

What I learned on the BC 1000km

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By Mark Thomas

About SPACE & TIME

1. It's a long way from one end of Vancouver Island to the other; it's also a long way back.
2. A thousand kilometers is a lot farther than the other brevets. (In fact, I calculated that it is 400km longer than the 600km).
3. It's possible to get 25,000 feet of climbing and never get above 1500feet.
4. The distance from 800km to 900km is significantly longer than the distance from 900km to 1000km. Einstein would attribute this to relativity. Wayne Methner would probably say that it's the smell of the barn.
5. 170 kilometers is a really long distance between controls, especially at night with nothing open.
6. It is much less demoralizing to climb a hill when your computer says 10km/hr than when it says 6mi/hr.
7. You can calculate the time to the next control by (1) converting the distance to miles; (2) taking your likely average speed in km/hr and converting it to mi/hr; and (3) dividing one into the other. There is also a much easier and direct method, but it does not immediately occur to you at 3am. Also it doesn't pass as much time.

About PHYSIOLOGY

1. You really can go and go on a long ride with as powder for power. (I used about 12,000 calories worth of Twinlabs Gainers Fuel 2500). All you need are a scientifically chosen collection of supplements to the powder. Mine included a spanish omelette and bacon, bananas, a sausage and pepperoni pizza, ham and cheese sandwiches, chicken and cheese sandwiches, ice cream, mushroom soup, french fries, a salmon and bacon club sandwich, oatmeal, onion rings, grapes, a blueberry scone and other similar nutrients.
2. If you use large amount of bag balm and reapply generously every 200km, your butt will thank you. Makes the saddle awfully slippery, though.
3. It was a lot easier when I was a lot younger to get by on two hours total sleep in two nights.
4. Odd things can start hurting at odd times. For example, one forearm?!?

About GEAR

1. If you add a bigger bag, you will pack more. This apparently has no connection with the odds that you will not have something that you end up wanting.
2. You cannot carry enough dry socks.
3. Lithium batteries have a different discharge curve than other batteries. My battery tester was apparently unable to distinguish between fresh and largely used batteries.
4. Although two Cateye halogen lights with fresh batteries will last for 10 hours; two such lights with largely used batteries will last for about a half-hour each.

About the ENVIRONMENT

1. If it's only going to be sunny for a few hours on a 3 day rainy ride, you can still sunburn yourself.
2. The difference between Canadian convenience store attendants and their American counterparts is that they say "Crazy; I wouldn't do that in a car, eh" instead of "Crazy; I wouldn't do that in a car."
3. Bald eagles look really cool (and big) when they swoop down in the road in front of cyclists.
4. It isn't summer yet on Vancouver Island either.

About OTHER RIDERS

1. If (1) you plan to ride with folks you don't really know, (2) they say that when they hit the 400k control, they are going to turn around and keep riding, and (3) you get there an hour earlier, then you should not have a large cup of coffee while waiting. (They may decide on a sleep break instead!)
2. If no one from the local club shows up for a brevet, maybe they know something about the weather that you don't know.

What I'm still curious about:

1. Can you dry socks in a convenience store microwave?
2. How exactly are you supposed to execute a roadside bathroom break with tights on over bibs?
3. Is summer coming this year?
4. When will my body feel normal again?
5. How much agony will another 200km bring in France?

Ride Description:

I headed up to Canada on Thursday to ride the BC 1000km brevet on Vancouver Island on Friday-Sunday. The route extends from Victoria at the south end of the island to Port Hardy at the north end and back. I was actually planning to start in between at Nanaimo, heading north to PH, south to Victoria, then back to Nanaimo. 25,000 feet of climbing were advertised. 75 hours was the time limit.

During the previous week, I found out that I was going to be the sole SIR rider on the ride. A couple of other guys had decided after Terry's 3-pass 400km that they needed more recovery time or had better things to do. I was determined to go anyway - I had started by thinking that 1000km might be a good way for me to prepare for PBP, get some experience above 600km before attempting 1200km, and to do a real shakedown on me and my equipment while I still had a couple months to make adjustments. As the ride got closer, I got passionate about it, and I wanted the ride a lot. I abandoned the 400 at Cle Elum to "save myself" for the 1000.

