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90 hours 750 miles on a bike

A Durham cyclist prepares for the ultimate long-distance ride

JOE MILLER, Staff Writer

Two things worry Branson Kimball about a bike ride he plans to take in August. One is that he'll lose his mind. The other, that he won't be able to sit down. Valid concerns considering that when he gets on his bike in Paris on Aug. 20, he won't be getting off much for the next 90 hours as he pedals his way to coastal Brest and back, a distance of 1,200 kilometers -- or 750 miles.

"I hallucinate even when I get lots of sleep," says Kimball, a 38-year-old Durham cyclist. "So I'm not sure how I'll handle that."

That being lack of sleep, one of the more daunting challenges of amateur cycling's most daunting event: Paris-Brest-Paris, a round-the-clock (more than three times) bike tour that offers recreational cyclists their ultimate test.

On the evening of Aug. 20, Kimball and about 4,000 other cyclists will depart in waves of 500 from Paris. They'll pedal throughout the night, into the next day and likely into the following night before they take an extended stop. (They'll take a few 10- or 15-minute breaks along the way.)

When they finally do stop, after riding maybe 300 miles, it will be for a quick catnap of four or five hours -- on a cot in a school cafeteria, in a local's home or in a roadside ditch -- before getting back on the bike and continuing down the road. They'll have 40 hours to get to Brest, 50 to make it back to Paris.

Those who break the 90-hour barrier will receive a medal and a place in perhaps amateur cycling's most hallowed annals, "The Great Book." That's a list of every rider who has completed the ride since it began in 1891.

"My name is in the book," says Mike Dayton of Raleigh, who finished the last PBP, in 2003. He makes the statement with a certain reverence, a respect that makes even someone unfamiliar with endurance cycling realize he's referring not to a book.

Rather, The Book.

It started as a stunt

As were many of the great adventures launched in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Paris-Brest-Paris was dreamed up by a newspaper hoping to boost circulation. In the spring of 1891, the eyes of France were on the inaugural Bordeaux-Paris race, which covered an audacious 572 kilometers over dirt and bumpy cobblestone roads. This on a two-wheeled contraption still in its infancy, prone to breakdowns and anything-but-beach-cruiser comfy.

Newspaper sales spiked before, during and after the race, which made Pierre Griffard, editor of Le Petit Journal, realize that if people went nuts over a 572k race, they'd go twice as crazy over a race twice as long.

And they did. The initial PBP was strictly a professional affair. Riders had sponsors, mechanics and support along the way. They could hire up to 10 riders to pace them along the route, France's main east-west thoroughfare, Nationale 12. It was the NASCAR of its day, with fans just as rabid as those who spend a race weekend camped on the speedway infield.

In time, an amateur division was added to PBP. Eventually, the professional "race" was phased out as pro cyclists began gravitating to more lucrative shorter races in the 1950s. The first PBPs were held every 10 years, then every five. Today, they occur every four years. And the intense competition that marked the early PBPs has been replaced with a spirit of camaraderie and altruism among the riders, called "randonneurs."

"The idea of randonneuring is that you're supposed to be self-supporting," says Kimball, who has applied his lust for learning as a Civil War buff to learning all he can about PBP. "But the spirit is to help others. If someone has a flat, you stop to ask if they're OK. The proper thing to do is to offer help.

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Branson Kimball is training for the Paris-Brest-Paris, a 750-mile bike ride in August.

Staff Photo by Juli Leonard

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Glossary

Speak randonneur in one easy lesson, courtesy of the Randonneur USA Web site: www.rusa.org.

Ancien (ahn see yin) -- A veteran. Originally a male Paris-Brest-Paris finisher, this term has now come to describe a randonneur who has successfully finished some other 1,200-kilometer randonnee. A female veteran is called an ancienne.

Brevet (bruh vay) -- Literally, the word means "certificate," "patent" or "diploma" in French. In "randonneuring," it means two things: certification of having successfully done a randonne as well as, by extension, the long-distance event itself (at least 200 kilometers in length).

Controle (cone trohl) -- A checkpoint where randonneurs' passportlike route cards must be signed and stamped to show their passage.

PBP -- Shorthand for Paris-Brest-Paris.

Randonnee (rahn doe nay) -- A long ramble in the countryside, by foot or bicycle. In common cycling usage, it means a touring ride, often somewhat strenuous, at least compared to commuting or running errands around town.

Randonneur (rahn doe ner) -- A male long-distance cyclist. The female version: randonneuse.

Interested?

Think you might be interested in riding 750 miles through France in 90 hours come August? Check out the 24th Annual North Carolina Bicycle Club Brevet Series Web site at www.unc.edu/~alanj/

Paris-Brest-Paris by the numbers

11 -- mph a cyclist would have to travel to complete the 750-mile ride without stopping.

15 -- mph Alan Johnson averaged, with stops, when he did PBP in 1991.

50 -- average age of the typical PBP rider.

129 -- miles in the 200-kilometer brevet qualifying ride.

192 -- miles in the 300-kilometer brevet qualifying ride.