

# A Blueprint for Success?

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What is the secret of PBP success? Is it planning? Or flexibility? Or a happy marriage of both traits, sometimes seen as incompatible?

In 2019, the difference between my PBP finish time (83 hours 35 minutes) and the target time in the schedule I had created was just three minutes. This year, my time (85 hours 46 minutes) was 19 minutes quicker than my target. Are these remarkably small variances down to chance or a vindication of the dark art of forecasting?

In 2019 I was relatively new to Audaxing. For my first PBP, I created a spreadsheet schedule to estimate how long the ride would take me. However, I lacked the experience and data to make realistic forecasts. My 2019 PBP (reported in Arrivée issue 149) was a game of 'snakes and ladders'. I rode at a reasonable speed but spent too long off the bike whilst also messing my sleep up. At about 900km, I realised that time was slipping away from me, so I abandoned my plan and continued to the finish with the minimum of stops, arriving physically and emotionally drained. Flexibility (and luck) beat planning in 2019!

For the rematch I was four years older and (I was hoping) wiser. Shortly before PBP 2023 I took early retirement. I was able to spend more time planning as well as improving my solutions to luggage and lighting for multi-night rides. The result was a loaded bike that weighed about a kilo less than in 2019 and a more efficient system for charging my lights.

The schedule I created for PBP 2023 drew on benchmark data from my qualifiers. On paper, I had managed the qualifiers comfortably, completing the 600km ride, Fenland Friends, in 35 hours. But my moving average speed was about 10% slower than in 2019. Behind these results was a struggle, since 2020, with knee and foot overuse injuries. This had led to several periods off the bike, one of them on crutches. I had been told in summer 2022 that I should forget about PBP.

My slower moving average speed, if repeated at PBP, would add an extra 6 hours riding time. I believed I could claw about half of this back by being more efficient off the bike. And I remembered that much of the PBP route is on fast roads with good surfaces. On this basis, I set a 'top down' target of 86 hours. I then built the schedule 'bottom up', estimating riding and stop times for each stage. I took account of the differences in terrain and even factored in the weather forecast. The final version of my schedule gave me a target time of 86 hours 5 minutes.

As I had started to rebuild my distances on the bike, in late 2022, it was proving tricky to find the sweet spot between insufficient training and overdoing it again. I needed to change how I was riding – physically and mentally. I went back to the bike fitters, emerging with shorter cranks and a riding position tweaked to use my glute muscles more and my quads less. I thought about what had caused me to overdo it in the first place and recognised a tendency to put pressure on myself to keep up with others or achieve arbitrary time goals. I listened to the experiences of other Audaxers and experimented. My new philosophy could be summed up as "Only ride fast when it feels easy - otherwise take it easy!".

In August 2023, as I set off to ride a winding 260km from Dieppe to Rambouillet, I was still experimenting with different options for pedals and cleat position. Some knee and foot issues

persisted on the ride down. The empirical evidence was that the most reliable way to relieve these problems was to unclip from the pedals. Sitting in a café, I committed road cycling heresy and removed the cleats from my shoes.

Arriving in Rambouillet on Friday afternoon, I went straight to the park where everything was being set up for the start. I had just intended to do some people- and bike-watching but found I could register early. This meant I had Saturday completely free. So I was well rested by Sunday, when I joined thousands of riders assembling in front of the Chateau de Rambouillet. This made a great backdrop for photos at the starting line.

Embracing my position in the middle of the 'bulge' of riders who had chosen the 90 hour time limit, I set off at 7pm. As the sun gave way to the first night on the road, the gently rolling terrain under the big skies of the Eure-et-Loir department made for easy riding. I applied the first part of my new philosophy. With judicious participation in one of the ad hoc peletons that are a feature of PBP, I reached Fougères (293km) an hour and ten minutes ahead of my planned time.

Unlike 2019, the food at the controls proved problematic on the way to Brest. The queues seemed longer and the selection more limited. I responded by choosing whatever food was available quickly. This flexibility enabled me to stay within my planned stop times. A side effect was that I ate more baguettes and sausage galettes than intended, increasing the risk of digestion problems. Luckily, these did not materialise. (On the return from Brest, the queues were shorter so I was able to revert to my preferred choice of rice or pasta!)