Since the 600km, I had made a few changes to my equipment, despite the oft-heard admonitions about not making any changes after the 400km. I had abandoned my "fancy-schmancy" (Kent Peterson's term) wheels for ones with lots of spokes. I had given up my hydration backpack (which I had a bad habit of overpacking, to my back's great detriment) and a small underseat bag. Instead I was using a seatpost mounted rack with a reflective trunk on top and 2 collapsible waterbottles to supplement the 2 on the bike for long waterless stretches. I had switched from shorts to bibs with a different pad. Another switch was to Bag Balm from the Assos chamois cream that I had used for two years. I intended to complete a brevet on my Litespeed for the first time since the 200km pre-ride, so I added fenders. At the suggestion of Bill Dussler and others, I was going to rely heavily on drink powders for my calorie intake, so I had packed about a zillion ziplock baggies filled with weight lifters' drink mix.

My vague plan was to meet up with two riders from Portland (George Wilson and Scott Aldrich). I had met George along Lake Crescent during the SIR 600k. Scott's wife, Carol, was planning to support them, especially for the long stretch between controls at the north end of the island. I was happy to go along with their ride plan - start on Friday and ride 630km from Nanaimo to Port Hardy and back to Campbell River for a sleep stop on Saturday night; then the remaining 370km on Sunday. More than 600km without stopping

would be a new experience for me.

Friday morning, I met George and Scott and Stephen Hinde of the BC club at the local 7-11 in Nanaimo. It turned out that we were going to be the only three riders starting that morning. A member of the BC club was planning to do the ride on Sunday/Monday, starting in Victoria. His plan was to complete the ride in 40 hours, so I wasn't expecting to see much of him even if we had started together. Stephen gave us our brevet cards (it took two to get all the controls on). He also gave us a new route sheet with some construction-motivated detours that would add about 10km to the distance. (This seemed irrelevant at the start, but assumed unnatural importance at 995km into the ride). I tossed my bag drop bag into Carol's car.

The ride started nicely. Shorts, jersey, and vest were adequate attire and we headed down to the water along the old highway toward the first control at Qualicum Beach (46km). This went by quickly and I got to know George and Scott a bit. George is a veteran of several PBPs; Scott, like me, had taken up randonneuring last year and was aiming for Paris. After a quick stop at the control, we set out for the next control at Willow Point near Campbell River (147km). This was great riding, much of it along the old island highway. My only mechanical difficulty of the whole ride - a flat tire from a piece of wire embedded in the tread - was quickly fixed. The weather held up and provided a wonderful tailwind. The scenery included offshore islands and a spectacular bald eagle flying above the road just in front of us.

After lunch in Campbell River we headed inland. We were greeted by a couple of very long but not very steep climbs and the beginning of the rain that would dog the ride all weekend. I also started to ride a little faster and began to ride by myself. By the time I got to Charlie's Place, the restaurant at the next control (219km), it was pouring. The restaurant had a number of friendly local folks, many of whom had pithy observations about our sanity, or perceived lack thereof. Some were eager to point out that there was basically nothing, particularly at night, for the next 170km. One said that there was one big hill coming up after the control and then pretty much flat the rest of the way. She lied, but not about the hill.

