

SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

Vinci'

THE BIKE

There was a bit of a trek over red carpet into T1 to grab our bike bag and into the tent. I bumped into Steve and Ronaldo – small world etc.

I knew my own TTC colleagues would be long gone. I walked to my bike, miraculously found Mervyn's pump and even more miraculously managed to put some air into my tyres (rather than let some out of it). Then it was a trot to the mount line where a stern faced official made sure that we were helmeted before we were allowed to continue.

The first bit of the bike was a bit convoluted and involved traversing park tracks and over a few bridges before settling down on a road surface for the start of the long haul.

It was about 30K out to a point where we then had 3 laps of approximately 40K each before the final 30K bike section. I had broken the race down into 11 segments. The swim was 1, the bike had 5 segments and the run had 5 (as there was 5 laps of the Parco San Giuliano park area). When I reached the start of the lap section that was 2 bits done and only 9 to go. You give yourself a mental pat on the back. Soon I was being lapped by the fast guys! Each to their own, these guys were going for a time, I was just going for a finisher's shirt.

The amount of marshals on the circuit was astounding. It was quite a convoluted circuit with a lot of turns through villages and beautiful countryside (we passed vineyards, olive groves, red poppies growing by the side of the road etc.). The Italian Police Force/Carabinieri were also out in force. If their Police Officers are on 25 quid an hour for contracted out time and he or she is standing there for 10 hours and if there are at least 100 Police... that's a lot of Police overtime to pay.

The Police were of course the best dressed in the world with their crisply pressed white shirts, white caps and cool shades. When there were hundreds of civil defence people as well, all of them were polite and helpful. It's the marshals who help make a race. If they are smiling and enthusiastic, you feed off that. One of the villages even had a brass band playing and a market in full swing. It all added to the atmosphere. Kids were standing by the road putting their hands out hoping you would give them a high five! All of this made sure the kilometres rolled by. I urged myself to get to 90K on the bike and when I did I felt I hadn't burned

a single match, the countryside was breath taking.

My average was higher than I had expected and all was good with the world. But I knew that you are only half way through an Ironman when you are deep into the run course as so many things can go wrong so quickly in the last 20K, so I wasn't counting any chickens just yet – the chickens still had to cross the road and there was a lot of potential foxes on that road!

I negotiated my way through the aid stations with care. You threw away your empty bottles into a netted area, grabbed a water bottle and put it on board, grabbed a bottle filled with energy drink for your second bottle rack, then you had a choice of banana, energy bar or a nice local touch, a panino with prosciutto ham. I normally grabbed everything I could to keep feeding the furnace that hopefully was still burning.

When I started lap three there were of course a lot less bikes on the traffic free roads. The sun was up, it was 25°C but felt hotter. I passed one competitor who looked fairly strung out and I told her to drink more. I dashed into a café at one stage for a quick cappuccino and a nature break. I always take money with me during a long race. I would later buy an ice cream on the run course. Eventually lap three was over and then it was on the final section back to T2. Maybe I had burnt one match by this stage, but felt really pleased with my progress.

The last 20 odd miles of an Ironman bike are always a bit of a slog. You rarely do that distance in training and the body is not only degenerating, but you realise then that you've got a wee thing called a marathon to contemplate. I chucked down the last of my caffeine gels and I negotiated my way back over the bridges and into the park. It was oppressively hot but the first two disciplines were over and according to my reckoning, I was 6/11ths of the way there, what could possibly go wrong?

THE RUN

As soon as I dismounted and put my foot on the ground, my right hamstring gave a twang. This wasn't a good start.

It was then that I remembered that my running had been compromised for a few months due to a potential bursitis in my right knee and calves that were more knotted than a fisherman's rope. I racked the bike, grabbed my running bag and joined a bunch of guys in T2 who were all

contemplating a very painful 4/5/6+ hours ahead of their lives. I had been really pleased with my swim and bike time and I was way up on my schedule. I had deposited a lot of money in the bank in the first two disciplines and now for the run I wanted to withdraw my hard earned currency.

As soon as I was out of Transition and on the run course, I tried to race a gallop, nothing happened, zilch! I tried again, same result. Oops – I realised instead of having 8 out of my 10 precious matches left I had about 2. The bike ride in the heat must have taken a lot more out of me than I thought. I got out my mental abacus and did a quick calculation. If I walked/force marched a kilometre in 10 minutes and there were 42K to go, that meant 420 minutes, that meant 7 hours. Hey, what else was I doing for the next seven hours of my life anyway?

Earlier in the run course I saw Iain going well, then Alan passed me – he was limping for home. Then Mervyn stopped for a quick chat then he ploughed on. I hadn't seen William or Stephen, but I knew they were going well. All I could do was try to join them on the finish line albeit much, much later.

