



WHAT can you get done in 30 minutes? Catch an episode of Coronation Street? Watch the news? If those are not your cup of tea, well, how about a 10 mile time trial? It's about as much fun as having your teeth pulled, but after it's over, boy, do you feel good!

How complicated is a time trial? It's quite simple really. You get on your bike, somebody gives you a 27 second count down, then, you hear the dreaded numbers "3.... 2..... 1..... Go!" After that, it's up to you. All you have to do is 10 miles or 16 kilometres (if you live in metric land) on a bike (without an engine by the way).

It's normally five miles out and five miles back. You are not allowed to do the distance in one direction as we would all go for 10 miles with the wind behind going downhill.

Out and back or a complete circular route is the truest test of your form and fitness on a bike. Time trials have been going on since the latter days of the 19th century.

They were originally held in the days of the horse and cart on old bone shakers that were as heavy as an iron gate.

Now, you have bikes that you can lift with one finger and that cost more than the average saloon car but the theory remains the same.

You get on your bike, you ride it as fast as you can until you cross that much anticipated finish line.

The Roe Valley Cycling Club used to organise time trials on the legendary Round The Bridges course and also, as I am old enough to remember, there was one on the Ballyquin Road, that went five miles towards Dungiven, then a dead turn and then back.

But that was dropped – why? Because it was "too hard" and "we weren't able to get a personal best on it."

QUEST FOR PERSONAL BEST

Ah, the quest for the legendary personal best, as the great Helena Dornan said to me a few weeks ago: "You will only ever have one PB, because your last PB is your current PB and your only PB!" People get too wrapped up chasing PBs too much.

That sometimes means that you are tempted to give it all up if you don't get a PB every other week (I envy new Triathletes just taking up or wonderful sport, they have the chance to get PBs in three different sports in about five different distances – my last PB was certainly not sent in this century!)

But, PBs are elusive and certainly shouldn't be seen as the reason to put on a wet suit or sit on a bike or run round a track.

If you focus on the result – as opposed to the performance and the effort level – it's easy to get disheartened.

I do like the school of thought that says every time you celebrate (and I use that word loosely) another turning of the anniversary clock and make it unscathed to your next birthday, that you should reset the clock to zero – i.e. start afresh. Sonia O'Sullivan, the great Irish runner who won an Olympic Silver medal, says that if you want a true test over a 10K run you should aim to break 40 minutes up to your 40th birthday, then allow yourself another minute for every birthday i.e. 49 minutes for a 49 year old.

I am so long in the tooth, that I should be able to run a 10K and have time for a shower before my age graded target of 59 minutes comes up!

I love the fact that in the 5K Park Run, your time is graded, i.e. I could be 3 minutes behind the winner but if my percentage success rate (based on my age) is higher than the 'winning' time of a 20 year old, then I have performed better than him or her.

To become a successful time trialist, you need to be able to hurt. You need to be able to pace yourself i.e. don't go out too hard otherwise you will blow up and go deep into an aerobic territory and once you are there is no way back and you need to be in the right gear.

You also need to train specifically for the demands of the distance and the topography of the course.

There is no point in either trying to mash a monster gear or alternatively spinning an easy to push gear which effectively gets you nowhere fast.

You have to find that happy medium, you have to be like a jet air liner at 30,000 feet, fast and yet efficient.

I hadn't time trialled in about five years but the Triangle Triathlon's own Thomas Moore has organised for us a Tuesday night session after our club swim. We leave the Leisure Centre at about 6.55 pm and make it out to the Aghanloo Road to start our effort.

The Race of Truth

INDIVIDUAL TEST

A time trial is an individual test, i.e. there is no drafting behind any other bike, it's you against the clock, or as the French call it, 'Contre La Montre.' There is no hiding place in a time trial, it's just you, your bike and your watch.

In a road race, there can be safety in numbers. You can stay on somebody's back wheel and save 30 per cent energy but in a time trial, it's just you versus the wind.

I sat on my bike on the start line on the Aghanloo Road two weeks ago, as Ryan Rivers, our official starter, intoned "5 – 4 – 3."

I cast my mind back to various time trials over the years, I remembered when I nearly ended up on the bonnet of a car on the Caw Roundabout outside Derry when that Roundabout was used for the 25 mile time trial (funnily enough, it has been now deemed far too dangerous to sling shot around).

I got a huge shot of adrenaline and achieved my fastest ever 25 mile time in 1 hour 8 minutes.

Many years later I did a 100 mile time trial on the legendary Wood Green course, between Ballymena and Antrim, which involved about seven laps of that stretch of dual carriageway. You just put your head down and went for it, completely oblivious to the presence of a car doing 70 mph, about two feet away from you. I dipped under five hours 40 minutes on the same day that my club mate Kay Hack set a new Ulster record.

