



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

The Wall

WHAT do you think of when you see the word Wall? Is it Pink Floyd's 'The Wall' album cover? Or perhaps the Berlin Wall?

Well, for about a hundred multi-sports athletes last weekend, it was a different type of wall – The Wall Duathlon and what was this Wall and where was this Wall? I was to find out over the course of seven hours that there wasn't just one, but many walls involved....

As usual the race arose out of an innocuous conversation between me and my mate Mark Kinkaid. We had been looking at the 26 Extreme website to see what types of athletic lunacy that Ronan and Iain, the 26 Extreme main men, had been cooking up... How hard could a Duathlon be anyway? There was no swim, so surely it would be easy?

We discovered there were two different events, there was sport and the elite. I normally love the word sport but I love the word elite even more but what was the difference between the two versions? The 'sport' consisted of a forest run, a mountainous bike ride and a mountainous run. The 'elite' had all of this – plus a trip up and down Slieve Donard, Northern Ireland's highest mountain. Why on earth would we want to tackle that 9km slab of near vertical granite? Because Mark and I had unfinished business on Donard....

Five months ago we were doing Coast to Coast which consisted of 312 kilometres from this fair Island's West Coast, Sligo over to the East Coast, Newcastle. After a 12 hour day on the Saturday, we had an even longer day on the Sunday which culminated with a 21 mile trek in the Mourne where, due to fatigue, we promptly got lost in the mist and ended up heading up to the top of the wrong mountain and were way off course, which led to the organisers sending out a rescue team, as we veered off practically into another county! So the illustrious duo of Kinkaid and Jack didn't quite make it to the top of Donard and we had a gap in our 2014 Sporting CV that needed to be filled.

I prepared for the event by having a few easier days in the week leading up to it but was pleased with running from Swan's Bridge, up through Ballycarton Forest, up to the top of Binevenagh, past the lake, over the cliff and up to the top of the hill where you are king of all you survey and then back down again; and a bike ride which consisted of what I call the loop, i.e. Limavady to Downhill (which really should be called Up Hill), Coleraire and back to the Ringsend Road, via the Quarry Road – 32 miles with a bit of everything. I was to find out, however, that nothing on the North Coast could prepare me for the near vertical climbs in the Kingdom of the Mourne.....

SILENT VALLEY

Mark and I got to the race site in the splendidly pretty Silent Valley at about 8.30am where the car park started to fill up with all sorts of familiar faces including Billy Orr, long time stalwart for the City of Derry Running Club, now dabbling with Duathlon; Vaughan Purnell and Emma Kerr from the Invictus Tri Club in Belfast and also the one and only Peter Cole from the Dogleap Canoe Club.

Peter is one of our best cyclists, canoeists, adventure racers and all round multi-sport athletes. I knew Peter just wasn't here to make up the numbers, he was here to give it 100 percent. As ever he was supported by his two good buddies and also great athletes, Gully McLaughlin and Ray Rowe (who is just back from running the Highland Way in West Scotland where he bivvied out at night without a tent). Mark and I looked around and saw very few 'fun runner'. Most people looked chiselled and sculpted and 'fun' seemed to be the last thing on their minds. They were men and women on a mission. I just wanted three things to happen over the next 7 or 8 hours – I wanted to finish, I wanted to beat the cut off and I wanted to finish anywhere but last!

About 80 were doing the sport version and 19 brave deluded souls were tackling the elite. We all set off



Peter Cole on his way to the podium! NCL42-304s



Pink Floyd's The Wall. NCL42-300s

together in ideal conditions, no wind or rain and under a lovely Indian Summer sun. We started at the bottom of a huge grass bank where we looked up at our first wall of the day which we promptly ran up to the edge of the Silent Valley Reservoir and took a left into the forest for a pleasant stroll where we soon found ourselves at the back as everyone else seemed to be going hell for leather.

Back in T1, I started talking to one of the stewards and by this stage Mark was off and running, at least biking. We exited the Silent Valley car park and straight into a huge slab of a hill which went up nearly as much as my heart rate. I was very nearly caught out by a sharp descent over a bridge with a 90 degree right hand turn at the bottom of an alarmingly steep hill. My race was nearly over before it had started!

Some 45 minutes after beginning the bike, I rolled into Donard car park in Newcastle which was our T2. I was glad to see that I had some company, but it turned out that the running gear hadn't arrived in transition for the other bloke. Rather than be dismayed, he punched the air with delight: "Great!" he shouted: "I don't have to climb Donard!" He looked like a man who had won the lotto rather than a man who had lost the opportunity to climb our country's highest bono fodo mountain.

Armed only with a rucksack with drink and gels, I left the car park keeping the Glen River to my left and immediately started to work hard. I can't say I was running, I was just yomping as hard as I could. Some bits required hands on knees, some bits required a trot but it was all hard work, I couldn't believe it was October, I was already lathered and had about six hours still to go....

VISTA OPENS

Once through the two river sections, you break out into the open and suddenly the vista opens up and you see a very impressive bit of rock to your left. If you had the energy to turn around by this stage, you would see Newcastle sparkling in the early morning sunshine. Soon I was on the dreaded steps. When I say 'steps', I mean bits of rock that were uneven, sometimes jagged, never flat and often slippery. You had to concentrate on them on the way up – and even more on the way down.

