

IPPAD outreach activity journal: amateur cycling marathon

...or another, more common name: Breveto. The name Breveto comes from the fact that each cyclist (or randonneur) has to carry their brevet card and verify it at each control point along the route. Distances can vary, with 200km being the shortest one (and some being more than 1000km long). Riders must finish within the time limit and be completely self-sufficient along the route; this includes taking care of food, clothing, sleeping etc. (having a support on the route usually means disqualification).

Brevets history is quite long, starting with late 1800's. Paris-Brest-Paris, 1200km long ride across the Brittany and Normandy, was first held in the year 1891, and it inspired the most famous ride in the cycling world today: Tour de France. Latter was a pro race from beginning, while PBP turned amateur in 1956 and it still is a most prestige amateur marathon/breveto today (having also a distinction of being the oldest cycling event still regularly run), held every 4 years. In order to qualify for it, rider must finish a series of brevets: 200km, 300km, 400km and 600km in the year of PBP, and possibly a pre-qualification brevets in the year before.

Main governing body of the brevetto marathons is the Audax Club Parisien (ACP), with headquarters in Paris. Since randonneuring is popular across the world, every country has ACP subsidiaries, which are responsible for the brevets held on its territory. In Croatia, it is Randonneurs Croatie, under which many brevets are organized during the year. One of them is a brevetto in the eastern part of the country (called "Slavonija"), which is also where I'm from. In May, it starts (and ends) from my home town, Slavonski Brod (roughly, "ship of Slavonija" would be the translation), while in September it starts from Nasice, another small city in Slavonija. Nasice is a hometown of my colleague Mladen Tomljanovic who is organizing these brevets with me, so we alternate between the host cities. Breveto itself is called "Inati se Slavonijo", which can be translated to "Slavonijo be proud" and it comes from a patriotic song, an unofficial hymn of Slavonija.



This edition of “Inati se Slavonijo” was held on 1. September 2018 and it started from Nasice.



At the start line: filing in the application, getting the brevetto card – and doing some IPPAD promotion



I arrived with my colleague the day before, and was well rested when I arrived at the start line at 06:30, to take care of administration, brevet card, and most importantly – to start with the “outreaching”. While “mingling”, I was talking to other cyclists about the IPPAD project, as they were eager to know what the meaning of the shirt I was wearing is. As reducing emissions and enjoying cleaner air is one of the main concerns for the amateur cyclists, they were interested in the research itself and how it can really contribute to the clean environment we all enjoy riding in.

After everything was set, it was time to start from the starting line: in total, there were 63 cyclists from Croatia and neighboring countries (Slovenia, Bosnia, Hungary). Route was organized in a way so that four distances could be chosen from: 200km, 300km, 400km and 600km. 18 cyclists have chosen the longest one (exact distance being 620km), including me. This brevetto is also a part of the PBP pre-qualification series, and the longer the better (it gives more chance of participating at PBP).

Ride started with a nice weather and a good forecast for the whole weekend (which, as always, was a lie), and since the routes were the same for the first 200km, all the cyclists were riding toward the first hill on the route – Papuk, with the highest point at 600m. Not a particularly hard climb, but a good one to start the marathon with and to “grease up the joints”. At the summit, there was a first control point and first check-in of the brevet card. Also, as our organizers are really kind people (and hospitality is very important for the people of Slavonija), there was food and drink organized for those who had a need to already replenish their reserves.

Next control point was my hometown, Slavonski Brod, which was reached after some 70km of riding. Well, at least that is the official route distance.

As previously stated, self-sufficiency is a big part of these kind of marathons: this also includes navigating the route. Now, most people have their GPS devices and phones (although, official navigation tool is a piece of paper with all the turns, because, well, brevetto marathons started before the era of GPS), and usually ride in smaller groups, so it is not that hard to follow the route. But, since I like to descent fast, I lost my group during Papuk descent, and was navigating on my own. I do have a phone, but it is annoyance to look at it the whole time – and after all, this is the part of the country where I'm from. So, I should be OK and have no problems navigating the route, right? Wrong. I missed one turn and ended up taking a bit of detour and adding some 10km extra to the route itself. But, this is also a part of the brevetto marathons, so I didn't mind it that much (and I was still well in time limit of the second control point). Since official route is also a shortest one between two control points, detour is not actually consider as cheating as you can only add kilometers. But, it is an interesting bit to mention, to highlight the nature of this kind of cycling.

