

The Six Ps of Long Distance Rallies

You may have heard of the 7Ps popular in the military - Prior Planning and Preparation Prevents Piss Poor Performance. I wrote the following after completing, and winning, the first UK Iron Butt Rally. On the way home I thought about my experience over the weekend and what I saw of others' experiences and have put these thoughts together here. Some of these comments are specific to that event but it may be that some of them are useful to riders completing other long distance events. It is not all original to me as I did a lot of research on the internet before entering the event and found a number of interesting articles which helped develop my thinking about this subject. Other influences include the time I spent working as a long distance despatch rider, several years running orienteering events and mountain marathons, and taking part in a number of similar events including the National Rally, the Welsh Rally and the Round Britain Rally.

My basic premise is that if you are serious about these events and want to do your best thinking about these six aspects will help you. The best way to improve your performance is not by riding more quickly but by riding smarter, for example by cutting down on time wasted at stops you will not need to spend so much time in the road to cover the same distance, and the result is that you will be less tired, less stressed and maybe be able to ride more conservatively, thereby giving yourself a safer ride. I do not mean any of this to sound prescriptive and certainly do not assume I know everything or all the right things about this subject, but merely offer these thoughts of what has worked for me.

Preparation

What bike should you use?

There is no right bike to use and unless you are incredibly serious or very wealthy you are not likely to go out and buy a bike specifically for an event (it does happen in America for the Iron Butt Rally but that is 11 days long!). On the Brit Butt Rally there was quite a variety of bikes, including Harley tourers, Gold Wings, BMW RTs, RSs, GSs, Pan-Europeans, Blackbirds, FJR's, Triumph Rockets, KTM Adventures, Honda NTV, Africa Twin, Transalp, Suzuki Hayabusa, Bandit amongst others. I ride a 2001 R1150GS, the second place rider was on a K1200RS and third place went to a Gold Wing. There was only one or two out and out sports bikes, but if Nick Sanders can ride round the world on an R1 then I am sure it is not impossible! The basic parameters are that you can sit on the bike for around 1500 miles in 36 hours, without any great discomfort and that it will be reliable and reasonably economical. Speed is not really an issue - you will not gain anything by travelling at hyper speeds except getting tired quickly, and gaining speeding tickets and disqualification. During the rally my highest recorded speed on my GPS was in the low 90s - these events are marathons not sprints.

What is important, indeed vital, is that the bike is right for you - the mantra of Long Distance riding is 'make the bike fit you'. Your aim in modifying your bike should be twofold - to remove or change anything likely to cause you discomfort over a long distance; and to only add anything that will improve your performance. I have made around 20 alterations to my bike in order to make it more likely that I could complete events like this. These include raising the bars, lowering the footpegs, changing the standard screen, replacing the standard bulbs with HID lights and fitting an Airhawk seat pad. None of them affect the performance of the bike and they were not very expensive changes: I sourced several second hand from Ebay or bike forums - I could probably have spent more than all of them on a performance exhaust system.

Other more costly enhancements you could look at include replacement seats or adding a fuel cell (an auxiliary fuel tank). A couple of the bikes on the rally had fuel cells fitted but it is not easy to source them in the UK as yet and I would suggest that as long as you have a reasonable tank capacity (ie over 150 miles) then you should not have a problem finding fuel as long as you include this in your planning.

Your bike needs to be prepared so that it will be reliable. There is no point in entering such an event and then not completing it because something you could have checked and replaced wears out. At the same time, anything you change or have changed can go wrong - there is always the possibility of something being fitted wrongly or being faulty. I would recommend having any changes done a couple of weeks before an event so they have chance to bed in and be tested. You need to start the event knowing everything on the bike works fine and all consumables will last the course.

What equipment do you need?

