

Audax BP: Freedom Ride, 400km

Saturday, 7 September, 05:30

In July, I rode out for the scheduled Freedom Ride and turned around and rode home before I'd even reached the first Control. It was not the ride for me that day, and I'm proud to own it as my first DNF.

I was arguably less prepared this time, but more committed. A 400km Permanent was a season goal; so despite my poor preparation, and perhaps because of it, I needed this ride.

The Permanent course has an 'Information Control' close to home, so I opt to start there. The proximity, and some tech issues, lead to a late start. I roll out with a two-litre hydration pack, two water bottles, five half-size salad wraps, eight cubes of fruit cake, six muesli bars, four green tea bags, and my standard supply of other drugs and emergency snacks. I wouldn't normally rely on muesli bars, but 9pm the night prior was not the time to bake potatoes. I plan to buy dinner at Fernvale, but reserve a salad wrap for the final stop at Yamanto.

The first official Control is 7km in, so I take a photo and sign my own Brevet, without much of a stop. I'm hoping to stitch some lost time. I'm feeling a bit sluggish by the time I reach the Lanita Track, and as I dip onto the path I'm overwhelmed with déjà vu. Every ride from my first PeachyMee Permanent in 2017, to the Goat Track Gambol just last weekend.

As I round the corner of Camp Mountain Road, I approach another rider. He looks fit, but is riding a little slower than I am. I'm here because I want to ride alone. I take a deep breath in, and out, and start pedalling again.

"G'day, how are you?" "Hi. Yeah.. I'm good.. I'm good... Wow! You look like you're about to ride two hundred kilometres!!" I genuinely laugh. Most riders don't respond to a G'day, so he's warmed me. "Ha! I'm actually doing four hundred. I guess I'll have fresh legs somewhere." "What? I .. I was joking!" He wobbles a bit. I'm keen to ride off, and I don't like being two-abreast along here. But he's ready for a chat now. I tell myself that positive human interaction is probably a good start, I'll be in my own head soon enough. "Where are you headed?" "I'm embarrassed to say now." "Every ride is interesting. Are you meeting with a group?"

He tells me about his Samford loop with some friends, they'll have a coffee and ride home. I tell him that sounds awesome. He enjoyed the Smiddy Ride a few years ago. He has a lot of questions. I've found these interactions result in varying extremes of expectation. Usually I'm asked if it's a race, a competition, or for charity. Gary wants to know if I ride 400km every Saturday. I invite him on a future ride, and we part at Samford.

The traffic is surprisingly steady for this time of the morning. I'm not given a lot of passing distance, and there's plenty of debris to navigate. I was prepared for the dust, but for some reason hadn't accounted the wind, so I'm not able to eat while riding as I'd hoped. I was starting to find my rhythm and didn't feel ready for a break at Morayfield (66km), but I did need water and know that eating properly early on will serve me well. I'm already thinking about the final hundred. I find a park table, with a passable toilet and good water, and work my way through a truly unpleasant Apple Bircher muesli bar, some cake, and a salad and

cheese wrap. Twenty five minutes later I agree to keep moving. I'm behind my schedule, but I think I needed the time, I'll make it up somewhere. I can spend a lot of space on a ride calculating distance and timing. How far is water, when will I eat. Am I hungry. If I maintain speed, when will I finish. Can I regain speed before the next Control. My intention for today was to complete the course in under 18 hours, but I was starting to review the idea.

We weren't delivered ideal weather conditions. Multiple towns were being evacuated around South East Queensland due to fires, plus there was a dust storm and blustery wind. I wore a buff over my mouth, nose, and ears throughout the day. It made for a warm ride, but reduced the dust into my lungs, and baffled the wind noise. The wind. Packed, my bike and I would weigh under 75kg. I'm thrown around a lot and the noise overstimulation wears away at me. One layer at a time. I spent a *lot* of time at Controls, just to have some quiet.



One of the reasons I love this course, is that it travels in the opposite direction to most of my other rides. This makes for a vastly different experience. The view, the road surface. It's the same area, but I see it with new eyes. I see different birds, different shrubs.

