

Rochester 600k Rider Stories - #2

Martin Fahje

Martin has been riding brevets for 20 years and has completed five PBP rides as well as several other 1200k grand randonnees. He was the Minnesota RUSA RBA for many years and has been a key builder of the randonneuring program in our state.

I read with interest the stories from the 600 brevet. All were great and of course congrats to all, including Ahi. Even though he did not complete the ride, he came away in good spirit and new knowledge.

I've been doing brevets for 20 years and some ultra events for 25 years. I'm still learning, probably less than those first years, but still getting new information. The interesting thing is I'm still riding the same bike and group!!

Some random thought and comments from the riders and their observations you can pass on.

1. Gary is correct in that the ride from Rushford to Chatfield is harder than Chatfield to Rushford. The inclines are steeper coming west than going east. The rollers are about the same but the major climbs are more difficult. The first climb out of Rushford is longer than the first climb out of Chatfield, and the slow low angle start of the Rushford climb tires you before the majority of the climb. Then the middle two climbs at Pilot Mound and Buck Snort Park definitely have more pitch west than east. I live in Chatfield and this is one of my favorite sections of road to ride. I ride it a lot, both directions and know these hills well. For me there is easily a 1 or 2 gear difference climbing westward then east on those climbs.
2. I've seen Richard look like death in a couple of earlier brevets and it was great to hear he made a breakthrough with his nutrition needs on brevets. Food variety is a key unless you are extremely focused. I've done shorter rides and some brevets with strict liquid diets and such. But man, after drinking only liquid foods for a while when you pull into a control, that pizza or brat smells awfully good!! I eat and drink whatever I feel like, if it be a brat or chicken sandwich. I know some things which work and work reliably and use them. I always carry some type of food with me between controls, Milky Ways work for me. I don't need Power Bars. I've used them, again as a break from routine and variety. I'll also mix the drinks in the bottles, sometimes Coke, Gatorade, or fruit juice. What I found tastes really good is grapefruit juice or cranberry juice some days because they leave my mouth with the tart pucker, not a sweet sticky taste.
3. The fatigue increases as the distance increases, seems like at an exponential rate. Sometimes it's a matter of knowing how your body responds to the additional distance and multiple days. The more brevets you do the easier it gets!! Seems counterintuitive, but you'll know how you should feel, how tired you are and adjust accordingly. But be careful, that your food consumption and fluid intake are significant and lack of isn't the cause of the decline.

4. Riding solo is sometimes easier and burns less energy than trying to ride with someone. Even when the difference is so very slight, riding faster or slower than just plodding at the comfortable rhythm takes too much out of you. I seem to ride in groups only when I feel fresh and strong. If I feel the least bit tired I'd rather ride alone, and I've done lots of that during brevets. Of the last 2 PBPs I'll wager that 1000km of each was solo riding. But then on those windy brevets, like we've been plagued with this spring it sure is nice to occasionally tuck in behind someone.
5. The biggest mistake I see many new brevet riders is wasting time at controls. But then again everyone has their own style. I prefer to get in and out of the controls fast. That way I do not have to re-warm up the legs for exercise again. Learn to eat on the bike. I don't necessarily ride fast out of the controls at break neck speed, but rather keep the bike rolling. Non rolling time is lost time to me. There are times when you have to do things at the controls, like change clothes and rig lights for night riding, but generally sitting and resting is not on my list. You'll learn to rest on the bike while rolling, soft peddling works.
6. Numbness. I'll stand up a lot, even when I don't really need to just to get circulation to those sit spots. Move your hands around frequently. You've all heard the old adage, eat before you are hungry, drink before you are thirsty. Same thing applies to seat and hands. I still will wear two pairs of shorts on the longer brevets, not for the padding, but as friction control. I have some older shorts with the thin chamois which work well for this, the newer style shorts with the bulky pads do not lend themselves to this well, but several layers helps.
7. I rode the 600k a week before the rest of you in much more difficult weather conditions. Headwinds and spotty light rain both days. The temps were rather cool also. Sunday on the return I think the temp barely changed from the 52 start all day. It was definitely a wool weekend. Nothing better for those cool and wet rides. Dressing well for the conditions saves you tons. I can ride hot, but cold and you might as well call for the sag. The mental part was harder than the physical part for me. I just slowed down a little and kept spinning easily rather than try to push too big a gear to make it go away faster, much as I wanted to get off the bike in that weather. Adjust riding and times and do not let it bother you if you are slower than expected. This was probably the hardest 600k and I know the slowest 600 I've done. The terrain didn't add to the difficulty, it was the weather.