What you wear also needs to be able to help you complete the event and not hinder you in any way. A small irritation from a slightly noisy or tight helmet or a jacket which rubs against your neck can become unbearable after 24 hours on the bike. All your kit needs to be comfortable to wear, while giving you full protection from coming off or the elements. Over the course of a full day, even in summer, the weather can change dramatically and a hot sunny day can become a very cold night, especially if you are tired. Personally I wore LD comfort shorts (most recommended), thermal socks, silk longjohns, a windproof shirt, two buffs, motocross gloves, waterproof lining, and a textile suit. I also carried a waterproof one-piece oversuit, spare winter gloves and a heated waistcoat. Although the rally was at the end of May, I ended up wearing the heated waistcoat most of the time, that and heated grips were a godsend at night in Scotland.

Many people recommend flip up helmets for ease of use, some find open face better. Whichever helmet you use make sure you know you can wear it for that length of time. I was going to buy a flip up but ended up wearing my Arai TourX because I knew I could wear it all day and it was comfortable for me, although the peak makes it a pain in the wind and changing visors is a fiddle. I also knew the extended mouthpiece meant I could drink with it on, by using a Camelback type bladder in my tankbag, and could eat stuff like flapjacks with it on by breaking them into chunks. If you need to take your helmet off to do stuff like you will be losing time.

What spares you carry for the bike will depend on your bike, your own confidence in carrying out repairs, your risk assessment of what could happen and the space you have available to carry stuff in. I tried to think what could happen which would prevent me completing the rally or lose me a lot of time. I carried a puncture repair kit, a can of tyre slime and a mini compressor, spare bulbs, a spare alternator belt, a spare speedo cable, spark plugs, and then added cable ties of different lengths, a roll of duck tape, insulation tape, a length of spare wire, a bulb tester and a selection of electrical connectors and spare nuts and bolts. I also checked I knew how to use all these spares to make repairs using the standard BMW toolkit on the bike. The only other tool I carried was a Leatherman.

Depending on the event you may need a camera to record where you have been and a torch if you are going through the night, so consider whether you need backups for these, spare batteries or memory cards. Other things you may need to consider are whether you need to carry anything to rest with such as a sleeping bag or bivvy bag, or for emergencies, bearing in mind that you may end up going to some very remote places with no mobile coverage where a breakdown in the

cold at night could be a problem.

How can you prepare yourself?

Apart from riding your bike which I will cover under practice, there are four areas in which you can prepare yourself for events like these - physical fitness, mental preparation, knowledge and riding ability.

The fitter you are the more likely it is you will be able to keep going as you will not get tired so quickly and lose concentration. I am not suggesting you need to go to the gym every night (I haven't been in one in years) but if you can raise your basic level of fitness in the months or weeks preceding the event it will help your performance.

You can also help yourself by preparing yourself mentally. What is it you want from this event? Setting goals and visualising yourself achieving them may help you and give you the determination to complete them.

Thirdly, the more research you do about events like this, the more likely you are to pick up tips you can use to help you. Before this event I looked on the internet and found everything I could about long distance riding - I read articles on sleep deprivation and the effects of fatigue, on how other people had completed the Iron Butt Rally in America, on the modifications other people had made to their bikes, on which kit they recommended.

Lastly, what can you do to make yourself a better prepared and safer rider?

Working on the basis that you have three levels of protection on a bike - your riding plan; your skills and ability; and your gear, you can improve all three and may find that some form of advanced riding training will help you work on the first two.

Practice

The only way you will know if you can do the miles, that your bike is comfortable and that all your gear works for you is if you have already ridden it in that condition regularly for a long distance. If you were going to run a marathon you would start off by running shorter distances and building up to the event by practising running. In the same way you will get better at long distance events if you have learned what you are capable of by completing a number of long distance rides and similar events. If you are not accustomed to riding in different conditions, at night, in rain, you will not know how these conditions will affect your riding, especially if you are in them for hours on end. There are quite a few long distance rides you can take part in if you want an excuse or target to build up your mileage. The Iron Butt Association has rides for 1000 miles in 24 hours, 1500 miles in 24 or 36 hours, and End to End rides from Lands End to John O Groats (see www.ironbuttuk.org). The Long Distance Riders have rides for 500 and 1000 miles in 24 hours and 1500 miles in 36 hours (www.longdistanceriders.net)