I arrive at Peachester (106km), and refill water again, I'm really working through it. I'm still not hungry, but I know I will be before I reach Kilcoy. The little park at Peachester is quiet and green. The rowdy dirt bikers are good sports, and I often chat with whomever seems to be here. Another twenty five minute stop.

Descending toward Woodford I see red-backed fairywrens in the grass on the side of the road. Shrill bursts of colour in and out of the brown. There are finches in dusty green, yellow, and brown. I see another one of those tiny brown fluffy birds on the road, but am not in a position to stop. I narrowly avoid a ground-bird, which seems too lanky to be a quail. My Garmin lost satellite connections back at Peachester, and it drops in and out over the next hour. I don't have the time or patience to troubleshoot it, so I keep cycling. I'm not out here to be annoyed.



Neurum Road isn't as tiresome as I usually find it. Maybe it really is quicker this way! Somewhere between Peachester and Kilcoy I start to notice a sharp stinging pain at my right calf. At the time I thought it was a skin reaction, as it was exacerbated on the pull stroke when my calf touches the knicks on my thigh. It's awfully painful, but I've ridden with worse.

The Kilcoy Bakery (151km) closed earlier this year, so I have a break on the other side of town, overlooking a pond. It's good to be out of the wind and off the road. A couple is having a barbecue, families are playing, there are children looking for mischief near the water. I've developed a bit of a cough; a result of the poor sleep in the week prior, the dry weather, and the dust. I see an aggregation of red dust in the crevices of my shifter, on the handlebars, and on my spokes. When I cough, I expect to see the same red dust. Another twenty-five minute break. I start to reevaluate my expected finish. I turn on my rear camera as I leave. I don't have fond memories of the road from here to Esk.



I've gained a few kilometres somewhere. I don't know how. But Esk (205km) couldn't arrive sooner. The final 3km into town takes an age. I'd been debating the reward of a sausage roll from the bakery. It's closed when I arrive, so the decision is made for me. I have good food in my pack, and don't want to waste more time waiting for service at the Red Deer Cafe, despite their appetising menu.

There's a good park behind the public toilet block. I enjoy another wrap, some cake, and a muesli bar. I add another tea bag to my bidon. The tea is a really good addition to the day. I'm working through over two litres of water between controls, and I'm considering if I'll be fatigued later, given I've extended the ride somewhat. I watch blue-faced honeyeaters and galahs try to reach water from a dog bowl under a tap, and drink from a puddle instead. A family passes them, ferrying food and gifts back and forth between their table and their vehicle. A lorikeet comes to my table, but isn't interested in the strawberry tops someone has left on the edge. I fill the dog bowl with water before I leave. Another thirty minute break. I'm resigned that my dinner will now be from Freedom Fuels. Surely they have pies. Surely..

Apart from the calf issue, my legs feel strong and I have a good run from Esk onwards. As I ride out I cheer to find the wind has calmed completely, but I turn the corner and it returns. I laugh. While it could be imagined, I feel solidarity with those riding the 200km BUAF today. Even if they will be on the homeward stretch now, and I still have 200km ahead.

I think my legs have finally woken up, and I'm managing the cough well enough. I focus on regaining some of my elapsed speed, and I start to realise that if I keep at it I might just make the Fernvale bakery (263km) before it closes. I ride hard. I don't love the place that much, but the goal gives me something to work toward. I'm right on the line, but I power into town and they're still open. They're still open and they have a selection beyond five curry pies and a questionable sausage roll.

I manage a pork and apple sausage roll, a steak and kidney pie, and a can of Coke. I wasn't hungry, and I now I feel very, very, full. While I don't want to break my solitude, I also use the stop to check in and send some text messages. It's after dark, and I am very much alone.

As I ride out, forty minutes later, I realise I don't remember the course between here and Yamanto. A complete blank. I try to work it out in my head, knowing the distance. A few turns seem to take me farther away and I question whether I loaded the wrong course somehow. Has my Garmin failed. Am I on my way to Kalbar.



