



MY SPORTING YEAR

HOW was your sporting year? Did it start with a bang and end with a whimper? Did you make lots of resolutions to make a revolution in your personal fitness goals?

Maybe your best endeavours melted like ice-cream in the summer. Talking of summer, we didn't really have one this year! I got invariably soaked and frozen when competing in various runs and triathlons and duathlons during the so called summer.

When I look back at this sporting year, it is invariably first person orientated, apologies for that, but I sigh wistfully when I look at my training diary and consider if I prepared properly for races or whether I just turned up and hoped for the best....

In the last 12 months, I have found myself holding a microphone, supposedly trying to inform and even maybe humour an audience or at least impart information to several thousand athletes. So far my microphone and I have travelled to places including Galway, Sligo, Yorkshire, Kent (twice), Benone, Merville, Derry, Londonderry, Athlone, Portrush, Claudy and even a place called Limavady... as well as doing MC at the Triathlon Ireland Awards dinner in Dublin.

On one of those weekends, I was commentating most of Saturday, I did a half Ironman the next day in Athlone and strangely enough, ended up with my best 70.3 time of the year. The other halves have a similar distance, i.e., a 1.9km swim in the sea, a 90km bike ride and a 21k run in Newry and Dublin and I emerged from both swims completely foundered. I don't remember it ever being as cold as this years ago. Is my blood just getting thinner or I am getting softer?

All three events were a lot of fun however, or at least that's what my memory tells me now. You tend to forget the first 6 hours of torture and just remember the final few minutes of making it over the finish line.

I also completed three half marathons, the first was in Larne on a scenic route beside the Lough where I recorded 1 hour 40 minutes. Then I did the same time in the Waterside Half at the other end of the summer before I did my last half at one of the largest races in the world i.e., The Great North Run in Newcastle in 1:47 (my

excuse? It was hot! And crowded!) The GNR in Newcastle is such an iconic race - every runner should do it once. Don't go for a PB however, just go for the legendary North East craic and beer, a great weekend.

One of the nicest runs you can do anywhere in the world is the Ballyliffin 10 mile Coastal Challenge at Easter. It's in a beautiful part of Donegal and you get to go up and down lots of lovely hills and see spectacular stunning views before finishing on a very long beach. I was quicker in 2015 than the year before, so happy days.

This community-based race offers great tea and sandwiches at the post race party and there is even a pint of cider on offer if you are not driving home.

LONGEST STANDING RACES

I love doing the Liam Ball Sprint every May, it's one of the longest standing races in the calendar and I remember it back in the day when it hosted the Home Nations Triathlon with people like Mark Jenkins and Helen Tucker when they were juniors before they both became Olympians.

The Liam Ball race is also a few weeks before our own similar distance race in Limavady. If you think doing a Triathlon is tiring, try organising one - I need a week in a dark room afterwards....

The only full distance race I did all year was The Walled City Marathon, beautiful course, beautiful crowd, put it on your bucket list. The race was in its third year and I have done all three (I even managed to dip under 4 hours this year) but I can't make it next year as I will be in Venice on the same day doing an Ironman, can't be everywhere I suppose.

Full distance wise, I swam the Ironman distance in the Creggan Reservoir i.e. 2.4 miles (I am not saying it was cold, but I am fairly sure I bumped into a few icebergs) and a week later rode 185km, i.e. 115 miles (It was OK apart from the last 100 miles!). It wasn't pretty but I got there.

Sport takes me to a lot of different places this year. I got to climb on the Great Wall of China, run around the walled medina of Marrakesh in Morocco and swam outdoors in an outdoor pool

in Reykjavik, Iceland. I even got to hike to the top of Binevenagh which is as beautiful as any of them.

Getting food poisoning and C-Diff when I ate out one night wasn't great for the energy levels, but if you lay down you just stay down, so you take a few iron tablets and get on with it, even if you are slower than usual.

I loved the challenge of the Park Runs in Portrush and Limavady (I haven't managed to do the Peace Bridge one yet) and cross country races in Cookstown and Gransha, they are short but somehow even more painful than longer races.

My most enjoyable athletic outing of the year was undoubtedly being able to spend some time with my big son, Patrick, who was back from his year long sojourn in China for a few weeks.

We managed to tackle and conquer Ireland's highest mountain, Carrauntoohil in Mcgillycuddy Reeks in Kerry on one day and then Croagh Patrick on the next day, in Mayo. The weather was gloriously sunny both days and the views were so clear I thought I could see the future.

That future involves Patrick standing on many more mountain tops in many different countries, his next one being Mount Fuji in Japan in June. When they are young, your kids have no option but to spend time with you. When they are older, you feel privileged when they want to spend time with you.

My two best MC experiences were both in England. The first was Manchester where I was let loose in the commentator's booth at the Velodrome to witness my good friend John Madden subject himself to 60 minutes of pure pain as he attempted to set an Irish Veteran's record - he succeeded. It was just such a thrill to see a class athlete on a bike, like poetry in motion, riding round the 250 metre track like a metronome.

John was on the same track where athletes of the calibre of Bradley Wiggins, Mark Cavendish and Victoria Pendleton had competed and conquered - class act, class day.

HEARTWARMING ATHLETIC ACHIEVEMENT

Even topping that, however, was an appearance at stunning Castle Howard in North Yorkshire, the scene for Brideshead Revisited. I didn't see too many bodices being ripped but I did see a remarkable athletic achievement from an 8 year old.

