

# Show time for the last time

## T minus 15 hours until my last Ironman Race (3.8K swim, 180K bike, 42Krun).

I am back in our flat in Naarden, about thirty minutes south of Almere, as it was impossible to stay anywhere closer – this is a popular race!

It is a three day festival of Triathlon with all sorts of different events.

I had racked my bike earlier in the transition area (as you do the day before in all big races) and walked round the Transition area which was full of go faster bikes, shaved legs and lean mean Triathlete machines.

I was able to work out that if I finish, I would be top 10 in my age group (as there are only 10 old blokes!).

I will be top three from Ireland (as there are only two other age group guys from the Island of Ireland!) but I will definitely be first TTC!

I did see, however, amongst the elite professionals at number 26 the one and only Bryan McCrystal, who went 8-07 a few weeks ago at an Ironman and if he does anything like that tomorrow, he should be top 5.

This event has a sub 8 hour male course record and a sub 9 hour female course record, so in theory, its fast, but as I look out the window I see the wind whipping the willows in the garden, it if forecast tomorrow to be Force 2/3 on the Beaufort scale i.e. windy.

Worrying about the wind however isn't going to help. As James Walton's grand-father said, "Worrying is a bit like trying to ride a rocking horse, no matter how fast you go you are not getting anywhere".

The briefing which was in a lecture theatre beside the swim start, was very professional.

When I first did this race 28 years ago, we had the briefing in a tent as we were on a beach.

Now, they have moved the event inland and the swim is now based in a lake with two laps.

Twenty eight years ago the briefing in English took thirty minutes and the Dutch briefing took 60 minutes – what were we not told?!

The race has been rebranded as Almere – Amsterdam to help give it global appeal.

It seems to be working as there were fifty different nationalities competing in various events over the weekend.

The 2017 Long Distance race was the European Championships and it will be again next year, so these guys obviously know what they are doing – I just hope I do, too!

I did the practice swim last night, just twenty minutes but it was good to get a feel for the water.

Apparently it's to be 18.5 degrees, which is practically tropically compared to Benone.

I just have to put one arm in front of the other and make it happen.

If I emerge after 80 minutes, I will be delighted.

There is then a 100 metre run into the Transition tent.

Last time I was there, there were grippers, rippers and strippers to get you out of your wet suit super quick.

The organisers have left nothing to chance. There is an entire room of massage tables for broken bodies after the race.

The anticipated wind will not bother me on the swim or the run course but it isn't going to help my biking.

It didn't seem to deter, however, the hundreds of kids earlier, most of whom seem to be on big clunky, chunky bikes i.e. it's all about the participation, not the winning – a bit like the TTC Kids' Race in Limavady on 30th September.

You can't win the race the day before but you can lose it.

I did very little walking and more than a little snoozing because there won't be much sleep tonight.

What was I worrying about anyway?

I am not doing the race to win it or gain prize money or gain a personal best, all I want to do is finish because for me, a finish is a win.

## D-Day

The day I had been planning and plotting for 9 months finally arrived.

I was up before the alarm at 4.45 and I managed to force down some porridge.

I didn't feel like it but I knew I needed it.

We picked up Patrick and Cath from their Airbnb as they had flown in to watch the race.

We were then confronted with a few closed roads which didn't do the heart much good but thanks to two bright sons and Google Maps, we eventually found Almere and were parked up for 6.30.

I went into the transition area after showing my wrist band so I could pump my tyres up again as they lose 20 PSI overnight.

Just after 7.00 a.m. as dawn was breaking and everyone was getting ready for the start of the Men's Elite Professional Race, a helicopter appeared and a paraglider jumped out with a huge Challenge Almere flag.

The music was pumping out of the massive sound system as if we needed any more hype.

A race for me doesn't feel real until I put the wetsuit on and smear my goggles with anti-fog film.

You put your Almere swim hat on and you say your goodbyes and off to battle you go.

No one else can help you now.

Although you might be representing your club and your town, there are no team mates to blame, no team mates to help, this is where it gets personal and you remember that every day for the last nine months I have asked myself, what can I do today to make it to the Finish Line on the 8th September?

If I am training, what type of training session? (I did train 6 or sometimes 7 days a week).

## What intensity?

## What distance?

## What can I eat or not eat to help?

## Do I cut down or cut out alcohol?

How early can I get to bed to get recovery from the last training session and prepare for the next one?

I had invested so much in this race - time, money and thousands of kilometres in biking, running and swimming. All I had to do was just succeed.

I was also raising money for Mercy Ships - a fantastic charity that provides hundreds of life changing and saving operations in ports in Africa.

The surgeons and the nurses of Mercy Ship needed me to succeed as well.

## No pressure then, Pete!

At 7.35 a.m. on the button, the starting cannon signified the start of the race. I walked off the plastic mat and plunged straight into really cold water – what a way to wake up on a Saturday morning! What happened the promised 18.5 degrees?

I had entered the water last, as I usually do as my good luck charm.

I started to do my version of free style (like other swimmers, only slower) and started to catch up with a few others and tried to avoid a few size 12's as I didn't want another under water smack on the face. Normally, when you are working hard you warm up, no chance of that here.

I was getting colder and colder. I started to work my way round the triangular course marked with huge yellow buoys.