With french fries and mushroom soup to stoke the fires and with a rain jacket and tights added to my attire, we set off in the rain to Port Hardy. After a few long hills, the rain actually let up a little and we had decent riding. By then I was out by myself again. With the exception of some ugly clearcuts, it was a beautiful and peaceful place to ride. Hardly any traffic either. Carol Aldrich had planned to set up water/food stops at about the 1/3 and 2/3 points of this stretch. Her big white Suburban was a welcome sight each time - loaded up with water, drinks, fruit, hot soup, and the good cheer of Carol and their kids. Carol also offered welcome encouragement each time she drove past on the road. She set up the first stop at the turnoff to Woss, a logging camp. There I waited for George and Scott, but I got too cold, so the next time, I just filled up and set off and left word with Carol that I would meet the guys at the control in Port Hardy. In the meantime it had gotten dark, very dark. The stories that I had heard from Stephen about black bears and cougars watching passing randonneurs may have been true that night as well, but I didn't see them. I was intently watching miles and miles of pavement pass through the little square of light in front of my bike. Too intently, I guess, because at one point I looked up to find the sky filled with stars and realized that I had no awareness that it had been clearing. One great thing about riding in the middle of nowhere at night is that the stars are amazing - I turned off my lights and just enjoyed the sky for a bit.

At about 2:30 in the morning, I reached the convenience store at the Port Hardy control (389km). I had some more liquid food and a cup of coffee to set me up for the trip back. I have basically given up caffeine, in large part to give me the ability to use it as a drug when I need it. As a result, this cup of coffee packed a nice wallop. An hour later, George and Scott rolled in and announced that a brief sleep stop in a motel was in order for them. I agreed to join them and we checked into a nearby motel with a plan to wake up 1.5 hours later and head out. By now it was nearly 4AM and the sky was beginning to show the first hints of morning. The coffee kept me up for the first two-thirds of the sleep time, so I started off in the morning with all of 30 minutes of sleep in the bank.

I woke up to the sun rising outside my window. Despite the lack of sleep, I felt great as we headed out of town. After a leisurely few miles at the start, I headed off. Although I did not know it then, that was the last that I would see of George and Scott - I was to have the next 600km to myself. After 50km, I saw the white Suburban, stopped for water and hot oatmeal and headed off. 60 km later, I made my own stop at the general store in Woss; Carol was back supporting George and Scott, who were tiring. I thoroughly enjoyed the first 150km of this stretch - the weather was good, the roads were nice, the views lovely, I felt physically and mentally strong. It was just great to be cycling.

Along the way I came across a very strange section of road. Looking ahead, the road clearly goes downhill for a couple of miles before bending out of sight. I find, to my disappointment, that it seems to be a lot of work to get downhill. I consider everything - rubbing brakes, dead legs - before checking my altimeter and seeing that I'm going uphill. I look ahead again - still looks like a downhill; I ride - still going uphill. Very weird. (I mentioned this to Stephen of the local club after the ride and he immediately identified the spot where I must have been and said that this was a common sensation.)

About 10km before the control at Charlie's Place (559km) the skies opened up again, ruining a great downhill into the control. Rain would be my faithful companion for the next 450km. After a warm reunion with the staff of the restaurant, more comments on my sanity, and a nice lunch, I put on my raingear and headed off. My goal was to make it back to Nanaimo to spend Saturday night. The next control was back at Campbell River and it would be at 632k. This would be a personal best distance, which was a powerful incentive.

The hills on the way back to the Campbell River control were relatively easy in this direction as well, although the rain was tedious. At the Willow Point 7-11, I indulged in a mini-pizza - sausage, pepperoni, lots of cheese. Yum. Lights on for the next leg to the Qualicum Beach control (733km). At one point Carol went by and said that she was heading into Nanaimo to get motel rooms. She put my bag drop bag in the room and brought a key back to me on the road. (Way above and beyond the call of duty - as with all her efforts all weekend!). It was around 2AM when I arrived at Qualicum Beach. By then I was pretty tired, but there was a shower and a bed just 46km away.

As I was preparing to leave Qualicum Beach, Carol drove up. She had lost her riders. The guy in the Willow Point control said that they had been there and looked strong. She decided to nap in her car at Qualicum Beach and wait for them. As I was to find out later after the ride, they were not to meet up again until mid-afternoon on Sunday. George and Scott had decided to overnight in Campbell River and also had decided that they would not finish the ride.

