



AS an athlete before competition, you are meant to be 'in the zone' before competing.

Whether you are a boxer in the quiet of your dressing room before the long lonely walk to the ring, or an 800 metre runner in the 'Call Room' before emerging for an Olympic final or you're just warming up before your local Park Run, you are meant to be in the zone. Your physical preparation is done, you are well rested but you are ready for whatever your opponent or the weather throws at you. You find that inner peace, that piece of reflection and composure - you have done everything you can to be ready when the whistle finally goes.

Funnily enough, last Saturday morning, although I was facing a big challenge, I wasn't in the zone. I was, however, in Letterkenny on my bike about to travel through every one of the ten clubs in Zone Two of Rotary. Two of my passions in life are training for triathlon and Rotary and I was trying to combine both. Zone Two is a strange geographical area and it ranges from Letterkenny in the West to Ballycastle in the East.

However, this wasn't a straight line test because the shape of my clubs was actually a big 'U'. On Day One, I wanted to journey from Letterkenny to Derry, then Limavady, Coleraine, Ballymoney and Ballymena. Day Two was to be Ballymena to Antrim and then Carrickfergus and Larne and Ballycastle. According to Google, each day would be 80 miles (they were wrong both days) when the wind was meant to be in my favour on Day One - what could possibly go wrong?

I had one slight problem, I hadn't actually trained for this.... I was to learn

that you can bluff for 50 or 60 flat miles but 80 plus with a few hills would prove to be very taxing.

#### MAIN GOAL

My main goal this year is running - I have completed the Manchester Marathon (3 hours 53), then my 55 mile run Round the Bridges (11 hours 53) and those were ticked off.

I then somehow managed to come up with a goal for the year of 1,000 miles running and 1,500 miles of cycling - and a few kilometres of swimming as well, obviously. When you are focused just on distance as opposed to speed, you end up sacrificing quality on the anvil of quantity. Why race hard one day when you know you still have a lot more miles to tick off later in the week?

1,000 miles of running is 20 miles a week and it doesn't sound like much, but that 20 miles a week means either (A) one 20 mile run (not likely) or (B) 4 x 5 mile runs, or (C) a 9/10 mile run with my good friend Brendan O'Brien, then a 6 and a 5 to make it to my target.

Life, however, can get in the way of the best laid plans. Some weekends I am away commenting for the Castle Triathlon Series and that means absolutely no time for training as I am on the race site before 7.00am and there for a 12 hour stint.

I had a week's hiking in Bulgaria with Mark, that may have meant a lot of great views but it meant I also lost 20 miles. Then I had a week's walking in the Camino region of Spain with Patrick - again, great craic and fabulous scenery but again, another 20 miles to be made up.

# In the zone

In relation to bike miles, my target was a modest 1,500 miles for the year - that's only 30 miles a week. A serious cyclist would be doing 100 miles over a weekend.

Some of the Roe Valley guys now head out at 7.00pm from Bells Hill on a Thursday night in the dark for 30 or 40 miles and they are all well lit up like a Christmas tree with lights on their handle bars and even, more importantly, a light on the back of their bike underneath the saddle. I bought a bright LED (a light emitting diode) for my bike before my weekend, as October days can get rather gloomy. These two days in the saddle would prove tough, but hey, we have to challenge ourselves, it's too easy to get complacent and lie on the sofa and shirk any challenge, physical or mental.

If you challenge yourself, those pre-race nerves are surprisingly effective, especially combined with adrenaline, so I found myself in the zone - and also in Zone Two - about to link my ten Rotary clubs.

Letterkenny on a Saturday morning was fairly quiet as I weaved my way out of town. Thankfully, it wasn't as busy as last Friday when I biked from Limavady to the Rotary Conference in La Mon House Hotel in the Castlereagh hills. I had been going really well until I hit the traffic of Belfast on Friday afternoon and then I had to fight my way up the Newtownards Road, past the Dundonald Ice Bowl before the last few back breaking hills up to La Mon - that was a mere 67 miles.

One week later, I was faced with not only one long day but two longer days. Most of my targets this year have been one day goals, ie, you can rest the day after your race, but this was different. I had to make sure I wouldn't be so hammered after Day One that I couldn't face another day in the saddle, so it would be a case of trying to hold back a bit.... but still say in the zone.

Every club (there are 73 in Ireland) has a duty to raise as much as possible and to split those three ways - (1): Local charities - The Limavady Christmas Tree of Remembrance last year raised £8,000, (£4,000 to St. Vincent de Paul and £4,000 to

the Salvation Army); (2): International charities - we have four which are endorsed by our Headquarters in Dublin. They are Lend with Care, Jole Rider, (Bikes for Africa), Right to Sight and H2O (clean water), all great African charities, although every club can also have other international projects as well; (3): Rotary Foundation - This is Rotary's own charity. This includes a lot of good causes and our main goal at present is to eradicate the scourge of Polio from the world. Thanks to our efforts, we have succeeded to 99.9999 percent but we can't relax yet.

It was with these goals in mind that I pushed off from the Station House Hotel in Letterkenny where the local club meet.

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#### BORDERLESS BORDER

In Donegal, I felt slightly safer on the road as there was a 'run off area' so I stayed that side of the yellow line. As soon as I crossed the borderless border, car and lorry drivers seem to have a competition to see how close they could get to a vulnerable cyclist without actually knocking me over.

