



Muddy Marvellous

NOW that the 2018 season is disappearing in the rear view mirror and 2019 is appearing quicker than a Mo Salah goal celebration, it's time to look back but also to look forward as well.

Were you happy with what you achieved on the sporting front in 2018?

What marks would you give yourself? 7 out of 10, maybe an 8?

Very few of us would be able to answer that question with a 10 out of 10.

The first days of January are, as ever, the usual time for very solemn New Year's Resolutions to be made.

Promises are made (and broken), declarations of intent are loudly stated (and soon abandoned), gyms are full of the best intentions for a few weeks in January but by February you can see the tumble weed of indolence and sloth blowing around the deserted gym floor.

You will see lots of ads for personal gym equipment over the Christmas and holiday period.

I must confess at home I have a rowing machine, a turbo trainer, a spin bike, a set of weights, a punch bag, an exercise mat and most of the time they sit in splendid isolation, untouched by my sweat.

They will however, get some use when my usual gym is closed over the holiday period and by in large, exercise is much easier to participate in when you are going to join a bunch of like minded people.

It's a fact that you don't feel like a fish out of water. There are others there striving and sweating, like you.

It seems to be rule rather than the exception.

Could you push yourself as hard in solo training as you could in a group setting? No, exactly.

Limavady is not short of great gyms there is Nspire behind the fire station in Catherine Street, there is Ricky Morrison's Ultimate Strength and there is CrossFit run by Andy and Michael out in Aghanloo.

All of them are dedicated to you being dedicated to getting the best out of yourself.

Participants here have made stupendous gains in their fitness, their ability to lift heavier weights – or lighter weights more often and people like to feel part of a community where a family of peers shares the same goals as you.

We all know how important it is to keep mentally fit and being physically fit really does help keep your mind from being effected by SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) or any condition that lowers the spirits, saps the confidence or reduces your self-esteem.

Recent research however, has confirmed that outdoor activity is better for you than indoor activity.

Your eyes react to the daylight and your lungs react to the fresh air and that sense of being truly alive.

I recently experienced that one free Saturday when I was able both to trot round the Limavady Park Run, organised by a group of fantastic volunteers every Saturday at 9.30am and then later, thanks to the Springwell's David McGaffin, I was able to participate in/stagger round the toughest Cross Country Race in the country i.e. Cookstown.

This mum fest is organised by the nice people of Acorn Athletic Club and is hosted in the Mid Ulster Sports Arena, just a mile outside the Town of Cooks.

Our race was a 1.00pm and was four miles.

Thankfully each lap was 1 mile so all I had to do was count to four.

The course has been changed as the arena authorities didn't want us mud merchants trotting around their nice clean soccer pitches.

They have fantastic facilities there with a huge indoor sports arena, great all weather pitches, a soccer pitch, plenty of car parking, showering and changing facilities etc. but what do you get for your 7 hard earned pound coins after you enter a Cross County Race?

Primarily you get a race but you also get a warm welcome from the host club whose distinctive blue strip is now seen at every race up and down the country.

You get changing facilities, you get a cup of tea/coffee, sandwiches, tray bakes, cakes, scones, you name it.

If you had a dog, you could even take home a fully loaded doggy bag of goodies.

After the race, you get a chance to sit down and have a natter with somebody beside you who looks equally knackered.

You get the change to wear a shirt to represent your club – in my case Springwell.

I can't over estimate how good it makes you feel when you realise you are not just running for yourself but for a club, therefore a cause.

There is the Northern Ireland Cross Country League and we had 6 purple shirts there and by finishing the race, I was able to contribute to the team which scored points in the league.

Thanks to the help of runners like Simon Stewart (who recently ran and outstanding 2 hours 35 minutes at the Frankfurt Marathon the team finished fourth despite me being 8 minutes behind super star Simon, I still felt I contributed something.

But the main thing your seven quid gets you is a race, a genuine honest to God heart stopping, lung shattering race.

By the time our event was due to start at 1pm, there had been 3 or 4 other races on it so the course truly was a mud fest.

You know the sort of mud that would stop a Massey Ferguson in its tracks, yeah, that type of mud.

The start line even had some grass on it – that lasted all of 50 metres.

After the first left hand corner you are confronted by a seemingly endless (probably only about a 100 metres) hill which more resembles a wall.

I am fairly sure I saw a mountain goat with an oxygen mask somewhere near the top, bleating about how horrendous the climb was.

Of course, there were spectators precariously hanging onto the ropes the length of the hill trying to encourage you (but secretly saying their prayers of gratitude they weren't on your side of rope).

To say conditions underfoot weren't treacherous would be a bit like saying that Boris Johnston is a straight talking guy and that Guy Fawkes was merely misunderstood.

This was mud with a capital M.

I wheezed.

You give what you have got until you can give no more.

It's like banging your head against a brick wall, once you stop it is wonderful.

As I limped off to the changing rooms, I wondered if the fast guys had left me any hot water.

My dodgy heel now has a week to recover until the next cross country race in Gransha, 6 kilometres of pure fun, muddy marvellous!

I would like to end this column – and the year – by saying thanks and paying tribute to the fantastic instructors in the Roe Valley Leisure Centre.

They are all top class – enthusiastic, knowledgeable, helpful, inspirational.

They do the same exercises as you but they at the same time, they have to shout like a Sergeant Major!