There are no events directly comparable to the Brit Butt Rally but there are a number of other navigational scatter rallies held in the UK which are useful practice for the event. These include the National, Welsh and Scottish Rallies and the Round Britain Rally. All follow slightly different formats. The three national rallies all have day competitions; on the National you can ride through the night depending on your course; the Scottish has courses which can be completed over the month before the competition day; the Welsh is probably the greatest navigational challenge; and the Round Britain Rally has 100 locations which can be visited at any time between April and October but they do require a certain amount of research on the internet first.

If you become very serious it may be that you use a particular event to focus on a specific area of your learning, eg spending a day doing Round Britain Rally controls and focussing on your system for dealing with controls to make that aspect as efficient as possible. (If you are getting this serious, it may be time to talk to someone about the problem...) There is a list of rallies and their websites on my blog at <http://grimridersblog.blogspot.com/>

Planning

I have known people who have spent hours riding an event and then missed out on the award they set out to gain because of a mistake they recognised afterwards could have been easily avoided if their plan was more accurate. This includes missing out on an Iron Butt Rally finish by starting the rest bonus at the wrong time; losing bonus points by taking a photograph of the wrong thing; having to ride hundreds of extra miles to go back to a control they had ridden past; getting disqualified on the National Rally by riding 5 miles too far on the Platinum course; losing an award on the Welsh rally by arriving at a manned control hours after it was closed. For some events it is said you can win or lose before you have even got on the bike, depending on the quality of your planning.

But planning, especially on a long distance event, comes in two stages: the initial phase before the event when you work out all the different possibilities and ensure you are equipped with a range of options to complete the course; and the second phase which continues throughout the event as you are constantly calculating and recalculating which options are most possible - and you will be doing this all through the event, depending on your average speed and when you arrive at controls, in comparison to what you expected in your initial planning.

Good route planning depends on being able to consider and take into account all the different factors which will affect your ride. These may include the rules of the event; any mileage requirements; any bonus or points requirements; any rest or stop requirements; any time restrictions; how far you know you can travel in the time available; the condition of the roads you are travelling over; the likely weather; how often and where you will need to stop for fuel, and how long each stop will take you; the time needed to locate the control sites you are going for; and your own physical condition. The more you already know about any of these factors, or can find out before the start, can only help you. Some of this goes back to preparation and practice - the more roads in Britain you have ridden over, the more you will be able to predict what they will be like on your route. An accurate weather forecast may be the deciding factor in determining the direction you leave from the start. If you are going to be somewhere remote at night it may be useful finding a list of petrol stations open 24 hours in that area before you leave.

Even if using GPS it is worth having a map with all the controls marked on - partly as a backup but also because it is the easiest way to get an overview of all the controls which you will need to make your initial plan, but also if you need to revise your plan partway through the event.

On some events you will be able to plan your route out before the start and just follow it (eg the National Rally), on many, and especially if there are time restrictions, you may have to have a more flexible plan which gives you different options, depending on how well you are doing.

I would usually start off with a core route which links together a number of high value controls and calculate a route which includes the route to and from this string, including any controls obviously on route. I would ensure this route includes any minimum points or mileage requirements and enables me to reach any time restrictions for any of the controls. Having plotted these in Autoroute I will be able to work out what time I should reach each control, by

using the route calculation in Autoroute but adding 5 minutes for each stop at a control, 10 minutes for fuel/toilet stops and any rest stop requirements. This gives me a clear picture of where I can get to - I will then look for what extra controls I can add to this, and will probably have several different options for the run in to the finish, using the last high value control as my marker. I will then transfer this Autoroute file as a list of waypoints via GPSU, a free download, onto my Garmin 2610. I also write down the controls I am going to visit on a list which goes into the top of my tankbag, and includes any specific directions or control collection requirements and my expected time at each control. On some shorter events such as the 10 hour Norn Butt Rally you may only have enough time to spend half an hour planning a rough route and end up doing most of your time planning as you go along so you are constantly revising your route and planning for different eventualities.

