

“An old fool” and his bicycle

Barbara Sibbald.

Réal Préfontaine’s idea of a good time is exhaustion, sleep deprivation and nausea, but then cycling 1200 km in 86 hours will do that to you. That’s how the retired physician spent his last summer vacation, competing in the Paris–Brest–Paris randonnées (ramble or tour). Call him crazy, but at 67 Préfontaine loves ultramarathon cycling and has regularly logged 200- to 1200-km endurance trips during the past 8 years.

This year, he was acclaimed to a 4-year position as president of the Randonneurs Mondiaux (the worldwide randonneur administrative organization), which is responsible for promoting the sport and validating events. The international organization represents 854 randonneurs from 8 countries.

Why does he put himself through this torture? “Why do people climb mountains?” responds Préfontaine from his home in Abbotsford, BC. “It’s a personal challenge, a competitive spirit to better your own time.”

He didn’t always hold that view. For years he only put foot to pedal for a short jaunt to his corner store. “I was a couch potato.” He’d also spent his career behind a desk. Born in Saskatchewan, Préfontaine graduated from Laval University in 1961 and, after 2 years in practice, became a medical administrator, eventually settling down as Pacific medical director for Corrections Canada. In 1982, after an embarrassing showing at a Corrections Canada sports day, he started stretching and doing aerobic exercises. The next year he won the trophy as most improved participant. Five years later, he cycled in the World Police Games in Vancouver and completed the course — without embarrassment.

“I realized I wasn’t a racer because I was 56 at the time,” he says, “but I liked competitive cycling.” He started training in earnest and in 1991 rode the BC Lung Association’s 200-km, 2-day trek, which he completed in 1 day; he pedalled another 100 km the following day. He was sold on the sport, and when he learned about the randonneurs he couldn’t believe his good fortune.

Each year since 1992 he has completed at least 1 basic series of randonnées or brevets — 200-, 300-, 400- and 600-km treks — but his crowning achievements are the

1200-km randonnées he has completed: 3 in Canada, 1 in the US and 2 in France, the prestigious Paris–Brest–Paris (PBP) event.

In 1995 he did his first PBP randonnée in just 79 hours. Last year 3689 randonneurs from 30 countries, including 69 from Canada, participated. Préfontaine was the oldest Canadian to finish. Riders select a time limit of 80, 84 or 90 hours. Préfontaine opted to complete the course in 90 hours but finished in 86, including just 10 hours of sleep. Riders

catching Zs beside the road or in doorways are a common sight during these events. The top finishers — they take between 43 and 60 hours — complete the event without any sleep. The record is 43 hours and 20 minutes.

“Ninety to 95% of it is mental,” Préfontaine says. “You need determination. You know you will hurt whether it’s 200 or 1200 km. You know you’ll get tired, depleted and your bottom will hurt.”

He takes NSAIDs for the pain and prevents saddle sores by keeping clean and dry and applying antifungal, antibiotic cream. Sometimes, though, nothing helps. In 1997 he rode a randonnée in the rain and snow and developed a “terrible rash.” But it isn’t all pain and suffering; at the end of a randonnée you’re “totally depleted in body but your spirit is excellent. You’re high on that.”

In between the big events he logs 4- to 10-hour rides a few times a week and does 1000-km trips through the mountains with a few biking buddies.

Since retiring in 1995, he seems to get a devilish joy from putting himself through the most onerous ordeals. In 1997 he rode two 1200-km randonnées within 2 weeks. “I was challenged. Someone said you can’t do it, so I did it.” He was also hit by a car just 10 km from his home, and broke 5 ribs and 2 vertebra, bruised his knee and lung, and passed out. “I was saved by my helmet,” he says. “My wife calls me the old fool.”

This year, he’s been challenged to do 2000 km. “I have to do it,” he says, and is already considering routes through Alberta or BC. He has 166 hours to complete that course. If anyone’s interested, he’s looking for biking buddies to accompany him (Real_Prefontaine@telus.net). ?



Préfontaine, marathon biking in Normandy