On the way to Papuk hill...



Climbing can be lonely sometimes – but not this time, I have IPPAD with me!



At the top, check-in of the brevetto card - and of course, some IPPAD promotion as well

Nevertheless, Slavonski Brod was reached and brevet card verified. There, I briefly hang out with my brother who volunteered as a brevet card official (giving stamps to those who deserve it :)) and his friends who were also interested in this outreach activity, especially since they already knew about IPPAD – back in December of 2017, I held a presentation at my high school, and they were part of the audience. It is interesting to note that emission pollution is a very hot topic nowadays in Slavonski Brod – as neighbor city on the other side of the river Sava (part of Bosnia), Bosanski Brod, has a fuel processing facility which pollutes air heavily. So, any project connected with reduction of pollution is welcome, even if it is not directly connected to the issue my hometown has.

After a brief stop, ride continues toward third control point, while sun is also showing its “teeth” – it is quite warm, at least for me, and the cooling becomes a bit of a problem. But, all kinds of weather are also part of the brevet, so the best thing to do is to just ride and not think too much about it, when the harder times come. And with that mindset (and some sweat), third control point is reached and verified.



Riding in a group, toward Nasice and beyond – IPPADing along the way

Although it is not usual (due to the nature of the marathon and very different riding stiles, as well as not having dedicated teams like in pro cycling) that cyclists ride in big groups

after first 100km or so, this time a group of around 10 people formed, and we continued together toward Nasice and first 200km. Riding in a group has a benefit of the reduction of aerodynamic drag (main opposite force, when riding on flat surface), because only the rider at the front has to “slice through the air”, and all others are taking advantage of that. There is a downside to that as well, as the bigger the group, bigger is the possibility of making more (and longer) stops, since everybody have their own self-sufficiency strategy. But, this is balanced by the feeling of comradery and making new friends within the group. Ride continued under the hot sun, until we reached next control point in the city of Nasice. There, a nice lunch was also organized for all cyclists, featuring Slavonija’s cuisine and drinks.



Control point in Slavonski Brod, with my younger brother Ivan (on the left) checking brevet cards – and me, going full throttle on the IPPAD promotion



Another quirk of the breveto rides – interesting things can be seen along the road. A wedding in Slavonija (which is also known as an agricultural part of Croatia)



Enjoying a nice lunch in Nasice



Contrary to climbing, flat surface riding is a good opportunity to meet new people and make friends...aaaand to do some IPPAD promotion

As can be seen, riding until Nasice was a lot of fun, which is about to change (a usual occurrence at long distance marathons). That is, it depends how you look at it – so far we were riding in the sun and during the day, and this is about to change into rain and night, with addition of the fatigue, which slowly creeps through pedals into the shoes and all the way to the brain. For real brevetto riders, this is all part of the fun (that's why the angle is important here – if you enjoy sitting on the couch more, this might seem as insanity and masochism).



*Control point in Krcenik, with very friendly hosts,
a bit less friendly rain – and always friendly IPPAD*

There, while again waiting for the rain to stop, we had what is called a best ice-cream in Slavonija – a well-deserved title. Also, it was another opportunity to talk a bit more about IPPAD, this time with Mladen's brother Zoran, who is a professor (numeric math) at Osijek University (biggest city in Slavonija, also next stop on our journey). I exchanged info and relevant links, especially about the EU and Marie-Curie Actions projects, which might be of use for his next projects. It is worth noting that alongside him there were also three other professors (from different universities) riding the brevetto, also interested in the EU projects.

With the rain, initially we had some luck – it started to rain heavily just as we reached control point in the small village Krcenik, so we decided (although not what I wanted, but as already said, group riding has its downsides as well) to stay and wait until it stops raining.