When riding I will enter each leg at a time into the GPS and follow that to the next control, regularly checking my time against my expected time. I will also be doing mental calculations to work out my average speed and see how this is changing each hour. Generally I find I am working to an average of around 60mph including stops.

The advantage of keeping your plan flexible like this is that if something does go wrong you should always be aware of your options and be able to quickly work out a fallback plan. What you don't want is to get to the finish too early and not have anywhere else to go to collect some more points, or, even worse, get to the finish too late and either lose points or even get disqualified. I once finished the first day of a mountain marathon over an hour late because the river I intended to cross to the finish was in flood, and ended up running for over 8 hours for a score of -65 points! I also had the ignition short out on my K1200RS on the National Rally one year, causing the rear lights to fail. Having wired them direct with some headphone wire I worked out I could get the bike home, spend several hours rewiring the ignition, and still get to the finish, albeit only for a Silver award, with only a 40 mile diversion.

Paperwork

The first rule of paperwork is read everything carefully, and then read it again. In every event there will be people who lose out on points or even on achieving a result because they have not completed their paperwork correctly. It may be something as simple as filling in the wrong box or not getting a receipt for something. Organisers have to be fairly strict to be fair to everyone so it is up to you to make sure you know what you should be doing. At the same time it is not impossible for organisers to have made a mistake (on the Scottish Rally I was supposed to get a receipt form a petrol station which looked like it had been burned down!).

Part of this comes down to your preparation - do you know where all your paperwork is, are you sure what you need to do at each fuel stop, each bonus stop. What if it rains, or is very windy? Just thinking about these possibilities beforehand will help you anticipate problems and see how good your system is and how it can be improved.

If you have to collect fuel receipts it is usually best to ask for a VAT receipt as they are more likely to include all the information you need, but even then check it - it is not unknown to be given the wrong receipt, on the Brit Butt Rally I was given a receipt for 70 gallons of diesel at Bradford!

If taking photographs make sure you know exactly what you need to record at each stop - it may well vary from bonus to bonus. If the photograph has to include your bike then get your bike in

the shot - if you have to be in as well then hold the camera at arms length and stick your head in or ask someone passing - but if so always check the photo afterwards. I got someone to take a photo of me at the end of an IBA ride, did not check it and found he had pressed the wrong button, no photo! The photos do not have to be artistic or perfect (unless you are on the Irish Photographic Rally of course!), just readable. It is always worth checking each photo to make sure it shows what you think it should and if your camera enables you to protect each photograph use that function too. It is not unknown for people to accidentally delete pictures or even reformat a memory card (don't ask how I know that, but at least it was only 6 bonuses on the Round Britain Rally so I could go back...). On some rallies it may be possible to carry two cameras and take two photographs - on the Brit Butt Rally this isn't possible as your memory card is checked and signed and you can only use the one card. Even if you can't it may be a good idea to have a backup camera which can take the same memory card if your first one breaks (and I have had the screen go on mine on the Scottish Rally).

For all these things have a particular place for them in your bag or pocket and put them back there each time they are used, and double check all press studs/ zips/ velcro each time you have done them up - it is easy to rush this at a control stop and find something missing at the next one (I was the only rider to lose their rally towel on the Brit Butt Rally and I have no idea where it went to...)

Performance

Okay, you have done all your preparation, packed all your bags, completed your initial planning and are ready to go. Thinking about some of these aspects of your ride may help your performance on the event.

Speed - as I have said before, excessive speeding will only be counter productive, long distance riding is very much about maintaining a steady pace which is reasonably economical, not too tiring and gives you time to keep processing information about your ride. I learned many years ago as a despatch rider that you can maintain an overall average speed (including all stops) of around 60mph without speeding but by keeping to the limit wherever possible and not slowing down for anything!