I commentated all day as hundreds of Triathletes young and old all swam, biked and ran their hearts out. It was the end of a long day and I could nearly taste my first post race beer when my attention was drawn to one of the youngest competitors who hadn't yet finished. He was 200 metres away from the Finish Line. He had swum 100 metres, biked 4K and was now running 1K. A terrific achievement for any kid, except this kid had cerebral palsy. He was called Bailey Matthews and he was about to steal the hearts of a nation.

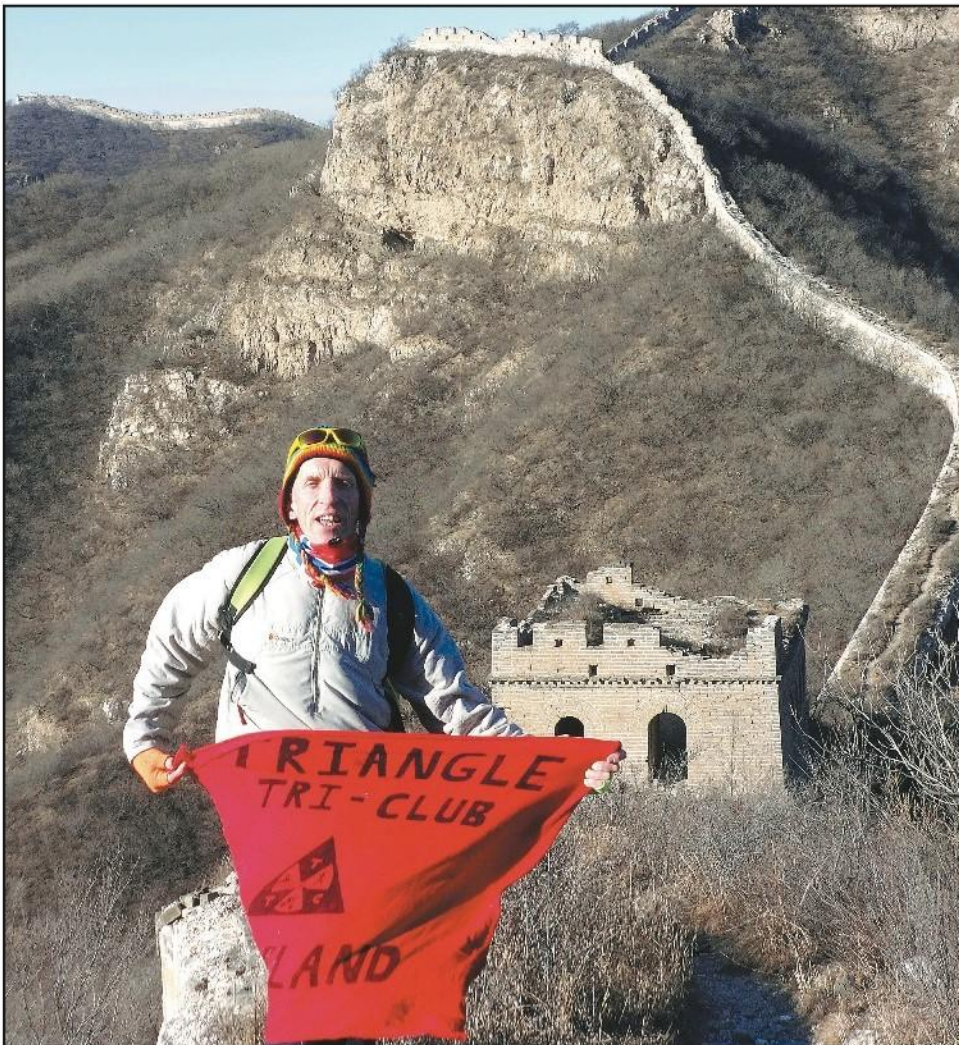
The cerebral part of my brain shut down and the emotional bit took off and I encouraged Bailey to make it home. Every triathlete I know views the finish line with the type of mythology that can only be understood by a fellow athlete. It's a mystical magical place where dreams come true. Every finish line is hard earned, however, this finish line was the hardest earned for anyone there out of the thousands who had competed.

Bailey was on his walking frame and his Dad (also a triathlete) was beside him. By this stage, the crowd were roaring this kid home. Bailey pushed away his frame as if to say he didn't need it, he staggered and fell, he got up, staggered and fell, if ever the collective heart of a crowd could be in a collective mouth, then this was that occasion.

I was going doolally on the mic, just mixing raw enthusiasm with fully justified hyperbole. Several seconds later, Bailey Matthews did what everybody told him he couldn't do, he started, competed in and finished a triathlon. The crowd were in bits and so was the MC.

Some 81 million hits on Youtube later, I was at the BBC SPOTY Awards. After the show had finished, I got a call from the PR officer for the Castle Triathlon Series, who was also there, to say that Bailey and his family wanted to meet me to say hello. I managed to blag my way past two layers of security to meet up with his family and of course with young Bailey. His unco-operative legs and unhelpful body could not dim the sheer enthusiasm and passion of this young man for his love of sport. He saw the finish line where others didn't even see the start line. He saw what he could do rather than what he couldn't. He saw triumph where others saw only disaster.

That was the highlight of my sporting year. If you want to make a New Year's Resolution, you might want to ask for a fraction of the courage of 8 year old Bailey Matthews from North Yorkshire. True Grit, True Hero.



Triangle Triathlon Club on tour! Peter with the TTC flag on the Great Wall of China. NCL03-511s



Onwards and upwards. Peter and son Patrick conquered Ireland's highest mountain, Carrauntoohil in Mcgillycuddy Reeks, Kerry. NCL35-0026s