I remembered trying to save weight on other time trials and not taking a water bottle and being absolutely parched half way through it.

I recall not eating for four hours before hand to try to feel light and being so famished on the finish line, I could have eaten my handle bars.

I took off in my mind's eye like a rocket. My computer was showing 23 mph, which I knew was completely unsustainable.

My original aim was to break 35 minutes. Of course, being me, I got greedy and suddenly my aim was to break 30 minutes, i.e. 20 miles an hour.

Sure here I was doing 23 mph what could be so hard about doing only 20 mph...what could possibly go wrong?!

ENCOURAGEMENT

I caught and passed Mary McGowan and Bridgen Duddy and gave them a shout of encouragement.

This was my first time on the bridges since I had run 55 miles there three weeks before.

Lots of memories but I can't recall the 88km which took me nearly 12 hours, being as painful as this. The adrenaline kicks in on the start line and you get the first 2 minutes for free.

After that the cold harsh dawn of reality sinks in and you realise your breath is already sounding ragged, your pulse (normally zombie like) is going through the roof, your heart if trying to escape your rib cage – and you still have nine miles to go.

I hit Swann's Bridge. I now had nobody in

front of me, instead I was the guy with the target on his back.

I was the guy everybody wanted to catch. Somehow, it's easier to chase than be chased, there is something primeval about being the hunter.

My aim, of course, was to be out of sight and out of mind. This course has lots of nooks and crannies bends and bridges where you can see but not be seen.

When I hit the five mile mark my average was at 20.6 and at that stage I realised that five miles was probably my realistic limit.

Instead of that I was only half way there! I saw with great relief every mile marker on the road (which I had painted a few weeks previously) in addition my computer told me what speed I was doing, what my average speed was (20.3...20.4...20.3...) what distance I had done to the hundredth of a mile, etc.

This was pure torture especially when I passed the cricket pitch at mile six and turned left one mile later to confront the hill at Myroe junction (there are actually two hills there, both of which are like a punch to the solar plexus).

You get out of the saddle which gives you a momentary respite while you use a slightly different muscle group but you lose any aerodynamic position.

People ask why I use aerobars, "Is it to go faster? No, it's to help me take a breather!"

I now had only two miles to go and my average was 20.2, if I could keep it there I would achieve my goal and I would feel as pleased as Rodger Banister did when he broke the four minute mile mark.

I thought of my good friends Brendan O'Brien whose personal best, set nearly 20 years ago when he was on the Irish Olympic Junior Team, was 20 mins and 50 secs (that's 29 mph) and I also thought of my 50 year old friend John Madden from Ballycastle who twice broke the 20 min barrier i.e. over 30 mph. I silently doffed my cap to the both of them.

FINISH LINE

I fought my way fast Cornfields up the hill at Forgies (you didn't know there was a hill there? – try it on a bike!) then thankfully after much relief flew down towards the roundabout while praying that no traffic was coming from my right to slow me down.

I came off the ramp like a man possessed onto the bypass with my speedo now showing a dizzy 26 mph and my average inch back to 20.4.

One mile later I was hanging off the handlebars making a noise like a demented warthog as I laboured up towards Artikelly Brae roundabout and then up that cursed hill towards Aghanloo Orange Hall.

My average went 20.4, 2.03, 20.2, 20.1 yikes! I stomped on the peddles as if my life depended on it and managed to get round the 90 degree corner at the Orange Hall.

The precious finish line was only half a mile away but I had only 90 secs to get there! If I could get my bike back up to 20 mph and keep it there for the run in I would break 30 minutes.

My vision was blurred with exhaustion. It was as if I was in a tunnel. Nothing else mattered. Nobody else mattered.

My body certainly didn't matter and my brain or what was left of it, certainly didn't matter, all that did matter was getting to that finish line with the clock stopping before 30:00 ... every turn of the peddles seemed like running up Benevenagh through a bed of quicksand while carrying a sack of rocks on my back.

Every second of pain seemed like a minute and every minute seemed like an hour but bang, there was the finish line.

I glanced down at my infernal bike computer and it showed me what I wanted to see – 29mins 54 secs.

I somehow managed to get the bike stopped without falling off. I tried to breathe while dry retching at the same time.

Pain coursed through every fibre of my being, my lungs were on fire, my legs were gone my head was dizzy, I felt like fainting but I had done it!

Chris Froome, move over there is room on that podium for me too!

Now, as I gasped in air and as my pulse hammered through my veins and I tried to find the energy to nod at my team mates who there then finishing, I had precisely 6 days 23 hours and 30 mins to recover before the next one.....



Chris Froome competing in a Time Trial. NCL27-11s