cycling as their sport, with an upbringing like that.

The descent from the Roc was gradual and long; just as well, as I knew that I would be climbing it again in four hours or so! As I rolled on through the countryside toward Brest and the turnaround point, I rode with a rider from Boston. We compared brevet notes and weather notes from the spring’s training rides in our respective cities. We stopped at the lovely old town center of Sizun at a fruit-and-vegetable stand in the town square and feasted on fresh fruit, and croissants from the bakery across the square. The morning sun became hot, and dozens and dozens of riders relaxed in repose outside the bakery, like lizards soaking up the sun to gain strength for the next leg of the journey. Soon, back on the bikes once again.

An hour later, as we crested a hill, we finally saw the harbour of the seaport of Brest in the distance. Almost halfway! We rode together across the harbour bridge and into downtown Brest and grunted up one last long hill to the control. My friend from Boston and I shook hands at the control and headed off to get our cards stamped and find the washrooms. I had a peek at the computer system running the magnetic card swipers. One of the officials told me, in quite good English, that the system uploaded the results every fifteen minutes at each of the controls onto the internet. I watched on the monitor as the counters clicked over as riders were swiped into the system. Of the four thousand participants, two thousand two hundred were ahead of me, thirteen hundred had yet to reach the control, and five hundred or so had dropped out of the ride, for one reason or another. I was very much in the middle of my departure group, where I had expected to be.

I opted not to eat at the control and headed off by myself through town. The road out of Brest was quite busy at first, then after crossing the river at the tide-head at Landerneau, the route re-connected to the D764 once again. I stopped again at the same town square in Sizun. All riders seemed to be slowing down now as we began the climb to the Roc once again. After the descent from the Roc, the route continued on the D764 all the way to Carhaix, bypassing our previous secondary road through Huelgoat. This, and the entrance and exit from Brest, were the only two times when the outgoing and the return routes were not the same road. At the control at Carhaix, I met up with Michael Thomson and another of the Toronto riders, Don Magie. We continued on together through the late afternoon sunlight and the growing gloom of impending sunset.

I knew now that it would be a late arrival at Loudeac. I couldn't face the thought of the lineups at the cafeteria there, which Michael and Don both said had been considerable the night before, and knew that all the restaurants in Loudeac would be closed by the time we would arrive. I was carrying a third of a baguette and some cheese, and was resigned to having that for supper, when we came into the small town of Saint-Martin Des Pres. As we rounded a corner in the dark, suddenly there was a street festival! The townsfolk had erected three huge tents in the town square and had several barbecues going. The smell of barbecue was divine! We screeched to a stop and leaned the bikes up. Musicians were playing accordions and flutes. Townsfolk bustled around, serving supper to hungry riders. Cyclists were chattering animatedly. This was a wonderful surprise! We unanimously decided to stop there for supper. The tents helped to take the edge off the growing chill in the air. Six euros got us soup, barbecued chicken and frites, tea and dessert. It was wonderful! We listened to the animated conversations of the riders around us.

It was full dark as we returned into the control at Loudeac, arriving there around midnight after 330km of riding. We invited Don to crash in our motel room

as he had only had an hour's broken sleep the night before on the floor of the cafeteria at the control. Showers never felt so good! It wasn't difficult to fall asleep, but not before setting out the clothing for the next morning and packing up the bag-drop bag so all would be in readiness for our arising, in a scant three hours.

All too soon, the alarm clock sounded and we quickly dressed, grabbed some breakfast, and headed off to the control to drop off the bag at the designated area. We headed off into the pre-dawn glimmer of impending sunrise. Once again, there was already a procession of riders making their way toward Paris. Groups began to form impromptu pacelines. Just as the sun crept above the horizon, we came upon the second of the secret controls, at the community of Illifaut. I checked in then headed off without stopping to eat. Shortly thereafter, Michael passed me and I let him go, not to see him again until the finish line. He was riding at a pace considerably above my comfort level and I still had four hundred twenty five more kilometers yet to go.

The countryside just after Illifaut was a magical area. The lovely early-morning sunlight richly illuminated windowboxes bursting with flowers on immaculately kept centuries-old stone farmhouses as we passed by. A light morning mist arose from ponds and valleys. I breakfasted once again at a bakery in the town square in the picturesque village of St-Meen-le-Grand, in front of a fifteenth century cathedral with an ornate slate roof. The terrain this morning was familiar, from the first day of the ride, yet subtly different, as if eight hundred kilometers of riding had altered the countryside in some vague, indefinable way. I rolled along, legs faintly weary but with sufficient resilience that regular transfusions of croissant, baguette, fromage, pain chocolat and café would return the power to them to allow the body to continue along, albeit at a slower pace than that of the first day.