Other riders - it is easy to be distracted by other riders, either by following them into mistakes or down the wrong road, or by riding with someone and suddenly finding you have spent the last 20 miles at a slower speed than you would have maintained by yourself, or by making extra stops than you would have done by yourself. Above all you have to ride your own event, and keep to your own plan. On more competitive events you may even find other riders playing mind games, saying it is not worth going for that control, or not admitting to knowing the way to somewhere.

Controls - how long do you need to stop at a control? A lot of time can be spent talking to other riders, getting paperwork or cameras in and out of panniers and working out the next leg of your route. You can cut all this down by having a quick way of accessing and recording what you need at each control, which may not even need stopping or getting off the bike (often on the Welsh rally I will note what I need in my head and ride on, recording several controls together), also by using the time in between controls to look at the following leg. This way you will know already where you are going out of a control and just set straight off without needing to check your route again. This is used in orienteering to save time and avoid giving the location of controls away to other competitors!

Fuel stops - you need to plan for these in good time and the amount of planning you need will depend on your tank capacity and where you are - in most of the UK there is not a great problem in finding petrol stations open 24 hours, but in some more remote areas, especially in Northern Scotland or Mid-Wales, and at night or on a Sunday, this can be difficult, so needs to be planned for. When you are going to stop, think through what you need to do at the petrol station before you get there so you are not wasting time. And remember your receipt - I have ridden away and had to go back to get one, but this only really works if nobody else has been into the station!

Rest stops - based on your experience you should know what sort of rest stops you need in a given time and how best they work for you: several and often, or one longer period of time. If going over 24 hours you will need to sleep (there is a really interesting article on Fatigue and Sleep Deprivation on the Iron Butt website which is recommended reading). Planning for this should also have come into your preparation for the event so you start as fully rested as you can. You do need to be able to recognise the signs of sleep deprivation and the effect they are having on your riding. If you are going to sleep make sure you have some way of waking up again, e.g. by setting the alarm on your phone.

Self-monitoring - you need to be aware all the time, and especially as the day gets longer, how you are feeling - do you need to stop for a rest/ put warmer clothing on? It is better to do these things before you are yawning or shivering as you will find your performance has dropped off and you have already lost the time it would have taken to stop and have a hot drink or put an extra layer on. It is easy to get tunnel vision and only see the road ahead and the ticking clock, but your first priority has to be ensuring you are as safe as you can be.

How can I improve for the next event?

Assuming you want to do another event, you will be able to improve. Firstly, by reflecting on your own experience - review your course: what could you have done better? Where did you lose time? What was good/bad about your planning? What would you do differently if you were starting tomorrow? What might you change about your bike/gear? Secondly, by learning from others who were taking part - what routes did others take who were more successful? What else were other riders doing that you could learn from?

Perseverance

The final P is probably the one that makes the greatest difference, certainly on the longer events, to whether you will achieve a good finish. Assuming that there will be other riders as experienced or more experienced than yourself, others who will see the same brilliant route you have planned and who are as efficient on the road, it may come down to determination and the ability to carry on whatever the conditions and at the limit of your abilities. At the same time there is a fine line between perseverance and foolhardiness - pushing on when you are a bit cold and wet is no problem as long as you are experienced at riding in the rain, pushing on when you are very tired or so cold you are shivering is a recipe for disaster. Unless you are sure of what you can do and survive, always err on the side of caution. Keeping safe should always be your priority.

Perseverance comes down to determination, having a goal and wanting to reach it; experience, knowing you can carry on and can cope with the conditions; and mental 'toughness', the ability to be single minded enough to keep to the path you have chosen. Part of this comes down to the level of risk you are prepared to live with, but also how accurately you have assessed that risk, depending on your experience and knowledge.

At the end of the day any motorcycle rally is just a bike ride, and the most important thing is that you complete it safely and in one piece at the end of it. Having said that the sense of achievement from completing such a rally is enormous and you will learn something important about your own abilities and character. I hope some of this has been useful - if you have any questions or comments feel free to email me at the thegrimrider@gmail.com.