

# Will Purple Reign reign?!

**IT was the middle of the night. My teammates (Fran McFadden, Will Colvin and Steven Miles) and I were competing in a 24 hour relay race in Belfast.**

We were already beyond tired I was on the graveyard shift i.e. 1am to 3am I had done six miles and still wanted to do another six but time seemed to be standing still.

This was session two out of three sessions and if you are doing "intervals", this was always going to be the tough one.

For the first two hours, you are full of energy and enthusiasm; for the last one, you are full of anticipation of the final finish line but during the second one, there is only the feeling of dread that no matter what you achieve now, you are going to have to do it all over again in six hour's time.

3.00 am came and I gratefully handed over to Steven.

Will and Fran were both recovering and getting ready for their next stint, so I grabbed my rucksack and limped over to the shower room. At 3.15am, on a Sunday morning, I was immersing myself in a freezing cold shower with 25 miles done evaluating my own sanity – or lack of!

We had all gone mad on the colour purple and one of our team had even painted their fingernails purple!

Ten minutes later, I made my way to the physio porta cabin but there were too many bodies in the queue so I went back to Stevens's brilliant van (which he had adapted to include a double bed, a fridge, and he even threw a kitchen sink in! i.e. everything you need for a 24 hour race!) where I disturbed Andrew Kincaid (who although he was a fellow Springwell runner had been drafted into a team from Ballymena only three days previously, what bravery!) and we both lay and pretended to sleep.

Despite being in a four seasons sleeping bag that would keep me warm on a mountain top, I was still chilled to the bone.

My energy system had given everything it had to propel me for a two hour running stint and I had nothing left now to keep me warm.

It had been up five degrees centigrade during the night which hadn't helped either.

At about 6 am, when by now it was bright sunlight, Steven came back into the van so I emerged from my cocoon to allow the owner of the van to actually lie down in it!

I had a bar and a handful of nuts for breakfast and then shuffled back to the madness where I managed to grab a great bowl of porridge with an outrageous amount of honey (give me carbs! give me calories!) as well as a cup of double strength coffee.

The queue for the physio at 8.00am wasn't too bad, in fact Fran was on the table.

She had completed her third stint and had done 14/13/12 miles in her three sessions. I was hoping for 13/12/11.

Fran was getting some physio to help her get ready to run more during the week. Personally, I didn't want to see my running shoes for at least a week!

The physio Alan and his predecessor David several hours earlier were both great guys.

A physiotherapist not only looks after you physically but in the middle of the night, he becomes a counsellor, a guru and a part time psychologist as well.

In the long dark night of the soul during a 24 hour race, meeting a top bloke like Alan was a real boost for the morale.

I went back to our tent to strap on my race number (299) then my heart rate monitor, apply much needed vaseline and generally tried to psych myself up for one last charge.

I felt no more like running hard for two hours than I did of sticking red hot poker into the soles of my feet – which funnily enough, I was just about to do.

The surface for the run wasn't tarmac but concrete which can be really unforgiving. Several of the competitors later on in the 24 hour race abandoned

their shoes and were running in their sock soles or even flip-flops and I saw some blisters in the medical tent which would have put you off podiatry for life.

I wasn't sure if it was sleep deprivation or disorientation or hallucination but at one stage during my nocturnal ramblings on this one mile loop, I had an epiphany.

The words of Gary Lightbody in a Snow Patrol song kept playing on a perpetual loop in my brain – "This is all I ever wanted from life" – despite the fact that this infernal, eternal, endless run was the last thing I wanted in my life at 2 o'clock in the morning!

It was now finally approaching 9.00am. The sun had been up for about four and half hours and I had to convince my mind and body that I wanted to run for another two hours.

The daylight had recharged both the 24 hour merchants and their support crews.

The last 150 metres of the loop was lined with marquees and tents on both sides.

Some these tents were massive and would have graced Glastonbury.

There was nothing wrong with our wee tent but we were all now suffering from tent envy.

Some tents contained their own massage tables, some had stoves where their lucky competitor could grab a bacon butty or an energy drink or a gel or a handful of jelly babies or some fruit – there was enough food and drink here to open your own local store.

There were even microwaves and boilers so we could make our own grub.

Most of the athletes hadn't had any sleep – neither had the officials or race crew.

Unlike most long distance races, you didn't have to wear a bum belt or a rucksack – there was simply no need to take supplies, every lap you got the chance to either to take your own stuff or the stuff the organisers had laid on for you.

As a race organisation, it was faultless.

Even they however couldn't do anything about the concrete surface which had to be endured by all.

Five minutes past 9.00am, Will came sprinting up the straight, great relief for him, but not for me!

Off I trotted, my aim was 11 minute laps. It didn't sound like much for just over a mile but I quickly realised this was the maximum possible I could extract from my beleaguered system.