The dry conditions mean that wildlife is abundant near the roadside after sundown. We may not have rabbits in Queensland, but we have plenty of hares, and they are not road smart! I had a number of critical near misses. An enormous wallaby on Coleyville Road bounds downhill toward me, startles and changes direction to cut me off, skids and goes down hard on his side. He scrambles and slides toward me, and we miss each other by inches. I need to pick up speed, but I restrain myself on every descent and I use my wide beam.

I check the turns several times, but I don't want to stop. From here to Yamanto I am hyper-vigilant about safety. Why are they slowing down? Why are they waiting? Why did he turn around? How far til the next house? I think about how to manage my phone if there is an emergency. Will calling a friend be more effective than trying emergency? What lie will I tell my attacker, about my friends waiting ahead, and behind, about how I'm returning to a friend's place, a friend of a friend, I'm only here for the weekend, I can't remember her last name, just up ahead. I am not fast enough to outrun a dog at the moment, I wouldn't stand a chance. Would I enter a yard with dogs? Yes. So when I see four vehicles ahead, in a road block, I wait. I listen. I look for movement, how many people, what are they doing. I wait for another motorist to come. I try to go through at the same time, but he sees them more closely and turns around. I waver. I'm already there, so I steel my resolve. It turns out to be legitimate. I assess where everyone is, what they have in their hands. I ask if everyone is okay, they make a joke about a snatch strap. I laugh, but don't look back. I count down in my head that there are three more turns until Middle Road, and from there houses.

I reach Yamanto (349km) and realise that while I have my own food, I still need a toilet. So I reluctantly enter the McDonalds. The evening is much cooler than I anticipated, and I spend almost half an hour here and cool down too much. I'd started experiencing a cramp in my leg a few hours earlier, and it had returned. It was no longer annoying, it was painful. I reason that the sharp discomfort I was experiencing early on led me to unconsciously alter my pedal stroke in order to avoid it. I was riding with an uneven gait, and now paying for it. I use the highway to try to stretch it out again, with no success. The climbs are painful now, and I'm dropping into the small chain ring for anything over 4%. It's still windy. Why is it still windy.

The rest is just riding. Reminding myself to keep my legs moving, they can recover tomorrow. I have plenty of time, but I want to be home. To have a hot shower and a long sleep in with my Cat. I know I could have ridden much harder earlier on. I've done it before, so I don't know what stopped me this time. Nothing. Me. I didn't find the headspace that I was hoping for, even after twenty hours alone with myself. I didn't resolve life's great mysteries, I didn't solve my failings, and I didn't find inner peace. I guess I need more time.

I'm grateful for no punctures, no major incidents, and generally having a good gut throughout the day. I drank far more water than I ever expected. I didn't experience the fatigue I had on previous long rides this year. Something that made me doubt my capacity to ride even longer distances.

This was a really difficult ride for me, and I loved every minute. Even the parts I didn't enjoy. The wind, the dust, the motorists, the paranoia, the pain. They fade into the distance and you have to find them to remember them. Gary, what a crack up. I remember the little birds, and how strong my legs feel when I need them most. The Zen of legs and bike in perfect motion as one machine. And what's with all the elastic bands? Where do they come from.

I'm already looking at my calendar to plan my final challenge to complete the 2019 Season.

Massive thanks to Brian for establishing the course as a Permanent, only shortly after returning from France. There are other 400km rides, but this one mattered. Thank you.

In the aftermath, it has been revealed that I tore a muscle, or muscles, in my right calf. I spent Sunday at home and tried to ease the 'cramp' through nutrition. Leaving the house on Monday, I took one step down the stairs and my leg collapsed completely. I yelped like a shot dog and I fell. I managed to ride to work, somehow, but was thinking the entire time that I wasn't sure how I'd ride home. I'll miss the weekly River Loop, but it should recover before my next planned Brevet. The weekends are really long when you're not riding. I wonder how I ever managed to achieve nothing.

