

MY mum passed away on holiday in Tenerife following a fall a few weeks ago, she was 88. She had enjoyed good health until her fatal trip. Essie Jack was born in Derry in December 1926, she was buried the day before her 89th birthday.

Most people on earth have attended or will attend their own mother's funeral, it's worse obviously if a parent buries a child. There was nothing unique about my mother's funeral, but my brother Reid and I and our families were bowled over by the amount of people who attended from all walks of life and who sent cards and expressed their condolences.

As this is a sporting column, I will try to dwell on the emotion of sport rather than on the emotion of loss. Following her fall, when Reid and I were at her bedside in Los Cristianos Hospital in Southern Tenerife, it was hard to see any relevance or meaning in sport, but as sport is one of the few constants in my life, I resolved to try to find some meaning in what had happened and to endeavour to mark Mum's passing in a sporting way. The only thing that I could think of was to race in her honour.

I aimed to do two races in one day and somehow to try to suffer a little bit in her name. It may sound daft, but sometimes a physical pain temporarily obliterates an emotional pain. When you hammer yourself to the state of exhaustion, it can blank out the raw pain of a loss which was so unexpected. Mum went out at the top of her game and was playing bridge and bowls, etc. as usual a few days before her final hour.

My first race in her honour would be on the North Coast. The Portrush Park Run regularly draws crowds of over 100 runners, sometimes over 200 in the summer. It has to be one of the biggest success stories of the NI activity calendar.

When Andy Deal or Mervyn Thompson, the race organisers, ask just before the start every Saturday, if there are any visitors from any other Park Runs, you always hear an unfamiliar accent pipe out "Edinburgh" or "Portsmouth" or even "Chicago," etc.

The community based Park Run is a real page turner in the efforts of Local Government Funded Health Initiatives to get sedentary people off the couch and into their running shoes. In Limavady, we have seen similar success stories.

James O'Hara, who hasn't run in 40 years, has his Park Run PB down to 21 minutes and is aiming for a sub 20! That's 4 minutes per kilometre, that's 6 minutes 30 seconds per mile pace, i.e. that is shifting!

I also had a sub 20 as my aim this year and brought my times down gradually from 22 to 21, then I had 3 times under 20 minutes 30. On a Saturday in August, I set my stall out, warmed up well and wanted to give it a good lash to try achieve my goal.

SPUR MYSELF ON

The Limavady Park Run is 3 laps and with a final 500 metres to go, I tried to spur myself on. If I had had any breakfast (which I didn't, because that would only slow you down), I would have tasted it. I finished in a time of 20 minutes and zero seconds. It was the quickest time I had run for 5K this century, but alas, not quick enough.

Rather than returning home suffused with pride, I biked home deflated. It was like Roger Banister going for the sub 4 minute mile - and then missing it! The only thing that was important, was the first number on the Finish Line sheet.

When the stadium announcer

A (SPORTING) TRIBUTE

Essie Jack 1926-2015

By Peter Jack

in Ifley Road, Oxford on May 6 1954 announced, "Three...." the rest was drowned out by the pandemonium that followed when the crowd went mental. When people asked me how my race had gone and I replied "20..." you could see the look of sympathy. Maybe next year?

The Portrush Park Run however, is not for PBs, it is on a beach and there are several vagaries at play:-

1. It's sandy and even if it's hard sand, you are never going to be as fast as you are on concrete or tarmac.
2. The tide! In the past, I have even had to run over the white rocks at the far end of the beach and
3. Usually when you hit half way and turn round, you are smack into a mini hurricane. (In Limavady the event is on the Back Burn Path which is a self-contained sheltered bowl, usually not affected by wind). What you lose however in the hope of a potential PB, you more than gain in the form of a majestic setting with the crashing waves on one side and huge sand dunes on the other.

As I started out, the weather was suitably funereal. It was dark, cold, with the thermometer barely nudging above 3 degrees. With the wind chill and the rain coming at us sideways, it definitely felt sub-zero. I hadn't run since I came back from Tenerife due to

an uncooperative back so I thought the day ahead would either kill me or cure me....Generally in a medium distance race, after the first five minutes, the crowd of runners you find yourself in is the crowd you will finish with.

You take a good look around and note the various coloured t-shirts and the black running tights and those are the same figures that should just be beside you, just in front of you or with a bit of luck, just behind you as you gallop towards the finish line.

Portrush is a beautiful course, but when you are getting tired the end seems a long way away. The beach seems never ending and the sand begins to feel like wet concrete. The secret of course is pace judgement. Two small words but it can take 30 years to learn them! Any race over 100 metres requires pace judgement. Get it wrong and you crash and burn, get it right and you are floating on air, passing your rivals right up to the finish line.

There is no point, however, in suddenly being able to sprint like Usain Bolt in the last 200 metres because that merely means you haven't put enough effort into the first 4,800 metres. If you get it right however, you have the satisfaction of passing people who are

deteriorating quicker than you are. Everyone is getting tired and slowing down, it's just the rate of degradation which you can control if you get it right.