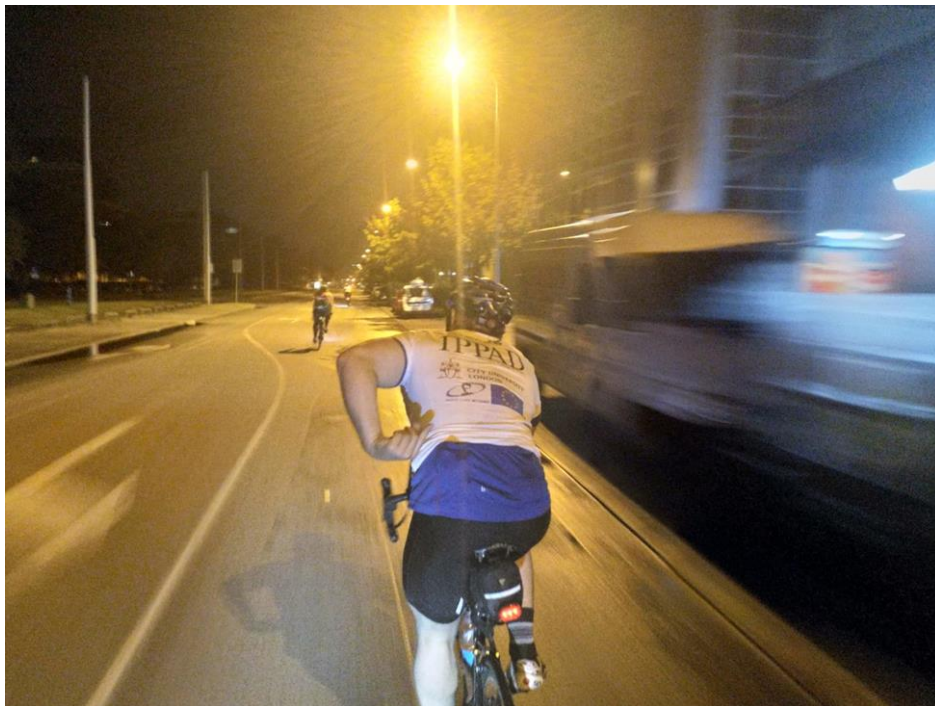
But, waiting there turned out to be fun as well, so there was a slight danger of us actually staying there, finishing just 200km (well no, not really, but it was a nice atmosphere in this small "pub", so it was a bit hard to exchange it with the rainy night). After we managed to get on our bikes (I also had a small issue with my chain, which was solved rather quickly with the help of the Krcenik CP hosts), ride continues into the night and toward next point in another small village – Baranjsko Petrovo Selo (no translation here, but it wouldn't help even if there was one).



*My friend Mladen, organizer of the brevetto.
Acting as a "soon meme",
his brother Zoran in the background.
Main actor however - IPPAD*

It was already quite late when we decided to try our luck and continue with the ride. Using real time weather forecast, Mladen suggested that we take a slight detour of some additional 5km in order to avoid rain completely. This almost paid off as we did stumble into a heavy rain after all. However, it was for a short period of maybe 10 mins, so it wasn't that bad. We continued toward Osijek.

After reaching Osijek, our group almost completely vanished. This was because most of the riders were taking shorter routes (and due to the fact that routes were overlapping, we could ride together so far), and thus only 4 of us continued together on the 600km route. Next stop was town of Ilok (also the most eastern point of Croatia, famous for its fine wines), at some 400km. Although I wasn't that tired, together we decided we should find a hotel along the way and have some sleep. This turned out to be not such a good idea, since we lost a lot of time trying to find something working past midnight, and although some of the hotels were open, nobody answered (because cities we were passing are small cities, people there don't expect guests at 2am).



Riding in the night, on the streets of Osijek – and this of course means doing some IPPAD promotion, you know, for the Saturday night partying people roaming the streets

But, we did manage to finally reach Ilok – and to try to find some place where we could get some sleep. Problem now was, that due to high tourist demands, everything was pretty much booked – or at least that was the info we got at the hotel “Dunav” (Croatian name for the Danube river, Ilok is situated on its coast), our ninth control point. It was already 420km in our legs, so a short rest was indeed needed. However, other guys weren't happy with my suggestion: to have a nap at the nice terrace of the hotel, near the Danube. It was too cold and uncomfortable for them, so they decided to look further for something else. I on the other hand, was happy with such an arrangement, so I took some chair pillows, made a bed, and took a nice hour and a half nap.



Nothing better than the improvised bed...



...Morning at the coast of Danube

Well, after I had this nice rest, it was time to continue and ride the last third, or 200km according to math. Here, I made a decision that I wouldn't regret - to leave the group and continue solo. Now, usually I wouldn't do it, but I felt really good, and since colleagues went on their hunt for an open hotel (informing me that they will stop for a few hours), I didn't feel like I wanted to wait some more time. It is also a bit of a challenge as well, to finish the breveto without the help of the group, so I was actually eager to continue alone. And so I did.