I noticed that of the several thousand cars that were to overtake me over the next few days, only one, a white van, bothered to put on an indicator to acknowledge my presence on the road. I had been on Radio Foyle a few weeks ago discussing safety for cyclists, particularly in relation to a new Dutch law that means car drivers have to use their 'other arm' when they open their car door, this automatically tilts their bodies round and makes them more aware of passing cyclists.

As you know, in this jurisdiction, the PSNI and ROSPA recommend that car drivers allow 1.5 metres when overtaking a cyclist. Every cyclist you see on a road has paid their road tax and means there is one less car to overtake so maybe, we could give all of these cyclists a wee bit of extra room?

Talking of road tax, did you know that less than half of the revenue which is raised in road tax is actually spent building new roads and more importantly, maintaining existing roads? I often think that cyclists are more aware than drivers of the appalling state of our tarmac. A pot hole can be a mere bump on the road for a driver but can be a complete game changer for a cyclist. Some 40 miles after Letterkenny,

I happened to be outside my house, so I nipped in for a cup of coffee and some carbs and threw my drenched kit into the tumble dryer as it had bucketed on me for the previous two hours (my so called rain jacket seemed to act more as a sponge) and I was soaked to the skin.

When I had dried out, I was back on the lovely Ringsend Road which is not so lovely as it is a four mile hill, but eventually you are mostly downhill into Coleraine (third Rotary town ticked off) then to Ballymoney (fourth).

I then chose a saner course and decided to go to Ballymena via the much quieter back roads, ie, past the Joey Dunlop Leisure Centre, Dunlop, Glarryford, before the metropolis of Cullybackey, before swooping gratefully down into the Pentagon and the Adair Arms where Terry Flanagan, a keen member of Ballymena Rotary Club, was there to meet and greet me as was Sharon, who kindly took me my bike and my soaking clothes (it rained yet again) to our base for the night.

I spent most of that night resting and eating and rehydrating getting ready for Day 2.

#### DAY TWO

At 8.50am, I rolled out of the Adair Arms car park for Antrim, then got a bit lost on the way to Carrickfergus (nice castle by the way). I asked a guy by the side of the road for directions and he replied: "You drive up to ....." as I stood there in cycling gear with a helmet on and a bike - anyway, he meant well.

I felt that even I couldn't get lost when I reached Carrickfergus as the sea had to be on

my right most of the way up. I popped in after 40 miles for a warm welcome and a hot cup of coffee with my sister-in-law before renewing my acquaintance with the Carrickfergus - Larne road. Some people say the best thing about Larne is the road out of it, but I am sure that's not true!

On the other side of Larne, I saw a beautiful but terrible sign, 'Ballycastle 43'. Whilst it was nice to see a sign that actually mentioned the existential prospect of my Kubla Khan actually turning from a myth into a reality, I realised that the next 43 miles would be the longest of the year.

I am glad I wasn't with any of my mates as I would have struggled to keep up with them but then I realised that this was a very personal goal and all that mattered was to keep on keeping on, just keep rolling, just get it done, chum.

One of the joys of cycling is the scenery and there is none finer than the east coast road of Antrim as I meandered my way up through Ballycarry, Glenarm, Cushendall and eventually into the hamlet of Carnlough. I stopped for a Mars bar and a Coke and I had time to read the label on the bottle. My 500 millimetre bottle of Coke contained apparently 2 x 250 portions of a fizzy soda liquid, each portion containing 30 percent of my Recommended Daily Allowance of sugar, 30 percent! Have you ever opened a bottle of Coke, drunk exactly half of it and put it back in the fridge? Nope! We finish the whole bottle, ie, there is 60 percent of your daily sugar for the day in one bottle. Scary stuff! However it was a case of needs must for me! I needed sugars, fats, carbs, calories - in short, I needed a hit and a fix

I took the opportunity of calling into to see one of the country's best cyclists, John Madden for a cuppa and a sit down and also managed to catch up with Joan Ward of Ballycastle Rotary Club to complete my Zone Two bike ride.

Was I in the zone? Possibly, possibly not, but after 167 miles in two days, I was glad, finally to be out of the zone. That may have helped my annual goal of 1,500 miles on the bike but it was now time to get back to running...

of energy for the next painful one and half hours.

It may have only been 17 miles from Carnlough to Ballycastle but by this stage, I was groveling. I had 77 miles in my legs from yesterday and already I had 73 done today before taking the road out of Carnlough which winds up like a snake rearing its head, for the next four miles. It was up, up and up.

Did you know that a bike computer is capable of showing us speed of 4 miles an hour? Or that if you stopped pedalling at that speed, you very slowly become a horrible horizontal lump in a ditch? When I eventually suffered, struggled and cursed my way up the series of hills to Watertop Farm, the Vanishing Lake (where I was tempted to make my bike vanish), I was able to knock it into the big ring and start blasting downhill and all was suddenly right with the world as the effects of the Coke finally kicked in.

The wind may have been on my face for the last 70 miles but at least there was no rain and at last it was downhill into what has been recently voted the number one town in Northern Ireland - strangely, not Limavady - but Ballycastle!

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The beautiful Vanishing Lake was a sight to behold. NCL42-13s



The fabulous Carrickfergus Castle. NCL42-14s