The classes are also great value. £20 gets you your basic months membership of the gym (which you can use 7 days a week, up to 12 hours a day) but for an extra £10 you get classes for an entire month which include Kettle Bells (Sean), Spinning and Swimming (Mervyn) Pump, HIIT and Total Body Workout (Willard, Simon, Jacinta) Yoga and Pilates, Mellow Movers, Tai Chi – you name it, the RVLC has it covered!

You have no need for a New Year's Resolution, or even a Revolution.

You just need to turn up with a few quid, sign up and prepare to be pushed (in an enjoyable way) to achieve your new goals.

As I tried to alternatively limp and sprint my way round the course, it came as no surprise that I was lapped on my 3rd lap by the leaders who were on their last lap.

I looked at them, two arms, two legs, same as me, so how come they were 10 minutes ahead of me?

They were running each mile 2 minutes 30 seconds faster than I was in this gloop, hats off I say, deep respect.

Eventually, just before it got dark I dragged my weary carcass across the finish line of the fourth lap.

I even passed a few guys on Zimmer frames which had got stuck in the mud but the finish line was as ever, a wonderful place to be.

You sink onto your knees, try and suck in some oxygen into your parched lungs, not sure whether to throw up or laugh at my own ineptitude.

Maybe if I hadn't high fived a group of fans from the Ballymena Club in one corner or avoided some showboating at a premature finish line, I would have finished a few seconds sooner but it would still just have hurt just at much.

What I love about cross county is quite simply, that it is gloriously pointless.

You are never going to get a PB, your time is irrelevant, your time this year compared to your time last year is meaningless as the conditions could be a 100 percent different but it is truly, madly, deeply satisfying on every level.

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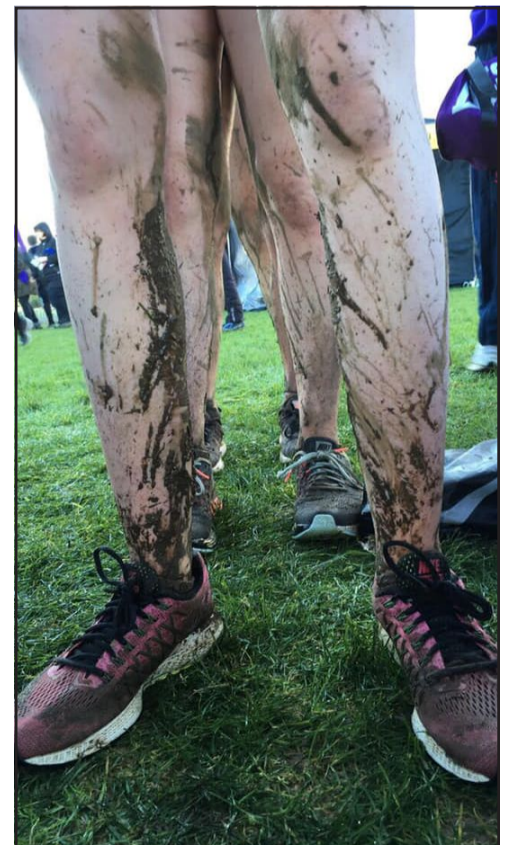
You just need to turn up with a few quid, sign up and prepare to be pushed (in an enjoyable way) to achieve your new goals.

You will love it – hopefully I will see you there!

Happy (sporting) New Year!



All the lads at the end. NCL51-21s



Knee deep in mud. NCL51-20s

disappointment.

You plough on through hoping that one of your cross country shoes doesn't come off in the glar and stay there (I passed two blokes who were just wearing trail shoes and they resembled Bambi on Ice).

Just when my pulse was coming down from the roof, there was suddenly now enough mud to make even the muddiest of pigs happy.

Of course, the mud contained freezing water and very soon this freezing water was in your shoes, in your socks and halfway up your calves.

If you like your socks to be the same colour on the finish line as they were on the start line, then cross county is not for you.

Generally, I take the hose to my cross country shoes in the back yard when I make it home to take most of a ploughed field off them and out of them.

I then wash them in the sink, then stuff them with newspaper to allow them to dry for a week but as for the socks they are usually for the skip as they are impossible to restore to their former glory.

Meanwhile, back in Cookstown just when I thought there was no mud left, there was a whole sheugh load of it.

Firstly, on an uphill, then on a steep downhill where my main concern was not to faceplant. Every step you had to pull your foot up of what seemed to be treacle or wet concrete.

After a relatively short nearly mud free benign sprint of 100 metres you were back to the start line – only three more laps to go.....

I had started the race under a bit of a handicap (apart from being too old and too slow of course) i.e. an Achilles heel problem.

I have had all sorts of interesting injuries over the years (Triathlon is very generous that way) usually hamstrings and calves, back, bust ribs, broken clavicle etc. but the Achilles heel was a new one, even for me.

I tested it earlier in the morning at the Limavady Park Run where it started to flare up after a mile and funnily enough, it was still sore two miles later.

Several hours later in Cookstown I didn't even make it ten yards before I thought someone was sticking hot needles into the back of my Achilles.

When you have an injury, you try to work round it.

You try to compensate, you try to use other muscle groups but there is not much you can do about a dodgy heel, you just try to limit the range of movement as much as you can.

By this stage of course your lungs are on fire, your heart thinks it needs a pacemaker and you are a vicious mixture of being too hot (from working so hard) and freezing cold (everything below your knees is practically numb).