In 2019, the weather provided challenges in the form of a stiff headwind on the way to Brest and temperatures just above freezing in the early hours. This time heat was the biggest challenge, as France endured another "cancicule". The heroic support of local people handing out water at the roadside kept riders going as temperatures hit 30 degrees Celsius. At night it remained warm until the hours around dawn, which were colder than the forecast I was relying on. Having (unwisely) left my base layer at the hotel I was lucky to find a cycling shirt on sale (40% off!) at the Tinteniac control (354km). With a fetching black and white Breton design, this kept me warm from the second night onwards.

In 2019, having heard tales of long queues for the dorms, I had booked hotels at various points near the route. But I wasted a lot of time finding them, checking in and in one case persuading the receptionist to let me take my bike into my room. I didn't stop at the last hotel at all, being so far behind schedule at that point. This time, my experience from the qualifiers had confirmed that I could complete a 600km ride on naps only. So my strategy for 2023 was to ride to Brest with minimal sleep and get about three hours in a hotel just after the control. My schedule for the return leg included time to use dorms flexibly as and when fatigue caught up with me.

I stayed very focussed on the way to Brest. I even resisted the many photo opportunities presented by PBP, aware of how this could add up to a significant time loss. Having had a couple of quick naps, it wasn't until my ascent of the Roc'h Trevezel, in the middle of the second night, that I found myself struggling to stay awake on the bike. A five minute roadside nap helped. But descending into the pre-dawn mist felt dangerous and it was a relief to arrive at Sizun around 6am and find the cafes were open. A strong coffee saw me through to the Brest control (604km). I had maintained the time gained from my faster than expected start and was still over an hour ahead of schedule. I decided to split this time between extra rest in the hotel and an earlier departure for Paris. I felt pretty wired when I shut the door of my room and only slept for an hour and a quarter during my three and a half hour stay. So there is more work to do to improve my sleeping/faffing ratio.

The return from Brest to Carhaix (697km) followed a different route to 2019. This time the iconic Pont de l'Iroise bridge marked our departure from the city, as the route headed south east, parallel

to the coast of the Rade de Brest bay. This was statistically the hilliest stage of the ride, but the climbs turned out to be 'sensible' – regular gradients, good surfaces, low traffic. And the descents were safe and fast. This stage proved one of the most enjoyable of the ride for me, although I know others experienced it differently.

The hills between Carhaix and the Loudeac control (782km) were less sensible and I took to walking up the steepest sections. I find this less tiring than straining on the bike and the change of position can help to prevent or relieve a sore back and shoulders. I would get back on the bike with renewed energy and often overtook riders who had just come puffing past me. Used sparingly, there is minimal (if any) time loss. You are still moving towards the finish, after all! Nevertheless, walking up hills seemed to cause consternation and I was often asked "are you alright?".

The stage after Loudeac (782km) was where I suffered the biggest loss of time against my schedule. For this relatively flat stage I had forecast a moving average of just 18kph, to account for riding it in the middle of the night. But a rapidly developing saddle sore meant I achieved less than 16kph and took nearly half an hour longer than planned to get Quedillac (842km). The saddle sore exacted further time punishment as I spent 20 minutes attending to it at the rest stop, by (TMI alert) squeezing out the pus before showering then applying a blister plaster.

This treatment mitigated the saddle sore sufficiently for me to get my moving average speed back on track and I stayed disciplined at the Tinteniac (867km) and Fougeres (928km) controls. I had restored my buffer, against my 86h schedule, to over an hour.

After Fougeres, the route leaves Brittany and follows the D33 to cross the department of Mayenne, to Villaines-la-Juhel (1018km). This stage featured the hottest temperatures I experienced on the ride, plus a headwind. Conscious of the need to maintain speed, I joined my second ad hoc peleton. This was a much less disciplined group than the one I rode with on the first night, and I was shocked to see riders straying onto the wrong side of the road, apparently playing chicken with the huge agricultural vehicles coming towards us.