There is no doubt that we all tried harder because we were representing our club, Springwell and we were in our own special team – "Purple Reign".

If I had been a solo competitor I might still have run 13 laps in the first two hours but I certainly wouldn't have managed 12 and 11 laps in the last two sessions. It was the need of the team that drove us on.

Any individual pain would be consumed by the collective pride we would all feel when getting our days' work done.

We laid it all out there, we left nothing back in the locker room.

I quickly worked out that 11 laps in the 1 hour 55 minutes available to me meant 10minute 30 seconds a lap.

My inbuilt computer quickly adjusted to that pace and lo and behold after mile, one 10 minutes 30 seconds had elapsed and I crossed under the clock gantry to signify another lap ticked off.

By this stage we could all have run this loop with our eyes closed and as for the 24 hour guys who were embarking on their 100th or 130th laps, they must have been suffering from deja vu... the sun was up and we were being baked, as most of the course was exposed and acted like a fan oven.

Some passers-by who had wandered into Victoria Park with their kids to use their play park, looked on in a mixture of amazement and incredulity as we fought our way round.

The view was like a scene from Dante's Inferno and as these modern day Sleep Monsters, valiantly battled their way round lap after lap.

In a normal race when you pass somebody, you



**Purple Reign on the finish line. NCL28-05s**

normally say "nearly there!" but I am not sure how what would have been received by a competitor who still had four hours to go out of his or her 24 hours.

I had gone for some more physio at 7.00 am where my new best friend Alan took one look at my legs and told me I wasn't drinking enough.

I topped up before emerging for one last crusade where I got a chance to chat to the great Helena Dornan. Despite me running 11 laps, I only passed Helena once, that shows you her metronomic speed.

Any time you see Helena running, she looks as if she is out for a wee stroll, nothing phases her. She doesn't do it for the glory just the personal satisfaction.

She wanted to beat her distance last year of 109 miles – and she did, with an extra seven miles.

She is one year older yet she getting faster - what a performance!

Fourteen nationalities were represented in the field and 26 counties from the Island of Ireland were also represented.

This really was a national and international outpouring of persistence and dedication.

One German competitor started to list to one side like the battleship Bismarck in 1941 in the Atlantic Ocean.

It was as much as this poor guy could do to stay upright – but he was still running!

I managed to hit my mark every lap and once I got to half way, I told myself I had "only" 5 1/2 more laps to go, so I played a mental game with myself.

Just do one more lap, just another 10 minutes 30 seconds. Okay, just one more lap, now, we are down to three.

What's three more miles? Keep going, keep moving, keep plodding, just keep on keeping on.....

Soon it was two, where I was bang on the money with another 10.30 lap. Eventually after what seemed like 10 hours, not 10 minutes the marquees appeared in the heat haze and then I was in the relay hand over point, gratefully giving the wrist band to Steven who was saying "well done and how are you?"

I may have mouthed a reply but I had nothing left, I was exhausted physically and psychologically.

I was wrecked from lack of sleep.

I had done 36 laps (37 miles) and I had nothing left to give, strangely enough it was a lovely feeling!

I pitied poor Steven who was about to embark into the worst of the days savage heat.

After another cold shower, (the boiler had blown up!) and some grub I joined Fran and Will and everybody else near the start/finish line as we whooped and hollered for Steven and Andrew and every single one of the relay and 24 hour heroes.

I couldn't believe some of these 24 hour guys were actually getting quicker with 30 minutes left to go.

Was it the adrenaline, the endorphins? Or is this what true madness looks like?!

A lot of them had over 100 miles on the clock and they were now getting faster.

There was nothing in science or logic or nature to explain this phenomena.

I metaphorically removed my hat to pay my respects to each and everyone of these modern day Gladiators.

Whilst we appear as a nation to be breeding an obese race, on the other hand we have a very slim group of super fit, Uber endurance athletes.

24 hours after the party started, the hooter sounded and all of the competitors could finally stop their marathon effort.

The referees quickly ran out to count how many metres they had completed of their final lap to make the final tally.

The rest of Purple Reign embraced Steven as we all thanked each other for a terrific team effort.

Medals, a bottle of beer and salad were distributed and received warmly.

What a unique event! We had managed 238K (148 miles).

It was really cheap to enter (I have done dearer sprint Triathlons) and it was incredibly well organised and it was a privilege to rub shoulders with some of the most dedicated athletes on the planet.

If you want to challenge yourself in a team environment and providing you don't like sleep too much, this race is for you!

Purple Reign had reigned.

As I sat in the car for the tiring journey home, I glanced at my finger nails still resplendently purple, oops, better buy some nail varnish remover on the way home.....



**Andrew Kincaid and Steven Miles sharing the miles together. NCL28-04s**



**Fran McFadden approaching the end of another lap. NCL28-03s**