*Leaving Ilok on my own, with nice but lonely road ahead...
and you guessed it right, promoting IPPAD for the Sunday morning mass people*

Compared to the day before, the weather was better, meaning that the sun wasn't that problematic, and although there was some wind (head wind from time to time), I was really enjoying the ride, combined with the good pace toward next check point in the (another) small city of Vrbanja, at exactly 500km from start (or, if you like it more, 120km from finish). Here, I experienced a few additional quirks of the brevetto marathons: first, the control point was unexpectedly closed (a bar that wasn't working due to the vacation, fact which the organizers didn't know). In such situations, practice is to take a selfie in front of the control point, and the brevet card is then verified at the finish line. If you don't have a selfie-able phone, well though luck - who nowadays can live without it. All joking aside, there are still other options, one of them is to wait for the next rider that has a camera.



Self check in at Vrbanja – and IPPAD promotion, mainly to myself

But, another “annoyance” wasn’t that easy to overcome. Remember how I already went off-route in the beginning? Well, now I decided to add a road to that off-, so I found myself in the middle of nowhere on an unpaved road. Of course, this is not exactly what I had decided to do, but I did make a wrong turn – when I actually realized that, it was too late to go back. Well, not really too late, but I didn’t want to go back (and in that sense, I kind of did decide to take an unpaved road “shortcut”). Usually, this wouldn’t be such a big deal, but I was riding a road bike (light, no springs, narrow, hard tires) and depending on the off-road, this can be a tough ride. And, for some parts, indeed it was – for that 15km stretch, I needed almost one hour. That speaks for itself.



Eventually, I did find my way back and continued on the normal, nice, paved road which I cherished now more than ever. I arrived safe and sound (and by that I mean my bike, as I was really worried how it will take this uneasy ride through unknown) at the next, second to last, control point in the (really small, not even sure if) city of Slavnonski Samac (translation left for the reader), where I still arrived before the others – I did ride quite fast once I got my wheels on tarmac. Quick check-in, replenishing water at the nearby gas station and “attacking” the last 80 km – toward Nasice and finish! With the exception of being bitten by an unknown kind of a bug (presumably a hornet, it did hurt quite badly and I was feeling a bit sick toward the end) 20km before the finish, that last stretch of the route went very well – riding (relatively) fast, enjoying the scenery and the weather.

And then – Nasice! Final stamp at the last control point and brevet card fully verified – job well done! Goal was fulfilled – getting a prequalification for the next years Paris-Brest-Paris, while promoting IPPAD project. Although the most important thing while riding in a brevet marathon (in terms of performance of course even more important is to have fun) is to finish within time limit, I did finish with second overall time – quite happy with that as well, especially after riding last 200km alone and having few issues along the road.



1	km: 30,0	Signature et cachet de contrôle Signature and mark of control	LIEU DE CONTRÔLE / PLACE Distance Horaires / Open - Close	CONTRÔLE / CONTROL Signature et cachet de contrôle Signature and mark of control	LIEU DE CONTRÔLE / PLACE Distance Horaires / Open - Close	CONTRÔLE / CONTROL Signature et cachet de contrôle Signature and mark of control
PAPUK prijevoj 7:53-9:30			5 km: 210,5 NAŠICE The Bricks Pub Na desno 13:15-21:06		9 km: 416,5 ILOK Hotel Dunav 19:41-10:46(ned)	
2 km: 84,7 SL. BROD Caffe bar CityBar Na trgu 9:29-12:39			6 km: 254,0 KRČENIK Kafé ZELENÍ GAJ 14:34-23:56		10 km: 500,0 VRBANJA Restoran Sandra 22:58-16:20(ned)	
3 km: 132,8 SL. ŠAMAC Caffe bar Napoleon Na desno 10:54-15:51			7 km: 307,3 Baranjsko . Petrovo Selo 14:34-03:29(ned)		11 km: 500,0 SL. ŠAMAC Caffe bar Napoleon Na lijevo 23:58-19:19(ned)	
4 km: 179,0 Đakovo BP PETROL Na desno 12:15-18:54			8 km: 345,8 OSIJEK CRODUX 17:26-02:24-23:00		12 km: 500,0 NAŠICE (Markovac Našički) INA na lijevo (ned)02:24-23:00	

Fully stacked brevet card – best sight for the tired eyes after crossing the finish line

At the end, I had a lot of fun, promoted the IPPAD project and did a prequalification – all in all, a very successful breveto indeed!

Emissions? NO WAY!