Villaines was busy maintaining its reputation as the top PBP party town. I had allowed for a two hour stop here. But I exceeded this by 15 minutes as the saddle sore demanded another shower. As I left at 7pm to cross the beautiful Sarthe Valley, I was in a cautiously confident mood, still an hour ahead of my 86 hour schedule. Against the 90 hour time limit, I had 18 hours to ride the last 200km. I recalled the sign I saw in 2019 - "Paris-Brest, c'est du gateau" – it's a piece of cake! However, I also remembered that the fourth night on the road had inflicted a marked deterioration in my faculties, especially the ability to do time and distance calculations and make sound decisions.

Happily, my knees and feet, which had been intermittently sore on the way to Brest, had stopped complaining. I had found my sweet spot and it was a 1200km randonee at touring pace! But an unforeseen risk materialised when I cut my lip on the wrist band all riders had to wear this year (an innovation that provided us with no obvious benefit). Forgetting it was there, I took a drink from my bidon and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. The wrist band was plastic and had a sharp edge. Ouch!

The final night on the road was dark. The ghostly section between Mortagne-au-Perche (1099km) and Dreux (1177km) dragged drowsily on. I was lucky to encounter a friendly rider from England to chat with, which helped me to stay awake.

My forecast for the 159km from Villaines to Dreux was 9 hours 55 minutes (including stops). It took me 23 minutes longer, but I still felt comfortably ahead of schedule. I could have used some of the remaining buffer for a longer sleep at Dreux. But at 5am the control felt cold and uninviting. My 2019 experience of incompetently tired cyclists on the final stage meant I wanted to allow plenty of time

in case of mishaps. So, after getting the Dreux stamp in my Brevet card, I slept for 30 minutes on the floor, departing as dawn broke.

The final 42km to the finish took me 2h 45m. This was 39 minutes longer than planned. My progress was painfully slow as the saddle sore reasserted itself. I was also stressed by other riders wobbling past me, perilously close to my handlebars, threatening to inflict defeat on the verge of victory!

The finish line at Rambouillet had relocated from its 2019 home in the courtyard of the sheep farm and was now approached via a descent on sandy gravel. One more risk to be negotiated and then...Arrivée! My finish time was 85h 46m, 19 minutes ahead of my planned time. Overall, I was riding for 73% (62 hours 21 minutes) of the time. The remaining 27% (23 hours 25 minutes) had been spent off the bike. This included a total of five hours sleep. I had ridden 7% faster than forecast but had stopped for about 17% longer than planned. Most of the additional time off the bike came in the final stages of the ride, when I knew I had time in hand and made a conscious decision to use it to reduce risk.

In 2019 I had finished on my own at 7am, experiencing waves of intense emotion. This time, arriving at 9am the finish line was bustling with lots of other riders and their supporters. I was too busy catching up with people I knew to consider how I felt. But over the next few hours a sort of slow-burn happiness grew in me, as the significance of completing PBP for a second time, in the face of various trials and tribulations, sank in.

So, does this help answer the original question? Is it planning or flexibility that is the secret of PBP success? For me, at least, the answer is "both"!

In 2019, I had slipped down the 'snakes' and spent most of the ride behind schedule before climbing my way painfully back up the 'ladders' to the finish. In 2023, I was never much more than an hour off my scheduled time for arriving and departing the controls. I wasn't ruled by the schedule but used it as a benchmark to monitor progress and adjust my rest times. If you're interested, my 2023 schedule (with actuals updated) is at [www.longbikerides.info/home-page/paris-brest-paris/](http://www.longbikerides.info/home-page/paris-brest-paris/)

PBP is a truly amazing event. There's a lot of challenges to face, especially the first time. But it is more do-able than many imagine. I have described my approach to the challenge, but other riders will offer different advice. If you are thinking of doing PBP for the first time in 2027 then now is the time to start talking to other Audaxers and experimenting to find the approach that will work for you.