I knew I wasn't going to tear up any trees so I was happy enough with my finish time which turned out to be 23.33, more than a minute outside my Portrush PB, but your time is so dependent on the firmness of the sand, that it's meaningless to compare times, exactly the same as in a cross country race.... A few hours later, I had fought my way through the slush and snow and arrived at the Mid Ulster Sports arena on the outskirts of Cookstown. I usually travel last minute.com, but even I was cutting this fine. The race was due to start at 2.45 and I roared into the car park at 2.36.

I dashed inside to fill in a registration form and a disclaimer, pay an entry fee, find the changing room, lace up my spikes and sprint out the door to the start line of the Acorn AC promoted race.

The weather hadn't improved any, it was still raw. As soon as I put my left foot down on the grass, it plunged into an oozing primeval swamp, my foot was now wet and cold. My right foot soon joined its compatriot in a similar state.

NOTORIOUS HILL

Most Cross Country races are about 6K, this one was 8K i.e. 5 miles i.e. 5 laps. I had heard about the notorious hill on this course. I turned round quickly as the starter began his countdown, "3-2-1-...." Some beast of a hill caught my eye. It was actually more like a ski slope than a hill, it was a monster. Surely they didn't expect us to go up thon thing?!

200 metres later I was huffing and blowing and gasping for air, already in oxygen debt as I tried to ascend this veritable leviathan. I was trying to think of my Mum but all I could concentrate on was to try to keep going.

Every classic cross country course has to have a hill. Cross Country by sheer definition has to be muddy - and hilly.

Times are irrelevant, it's just you against the next bloke - mano a mano. No two cross country courses are the same and the course in Cookstown was certainly like nothing I had ever witnessed before.

There were some sadists, sorry, spectators, standing at the top of the hill trying to encourage us - and trying not to laugh as we slid up, slipped down and made our way up anyway we could to the summit.

I thought I saw a Sherpa at the top in an oxygen mask but perhaps I was hallucinating. This was a hill that needed a Stannah chair

lift, not mere running spikes. There were to be 5 laps, I was already foundered to the core, chilled to the marrow, I have never known mud like it, you could have lost sheep in it. Usually in courses there are bits of grass which are still recognisably green but not here in Cookstown where they do things differently.

There had been four or five races earlier and the whole thing had been churned up as if there had been a ploughing competition. Every time you put your foot down it disappeared into a black sodden mass of mud and you had to drag it up out of the morass. I am a narrow gait type of runner, i.e., I take lots of steps, I was having to repeat this action over 100 times a minute. What you needed in this terrain was a long rangy stride where you come into contact with the mud as infrequently as possible.

Before I knew it, I had finished the first lap, I already couldn't feel my toes or my fingers for that matter. My watch showed 8.48. I resolved I wanted to break 45 minutes, that was my mission, somehow I equated a sub 45 minute finish with a tribute to my Mum.

If I didn't break that time, I would have let her down. It was a powerful incentive, even when my laces became undone and I had to waste 30 seconds, kneeling down in the mud with my frozen fingers fiddling at my unhelpful laces.

Before I knew it, I was at the foot of the hill again. I ran up it the first time, jogged up it the second time, walked up it the third time, cried my way up it the fourth time and I can't remember how I got up it the last time.

Usually my aim in a race is not to be lapped. I was in lap three of five when Seamus Lynch from Newcastle came past me as if he was on roller skates going down a marble hill.

I felt as if I was in wellington boots, which when I think about it, might have been a better option.

Soon Alan Bogle and Scott Rankin both passed me in a desperate battle for the other two spots on the podium. I know both of these guys, they are both super runners and it was just an honour to be sharing the same field as them.

THE FINAL FINISH LINE

Dozens of other runners lapped me, good luck to them all but I was locked in a deadly battle of survival. Could I make it to the finish line before hypothermia over took me? Could I stumble my way round this savage 8,000 metre course in under 45 mins? Well, I had made a promise to my Mum, my last one as it turns out, and I was going to strain every sinew, motivate every muscle and fire up every fibre of my being to make it there, for her.

45 minutes and 22 frozen seconds after I had started my journey I crossed the line and sank to my knees.

I cast my mind back to the day when I actually won a (novice) cross country race at Mallusk back in the day. Now, here I was with the rest of the tail end Charlies. I may now have less hair and teeth than when I won at Mallusk but I have more reason than ever to run, to remember, to reflect.

As I looked around me on the finish line, I realised I, at least, had the consolation of knowing I had given an honest effort. I had run with the extra motivation of a missing family member.

I hope that you were looking down on me Mum and somehow in some strange way, that I made you proud on that otherwise pointless Antarctic day in Cookstown.

I know there will be an extra yellow ribbon this year on the Limavady Rotary Club Christmas Tree of Remembrance. Rest in Peace Mum.



Essie and Arthur Jack, Portrush, early 1950s. NCL52-47s