My trip into Nanaimo in the wee hours of the morning was torture. Although my legs were ok, I was extremely sleepy. I struggled to keep it going and to stay awake. Lots of speculation in my head about exactly what would happen in what order if I actually fell asleep on the bike - especially if going downhill. I also tried to determine which of the local businesses would think it least odd to come in and discover a Mylar-wrapped cyclist when they arrived in the morning. The fact that it was Sunday and most places would be closed completely eluded me. Somehow I made it to the Nanaimo control (778km) and backtracked a half-mile to the motel.

A shower was pure heaven, especially because I was taking off cycling clothes that had been unchanged for 48 hours - another personal best, but not one I care to repeat. (I was to be reminded of this nastiness again when unloading my car back at home on Monday night - yuck). Remembering all the randonneur lore about 1.5 hour sleep cycles, I set up a wake up call, estimating (correctly) that it would take about a nanosecond to fall asleep.

I think it was about 9 on Sunday morning when I headed south to Victoria. I considered leaving my headlamp & battery pack to save weight, thinking that 11 hours would be plenty of time to do 230km, getting me back well before dark. Conservatism led me to pack the light, which I use for fast descents and roadside tinkering. I had no idea how far off my estimate would turn out to be.

The 116km to Victoria definitely marked my emotional low point for the ride. The perceived time for each 10km increment on my computer was interminable. No matter how many slugs off my flasks of strawberry-banana PowerGel (with caffeine!) I took, I couldn't get any kick. Thoughts of abandoning were a constant companion. I especially struggled with the "800km is quite an accomplishment; you don't need to jump all the way to 1000km in one shot" thought. The one bright spot was a late breakfast. I rode past a little restaurant in Chemainus, on a detour to avoid construction on the main highway. Something about it called to me and I turned around and went in. It was a delightful little place, presided over by an older woman who seemed to know every customer and quite solicitous of the bedraggled cyclist. I ordered an omelette, which came with a choice of pancakes or toast. I asked for the pancakes, but she gently suggested that I might enjoy the bread, which she baked herself. By the time I left, I had consumed 8 slices of this delicious multigrain toast, along with a large spanish omelette, hash browns, bacon, and fruit.

The route diverged from the main highway again around Shawnigan Lake. These backroads seemed like an endless series of short steep hills. I wasn't paying attention to my altimeter, so I didn't realize until I returned to the main road that there had indeed been more up than down - I was about 1000ft higher than when I left the main road. These hills, which would probably seem insignificant on a shorter ride, nearly broke my resolve. Luckily, I had no readily accessible bailout strategy. After rejoining the highway, the last 30km into Victoria were not too bad. There was a great long downhill, but my enjoyment was substantially tempered by dread of the climb on the way back.

I took a decently long break at the Victoria control (yet another 7-11, this one at 894km) and took in a sandwich and lots to drink. Also realized that I didn't have a prayer of finishing before dark. Turning around and heading for the finish completely turned around my state of mind. I stopped noticing the rain; the dreaded climb turned out to be not bad at all; and the kilometers seemed to roll by quicker. I wasn't going a lot faster, but the mental attitude was much better. I stopped several times for coffee on the way back and started to target a 66 hour finish (11:30PM Sunday). At Stephen's request, I telephoned him about 15km from the finish so that he could meet me at the final control. At that point it seemed like my finish target was receding from possibility, but I became like a demon possessed. I found myself sprinting up hills and feeling good about it. The smell of the barn was getting stronger. I rolled into the 7-11 at 11:15, high as a kite.

Damn, I was thrilled.

I spent a little time talking to Stephen, who predicted that I would finish PBP and that according to his rule of thumb, I could expect to finish in 20 hours more than my 1000km time. We'll see - those thoughts are for another day. A short ride to my motel room, a much needed shower, and a last big slug of weight gainer fuel and I was ready for a real night's sleep. I was still pumped up the next morning and enjoyed my completion high for 4-5 hours on my ferry and car ride back home. After 2 years of brevets, I finally have a real feeling of what randonneuring is all about.