Eighty more kilometers, another control. The sun rose high in the sky, then began to descend slowly toward the west. Eighty kilometers, another control. Tinteniac, Fougères, Gorrion, Lassay. Near Charchigne I began to ride with a French rider from Paris, Hervé. We were evenly matched in pace, both climbing and on the flats. I speak only a little French and Hervé only a little English, yet we began to converse and translate terms as we rode. I was to ride with Hervé for the rest of the ride. He had attempted PBP four years previously but had to drop out partway. He was on a mission to complete the ride this time.

We came to the control at Villaines-le-Juhel, at the 1000km point, around supertime. Hervé suggested using the free showers at this control, as the evening was coming and it would be good to be clean and change into fresh clothes for the night-riding. I had another bag drop here as well, with a full change of clothing and some cool-weather clothing as well. After a shower and a

change, and a good supper at the control, we headed off into the rolling countryside. Hervé described the terrain and the history of the area as we rode. The sun went below the hills around Sougé-le-Ganelon. We stopped a couple of times to add more layers. At Freshay-sur-Sarthe, the community had erected tables at the roadside and the townspeople were dispensing coffee, tea, baked goods, and fruit to the riders. We indulged. Hervé asked, who pays for all this food, the townsfolk replied, we do; it's wonderful, what you cyclists do, and we're proud to have you come to our town from all over the world. We thanked them and continued on. It became cooler. It was already colder than the first two nights had been. We rolled along through the countryside, which was becoming hillier as we entered the Perche region.

The route arrows were reflective, lighting up in the glow of our headlights as we rode into the dark of the night. On a long straightaway stretch, about 11 pm, I was cruising along when I heard a feeble call from the ditch at the side of the road, "I need some help", in a British accent. I swung back to see who called. A rider was rolled up in a space blanket at the side of the road, shivering beside his bike. I got off mine and asked him what was wrong. Between uncontrollable shivers, he said that he could not continue, that an old long-term medical condition had attacked him again, and could I call for help. He retched weakly into the ditch. Feeling somewhat helpless, I stayed with him for a minute or two, then saw car headlights approaching. I stepped out into the road and waved down the car. In my halting French I explained the situation to the sympathetic driver and his wife, who offered to take the ailing Brit back thirty kilometers out of their way to the medics at the next control, at Mortagne-au-Perche. I gratefully helped load the fellow's bike into the back of their mini-van and helped him into the back seat. Expressing my thanks for helping this cyclist, I waved au-revoir to them and somewhat unsteadily got back on my bike. I rolled on into the night, somewhat sobered by this incident.

The twenty kilometers before Mortagne-au-Perche were quite hilly. As I arrived at the control and stumbled blinking into the fluorescent lights of the cafeteria, it was half past midnight; I'd already gone 310km today and there was 140km more to go. I had been debating whether to try to get three hours sleep at this control or to continue on through the night. The sight of the line-up in front of the dorm area convinced me to continue on all the way to Paris. I met Hervé at the cafeteria, and Don and Phil Piltch from the Toronto group as well. Don was having stomach troubles and Phil had decided to get some sleep. Hervé and I decided to continue. We finished soup and coffee and put on all of our warm clothing and headed off.

Either I had chilled down at the control or the night had become colder, but it now seemed very cold. The stars were brilliant, and you could see your breath with each exhalation. My right Achilles tendon was also starting to act up, in fact

had been twinging since Villaines, and I explained this to Hervé and said that I must slow down a bit. In fact, it became so cold that going any faster was no longer an option; the temperature dropped to +7 Celsius overnight and the wind of our progress cut through clothing like a knife. We began to dread downhill for the chill they brought. The fifty kilometers after Mortagne were very flat, through a forest reserve, and we rolled along at eighteen to twenty km/h. We told each other stories all night long, trying to keep awake, figuring out missing words by context between us. We stopped to pop a couple of caffeine pills when we began to nod off. Both Hervé and I were well-prepared for the cold, with Gore-tex rainjackets, polypro undershirts, arm and leg warmers, finger gloves and wool socks, but we were still chilled, as much by the cumulative effects of eleven hundred kilometers in three days as from the temperature. At one point we met a rider who spoke no English or French, standing immobile at the side of the road, clad only in shorts and jersey. He was so cold he could not even think or speak. We forced some chocolate into him, then continued on into the night.

A couple of hours later we reached the first town in hours, Senonches, at four in the morning, with not a soul around. As we passed into the town center, we espied a cyclist rolled up in a space blanket on a front lawn, his bike's taillight mutely shining into the dark. Around the next corner, another rider was sitting on a stone doorstep, head in hands, immobile, clad only in a short-sleeve jersey and shorts. I think there must have been a world of hurt that night amongst the ill-prepared. We rolled on into the night. A faint loom of lighter sky began to appear in the distance, but I could not tell if it was the glow of the lights of Paris on the far horizon or the faint glimmers of the hours-off sunrise.