By the end of the first lap, which should have taken 39 or 40 minutes, my watch showed 45 and to make matters



Three Jacks - Peter, Mark and Patrick. NCL38-34s

worse, 800 swimmers in another race were let loose just as I started my second lap.

How was I to avoid being the Irish meat in a Dutch sandwich?

As my brain started to shut down with the cold, I could see how swimmers die in triathlon.

They either get a heart attack when they panic in the water when hordes of lemmings swim over the top of them or they get so cold, they just lose consciousness whilst face down in the water – I just had to keep going and reach dry land.

At least, if my race was to end, I had to finish one of the three disciplines.

My second lap was even slower than my first lap but eventually I staggered onto terra firma.

My eyes were like saucers on stilts, I had no idea what was going on.

Thankfully I saw the family who were cheering and roaring me on, God Bless them.

I had to keep going for their sake. I made a hand signal to signify that I really needed a cup of hot black coffee.

In the changing marquee, I divested myself of my wetsuit and whilst shivering uncontrollably, tried to put on my bib tights, TTC bike jersey and gilet, arm warmers, socks, shoes, helmet, sunglasses, etc.

Thankfully, I had a wall to lean against to prevent me from falling over.

I was amazed that there were swimmers still pouring into the marquee i.e. there was actually someone slower than me!

I emerged into T1 to grab my bike and walked rather unsteadily to the mount line.

A female marshal came over to rub my back to try to warm me up, I must have looked as cold as I felt.

I grabbed a coffee from Patrick with enthusiasm and despatched it with haste.

The first few kilometres of the bike course were on narrow cycle tracks with lots of tight turns and it was hard to focus as my brain was still in ice cold mode.

If Paddy Power had been giving odds on me finishing the race, at that point it would have been about 5 percent likelihood of me succeeding and finishing on the big red Finish Line carpet.

I wasn't the only one who suffered in the swim - later on in the day, I bumped into the great Nicky Ferrugia from Malta, a rock of a man who came over to do the Benone Ironman which we organised back in 2000.

Nicky threw up in the swim in Almere as it was so choppy but he still managed to finish his 27th Ironman in 12.44, what a legend!

I wasn't wearing a heart rate monitor and was trusting my inbuilt RPE, (Rate of Perceived Exertion) as I didn't want to burn too many matches this early in the day.

Just as work in the office is full of deadlines, so too was my effort to complete Ironman 16.

## I had deadlines

I had to finish the first lap of the 90K bike ride by 1.30p.m., which meant 3 hours 40, which meant 15 miles an hour – which meant that if my speed dropped below that as it tended to do in the wind, then there was a bit of a major panic.

Eventually, we hit the west coast of Holland (or Netherlands as the Dutch prefer to call their country)

and we turned north where we had the advantage of a huge tail wind and never has a present been so gratefully received.

The road was on top of a dyke and was on reclaimed land, (our swim was actually below sea level) we now had 20 miles north on a straight road and it was great to be doing 20 to 23 miles an hour without any apparent effort.

Meanwhile, I grabbed bananas, gels, water, isotonic drink and my own rolls and protein bars to fuel the machine.

Eventually the good times had to end and we turned east then south into a cruel headwind.

There is a reason why Holland has more wind turbines and windmills than anywhere else in the world – there may be no hills, but there is plenty of wind!

The wind was so fierce all I could manage was 10 miles an hour, whilst praying for the start of the second lap and a helpful wind.

The bloke in front of me turned off for the Finish Line one lap early i.e. he was bailing out, he couldn't hack it.

I made it past the cut off with 30 minutes to spare but now the hard work had to start again, 90K down, just 90K to go.

Lap two was deja vu but I put the hammer down for the wind assisted bit.

After about 90 miles and now back in the teeth of the headwind, I stopped at the only coffee shack I had spotted in the entire race.

I wolfed down a brew and a Belgium waffle while three or four guys I had worked hard to pass earlier, now passed me.

I tried to lie down on a table to straighten my back out after 6 hours in a crab like position but even that didn't help.

After 80 miles, I was on my longest ride of the year and I counted off each mile, sometimes every 10th of a mile.

I got chatting to a nice bloke called Yan, whose English was better than mine.

He has done this race three times before - he looked lean and strong and was confident of finishing.

Whilst Paddy Power might have increased my odds of finishing from 1% up to 50%, it was still in the balance.

I learned from Yan that the Dutch word for maniac is "maniak" – that's the sort of conversation we were having!

My race however, nearly ended prematurely on the bonnet of a car which somehow I had neglected to notice.

He thankfully swerved onto the verge and I swerved back towards the correct side of the road – a heart stopping moment that woke me up.

Eventually, after what seemed like a life time heading straight into the teeth of the wind, I was able to turn right and head north for the last few K of the 180, and again, I had to have my wits about me on this narrow track.

Twenty eight years ago, I had suffered five punctures but unbelievably, I was now coming back into T2 with about the same time on my watch.

This time, however, I had a lot more miles on my age clock. In 1990, I was able to run a sub 4 marathon to finish in 13.31 – could I now run a sub 5 hour 50 marathon to finish in under 15?

Join me next week all the way to the Finish Line!



The calm of the transition area. NCL38-33s