A follow up note from Martin, a couple of hours later

I wanted add that liquid foods do have a place. I find it hard to take in solid foods when it's hot, real hot. So I convert to liquid foods. Sometimes Boost works well and it's great for a multi day with a baggage drop because it's shelf stable a room temps. That's when I'll also switch to liquids with sugar of any kind. Usually I'll have three bottles on the longer brevets and keep only water in one but switch different fluids in the other 2. Like Richard alluded to, variety so that my body didn't get tired of the same old stuff and not want anything.

Greg Berkley

Greg is an experienced randonneur who has completed many long brevets and PBP 2007.

Sorry about the late reply (fishing in the Black Hills for a week), but here are some of my thoughts on the Rochester 600k. This was my 4th 600 km brevet, and definitely the hardest. I rode the last one in '07 before PBP without sleeping, and thought I'd give this one a try too. My philosophy for brevet riding is to never ride hard. There are times when the ride is hard, but I try to never ride beyond my limit. I rode down to the turn around and back to West Union with Dan and Richard. This was the most enjoyable part of the ride. We rode at a very civil pace, and pretty much shared the work, although Dan was by far the stronger climber. Thanks to Dan and Richard for putting up with my creaking bike on the climbs. I think we got back to West Union around 8:15 or so. As I changed into some clean clothes, Dan and Richard stopped by to wish me luck. I ate a burger and fries at Hardies, and started again around 9:00. I try to eat what is available at the check points, and save things like bars and gels for when I don't have enough with me on the longer sections. I forgot to pack a small flashlight that I usually carry for night riding, so I can read the cue sheet, and had some difficulty navigating. After riding the old course a few times, I could ride it without help. Not this time. There were 3 or 4 times where I would have to circle around an intersection looking for arrows. I never got lost, but I started to second guess myself at some of the turns. This really started to mess with my head. I thought the bike path back to Cresco in the dark was great. Somewhere before Rushford, the wheels fell off the train. Looking back, I should have slept at West Union for an hour or two. I think this would have made all the difference. The hours before the dawn really are the darkest! I ended up sleeping in a couple of grassy ditches twice, once for maybe 15 minutes, and the other for about 30 as the sun came up. Rob and Mike caught up to me at Chatfield. I was in really rough shape mentally at the time. Both Rob and Mike said they would take it easy, and that we would ride together. I started feeling better almost immediately because of the company. After Stewartville it got HARD. I've ridden on some long rides, but I have to say this 600k was the most I've ever suffered on a bike. If Rob and Mike had not come along when they did, it would have taken a lot longer for me to finish. Thanks again!

As far as ideas for some of the new riders to brevets? Everyone has their own likes and dislikes when it comes to riding style, equipment, food, etc. But here goes. My number one piece of advice is to take your time. Finishing before the cutoff is important, but enjoying the ride is everything.

The course was hard, but I think that's important. Maybe not this year, but definitely the year before and the year of PBP. I rode the 200, 300, 400. and 600 brevets the year before PBP and I think it really helped me. It gave me a chance to experiment the year before the big one.

Fenders. Fenders are huge. If you can fit them on your bike, I'd give it a try. It's not always wet. But when it is, they can make life a lot easier.

Also, I subscribe to a magazine called Bicycle Quarterly. The articles in it have given me a lot of good advice and ideas for distance riding. Thanks.

(editor's note: go to <http://www.vintagebicyclepress.com/> for more information on Bicycling Quarterly – a great magazine for bicycle lovers in general and randonneuring in particular