What seemed like hours later, but could only have been minutes, we entered the next town, Chateauneuf-en-Thymerais, and spotted a bakery with lights on! The owners were inside, preparing for the day, and enjoining cyclists to come in out of the cold. There were a couple of riders already inside. We stumbled in, to the warmth and intense smells of pastries fresh from the oven! Suddenly the world was a better place. The proprietor pointed out his guest book with signatures from previous PBP's, and I noticed that outside, above the entrance, was a brightly lit bicycle mounted above the doorway, with a mannequin in cycling garb and helmet on it; an electric motor turned a chain, slowly rotating the mannequin's pedals and legs. The bakery was next door to the bar/café where I had stopped some seventy hours earlier, on the trip outbound! So much had happed in so little time in between. The owner asked us if we wanted coffee, and we gratefully said yes, please, and he beckoned us to follow him behind the bakery to the back yard where he had set up trestle tables and benches for twenty or twenty-five. His wife came out with coffee and cups and we devoured our pastry purchases and clutched our coffee cups with chilled fingers. It was wonderful!

We continued on into a faintly brightening eastern horizon. We began to be able to make out the details of the fields and hedgerows around us. A long gradual descent brought us into the last control before Paris, at Nogent-le-Roi. I creaked off my saddle and hobbled into the brightly lit interior of the school gymnasium. After checking in at the control for a stamp and a swipe, Hervé and I bought some breakfast at the cafeteria. The coffee came in a large, deep bowl! They know what we needed! As I munched my way through the contents of my tray, I noticed all the corpses littered around the cafeteria. Some were rolled up in space blankets, some just flaked out anywhere. A few had managed to take their shoes off but most hadn't. A few were seated, sleeping face down in their empty dishes. As the warmth of food and coffee made it through my bloodstream to my toes, I began to look at the distance remaining, and the time, and discussed with Hervé that if we could average 22 km/h, we could make it to the finish line at St-Quentin by 10:45AM, for an elapsed time of under eighty-four hours. We agreed this was possible and, somewhat stiffly, made our way back onto the bikes for the last fifty-eight kilometers into Paris.

The sun was now well up above the horizon and there was the beginning of a tangible warming in the air. We rode through some spectacular countryside, which we hadn't seen on the way out because it was the middle of the night. Tall trees lined both sides of the roadway. Gently rolling hills beckoned us onward. We entered into a forested reserve, the Gambaiseuil, which Hervé said had been a hunting preserve for the Kings of France hundred of years ago. Ancient trees overarched the asphalt. There was no traffic. As we approached Paris, our speed began to increase. We passed riders who hopped on our freight train and were swept along in an increasingly large peloton. We entered the city proper. We began to hear shouts of encouragement from passers-by; cars honked cheerfully at us, small groups of pedestrians called, "Allez! Allez!" We swept into town, filled with sudden energy at the impending finish of our odyssey, hammering along at thirty and thirty-five and forty kilometers per hour. We began to hit every single red light!

It is impossible to describe the feeling of riding the last kilometer to the Gymnase, the sense of anticipation nearly fulfilled, the dream of a couple of years' preparation, the consummation of a long winter of spin classes followed by a spring and summer of centuries, brevets, and long training rides, all of them looking forward to just this very moment, the final kilometer of the most famous randonnéé of them all.

It was ten-thirty, only fifteen minutes to go to arrive in less than eighty-four hours, as we swept into the last few streets along the road leading into the Gymnase des Droits de l'Homme. As we came around the final corner into the roundabout in front of the Gymnase where the starting line was located, there were several hundred spectators present, and cheers, applause, and roars went up

as each rider passed the crowd. I must admit I was choked with emotion as we were directed down the path into the Gymnase past the cheering crowds, and parked our bicycles in the racks and grabbed our control cards for the final swiping and stamping. As my card was stamped, I noticed the official time: 10:44am. Eighty four hours for 1225 kilometers, exactly three and one half days, 11:45PM to 11:44 AM.

Walking back outside, I met Michael Thomson and his fiancée Kim, who had come down to watch me arrive. Michael had arrived eight hours previously at 3:30 in the morning and had gotten a few hours sleep and some breakfast. Kim and her friend Judy had arrived the day before from Toronto.

Herve's wife had also arrived to welcome him home. We exchanged addresses and took photos and his wife presented me with a lovely bottle of champagne. We bid each other adieu and I headed off to find some well-deserved lunch, before going back to the hotel for a shower and a few hours sleep before all the Ontario crew, and the sole Maritimer, got together for a celebratory supper.