The sun was still beating down, my feet were telling me there were blisters upon my blisters and that they were bubbling up (the next day when I got out of bed and put my foot on the floor, my foot stuck to the floor. My blisters had popped and were still oozing – nice!). The kilometres started to pass by on the run course, none of them pleasant. But I was wearing a Triangle Triathlon Club necklace and shirt and I had a photograph of my parents around my neck and I didn't want to let them down. My son Patrick in Japan was tracking my progress online. He was watching a very slow moving dot i.e. his dad, taking ages to reach each timing mat on the course. I couldn't let him down or my family back home. 15 Ironman starts, 14 Ironman finishes would not sound good! The local crowd shouted out your name (as it was on your race number) and also shouted something like "Die! Die! Die!", but I understand that its Italian for "Come on!" However, I felt like doing what I thought I had heard.

FATIGUE

I made it to 21K – great – only another 37 hours of torture to go. My fatigue levels got even worse. I felt like I was a drunk hanging onto a lamppost for stability. I sat on a bench at one



Triangle Triathlon Club triathletes Stephen Morrison, Iain O'Kane, Mervyn Kelly, William O'Kane, Alan McElhinney and Peter Jack. NCL25-26s

stage and nearly made a fatal mistake. The bench was calling at me like the Three Sirens, "come, lay down, it won't hurt, it will be great, sleep, it will be wonderful."

I know it would be, but if I lay down and closed my eyes I knew I would wake up at midnight and not feel too good about myself.

Dusk eventually arrived. My daughter Hannah always said to me "Daddy, could you please try to finish at least one of these races in day light!" Alas, Hannah, it was the same old story.

The nee-naw sound and the blue and white flashing lights of ambulances punctuated the night air. One guy picked up a competitor who had collapsed and ran with her back towards an aid station. The race was taking its toll and the paramedics were there to literally pick up the pieces. Casualties were being ferried off to the hospital regularly. I didn't mind going to hospital as long as it was after the finish line and not before!

It was dark and way after stupid o'clock. I was well on my way to having a 22 hour day. I knew all of my mates would be back in their rooms with great times (William 11:04, Mervyn 12:17, Alan, Iain and Stephen all about 12:45). There was only one Charlie left out of the six to make it back.

I had already given everything I had. I mentally opened out the Hurt Locker and had a rummage around.

All of the physical tools had been used hours ago. The mental reservoirs of doggedness and cussedness and stubbornness had all been used up too. I looked into my box of matches, but found only 10 burnt out match sticks, none of them even left with a spark of life.

Is this how it would finish? With ignominious defeat in a foreign field? If I wanted to be able to look myself in the mirror the next morning, a miracle needed to happen.

As the rest of the world mourned the loss of the incomparable Muhammad Ali, I forgot about the world. I looked inwards and concentrated solely on the first pronoun (not for the first time some might say!). It seemed as if I had no

future, I only had a present and every second of the present was filled with pain, hurt and sickness. If I tried to run my guts told me I would throw up or collapse. If I made it to the finish line I would have a future and a proud (recent) past. The only thing that mattered in my solar system was trying to put one foot in front of the other.

VINDICATION

A bloke called Andrew from Crewe caught me and I latched onto him like a drowning man snatching for a life raft. If I could chat to him perhaps I could make it, I could try and metaphorically hang onto his coat tails.

22 hours later and we had done the last 14K together. We heard the MC, we saw the finish line lights in the dark Venetian light. I told Andrew to go for it. I turned up at an Ironman finish line straight for the first time in the race and the last time in my career. I threw off my hat and race belt and staggered across the line. I was hollowed out. I was a shell. I didn't know what day it was.

The organisers were there to clap me on the back (which was fairly sore as my back was as stiff as a poker). They ushered me into the tent. I tried to talk to say thanks but whatever emerged was unintelligible to me never mind them. They garlanded my neck with a precious finisher's medal. They thrust a finisher's t-shirt into my cold shaking hands. I was about to start shaking violently with cold as my body just gave up.

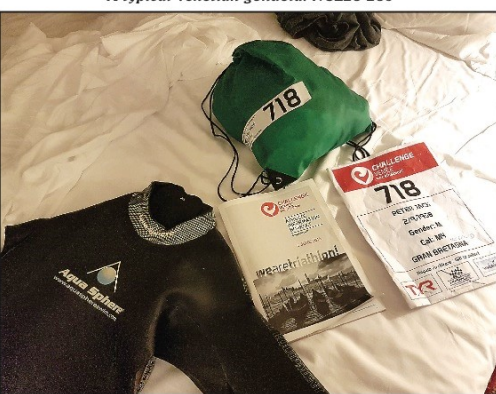
I would need two ibuprofen and a bath hotter than Hades to get some life back in me.

However, my bike was 200 metres away, there is no way I could make that vast distance on my own. One of the organisers kindly poured me into a race car and got my bike and my bags and took me to the hotel where Mervyn and Stephen oxtor cugged me to our room.

Burnt by the sun. Beaten by the distance. Broken by the challenge. But still beaming with pride as I fell asleep before my head hit the pillow.



A typical Venetian gondola. NCL25-25s



Preparations, the night before. NCL25-23s



Ronaldo with four Limavady amigos at San Marco square. NCL25-24s