As I passed the Saturday morning walkers and hikers who were just out there to enjoy themselves (imagine), I soon saw the leaders streaming back towards me. The first guy was well clear and he just practically danced down the steps as if they were made of carpet. In third place was my good friend Pete Cole who looked comfortable, despite, as he put it, having a case of TMB (Too Many Birthdays). I hoped he could stay in that podium place.

Eventually I made it to the wall (yes another one) where I dibbed in with my timing device and then it was left and up, up, up to the very top. There was a bloke in front of me whom I was gaining on, but when we got to the top, it turned out he wasn't even in the race! I apologised to the marshal at the top as I was in last place and he could now begin his own descent. If going up was hard on the lungs, going down was hard on the legs.

Fell runners who are experts in this particular discipline are a breed apart. While the rest of us tend to brake on the way down (thereby hammering our quads in the process) fell runners just seem to flow down. They don't look one metre in front of them, they look five metres ahead, seeking out a soft spot to land on as they bounce downhill. Mark took only 67 minutes going up – but it took him 60 minutes for the descent.

Eventually I tumbled into the transition area where my bike sat lonely and forlorn i.e. I was in last place! I took some of the fruit cake that was offered, filled up the water bottles and took off through Newcastle – then the road just seemed to go up. I remembered this road as the place where I picked Patrick up a few years ago when he completed his Duke of Ed bike. While waiting for him, I ran up and down Donard in 1 hour 47 – those were the days! Soon I was climbing for about 4 miles. I managed to pass one other bloke who thought it was so steep that he got off and walked! I knew if I had done that I would be drummed out of the regiment that is the TTC! So I staggered up the hill in the bike's granny gear with my legs now really suffering from the bashing they took from the rocks of Donard.



A group of children sitting on the Berlin Wall. The graffiti translates as: 'Unity and Freedom for Berlin'. NCL42-301s

Eventually I saw the sign that said 'Silent Valley 10', so the end was in sight. I asked one of the marshals if they had any coffee. I got a negative response. By this stage of any day, I normally have three cups of Columbia's finest inside me to keep me awake, but due to caffeine deprivation, I now felt like a bunny whose Duracell batteries had run out. Thankfully Mark's wife Catherine was on hand at the very top of the climb, along with her son Peter, with a flagon of coffee and with something equally welcome, a bar of chocolate. Five minutes later I felt I had been plugged back into the national grid, and I took off, if not feeling wonderful, then at least feeling awake.

DRUMLINS OF CO DOWN

After the drumlins of County Down on the bike ride which I had learnt about in my O level Geography class, I parked my Cannondale gratefully and put on my runners again in T3 ready for the last challenge, a 15 kilometre run (I used the word run loosely). The first 4K was on tarmac (hallelujah!) All uphill of course, then left up a farm lane and away into the mountains again. On that steep track, I passed a bloke carrying a tent, sleeping bag and tripod and a huge camera. He was going to spend a cold night hoping to get a few shots of the stars – mad man! Thank goodness I was the only sane one here....

Meanwhile the ground just got rockier if anything. You had to concentrate on every step as every other step was a potential ankle breaker. I had eaten enough but probably hadn't drunk enough and was going a bit gaga by this stage. The scenery was fantastic though.

I suddenly realised an absence of something – windmills, not a single solitary windmill up here in this area of outstanding natural beauty. Now, if the Mourne is deemed to be beautiful enough not to have a 35 metre windmill farm

erected in its midst, then how come an equally outstanding site of natural beauty, Binevenagh, is destined to be festooned with these ugly leviathans? I am all for wave power and wind power but there are certain places that should not be besmirched with them, come on, Planning Appeals Commission, do the decent thing and just say NO!

I had slogged my way through the Annalong Valley to the Col between Slieve Bininn and Slieve Lamagan on mountain style tracks in an increasing gradient to the top of the Col. There was one more marshal there and there was one more dip point. He told me I would be grand and off I trotted off down the side of the cliff, overlooking the staggeringly beautiful Ben Crom Reservoir before finally hitting good old honest to god tarmac.

I thought I could at least run the last three miles, but I only managed to half jog, half walk. I finished in 7 hours 15 minutes, some six minutes behind Mark. We received a hard earned medal, tomato soup to die for and a non-alcoholic beer which refreshed the parts which most beers don't normally reach.

I have listened to Pink Floyd's 'The Wall'. I have clambered through the ruins of the Berlin Wall but I am very proud to boast that I have now conquered the Team 26 Wall Duathlon. It started with a wall and every one of the next 72 kilometres seemed to consist of a wall or three. I very nearly hit the metaphorical wall but we had scaled every conceivable wall that Team 26 had thrown at us.

Put this race on your bucket list folks, you would go a long way to find better company – or a more stunning course.



Three incredible athletes from Limavady...and Peter Jack! NCL42-303s



The wall at the entrance to the Silent Valley. NCL42-302s



The stunning scenery of the Silent Valley. NCL42-305s