



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

ATHLONE labels itself "The heart of Ireland". It certainly represents the beating heart of the sport of Triathlon on this Island.

I have been going down to this lovely city, perched on both sides of the River Shannon and straddling two counties, for about eight years and have been privileged to commentate on various big races including the European Championships (won by Alistair Brownlee and Nicola Spirig, who both then went on to win the Olympics) and the races there were first organised by Hugh McAtamney and now Liam Heavin and their phenomenally hard working dedicated race crew.

This year however, I wanted to do something different, I wanted to both hold a mic and spout the usual blather for the sprint races, then the next day, take part in the race known as "The Middle Distance Championship".

What is a Middle Distance Triathlon?

Well, strange as it may seem a Middle Distance Race can take up to seven hours, but is merely a half Ironman distance i.e. the swim is a mere 1.9KM (1.2 miles), the bike ride is a doddle at 90K (56 miles) and the run is a mere stroll in the park of 21K/13.1 miles.

In what other sport could that possibly be called 'Middle'?

On the same weekend my young TTC club mate, James Walton was representing Triathlon Ireland and gaining his first International cap at an ETU race in Holten, Holland. While James is at the start of his suc-

cessful Triathlon career, I am at the end of my unsuccessful Triathlon career! This year, I had no real appetite for an Ironman race, so I have decided to do three Half Ironmen races. Athlone, being the first and in four weeks' time it's the Dublin 70.3 (where I am representing Rotary International and not TTC for once). Then at the end of August, it's the big show between me and my bud-die, Mark Kinkaid, at the Newry "Borderman". I still think that a race over 70.3 miles is long enough that a finish is still a win. Anything else is a bonus.

Have you ever heard the phrase "Failure to Prepare, is to Prepare to Fail"? Well that summed up my race preparations for Athlone.

I had been down to Dublin Airport twice in three days to bring home my globe-trotting children, then after a few hours' sleep I was fighting my way past tractor drivers and Saturday morning shoppers for the four plus hours to "the heart of Ireland".

When I got there I discovered I had forgotten my race belt, I had brought the wrong tri suit (with no back pockets for food etc.) and I had no safety pins, i.e. I was a walking disaster.

Gerard Turbitt, a stalwart of the Omagh club, came to my rescue with a race belt and pins and I got round the problem of no pockets by deciding to wear a bike jersey on top of the tri suit, not perhaps the most sartorial of

THE ATHLONE HALF

outfits but hopefully practical enough to hold my gels, bananas and sweets on race day.

First however was the commentating gig for the Super Sprint and tri-a-tri races. These events are by their definition short and fast and a lot of fun for spectators, if not for the protagonists, who are going flat out. There were hundreds involved including visiting Americans from Chicago and Ohio. Can you imagine what they were contributing to the local tourist economy?

It's no wonder that Liam Heavin receives bags of support from the local Council. An event of this size demands closed roads so there was lots of liaison work with the Garda, the Order of Malta, Civil Defence, Waterways Ireland, Triathlon Ireland, Chamber of Trade and Commerce and is it any wonder that a Race Director looks punch drunk on the Sunday night after more than a 1,000 people have raced - and then parted - for two days non-stop?

A Win for Our Twin Town!

First across the line was a 15-year-old Ben Walsh from Westport. The most famous thing about Westport is that it is twinned with Limerick. The Twinning Charter stresses the importance of the economic social tourist and cultural links but alas, sport doesn't get a look in. We have got James Walton and they have got Ben Walsh, perhaps we could form a joint team! They have also got triathlete Con Doherty, who is about to join the TI Senior Elite squad, so there must be something in the waters of Co. Mayo...

During and after the race there were live bands, fire eaters, face painters and a real carnival in Burgess Park, all the fun of the fair folks, roll up, roll up....

I had the privilege of interviewing Conor Murphy, ITU, Irish elite triathlete who has been racing on the world circuit for the last few years and also Robbie Henshaw, Ireland's centre who is looking forward to the World Cup in September, they are both humble heroes.

The hooper sounded and we were off, I was sporting a brand new sexy pair of goggles that promised fantastic vision, with all the bells and whistles and they would on no account fog up at all..... I could see diddly squat. I swam a bit, stopped, treaded water, took off the goggles, rinsed them, put them back on, 50 meters later I might as well have been in a coal mine. With my eyes closed. At least I wasn't in the sea where navigation really is an issue. The very worst I could do here was to swim into a river bank, or a railway bridge.

We had two sharp turns in the first 200

metres, by this stage I had been punched, kicked and elbowed by people I didn't even know.

Whoever said that triathlon was a non-contact sport?

At one stage I thought I was sharing a ring with Connor McGregor..... Eventually with the end in sight (and if you don't get out at the right spot, then you disappear over a weir), the heavens opened and it absolutely lashed down. This might sound weird, but I love swimming when it's pouring down, it just feels... appropriate. I stopped to apologise to one of the kayakers who actually looked wetter than me.

There was a long transition before stumbling into the tent to tear off a wetsuit to try and change into what passes for a cyclist. As this was only my third open water swim of the year, I was happy with my forty minute time - only twenty minutes behind the leader! I didn't want to damage the new cleats on my bike shoes, so I ran in my socks on the soaked roads to the mount line, where I saddled up, pushed down on the pedals and twenty yards later was confronted with a master hill - thanks Liam!

It was good however to be working hard to get warmed up. There were a few wet testing hills on the way out of Athlone and the roads were still soaked. I heard the blues and twos of an ambulance roar past me and I guessed that one of my fellow competitors was in trouble, sure enough, two minutes later, I came across the prostrate, comatose figure of an athlete. She was unconscious under a blanket, thankfully she wasn't under a shroud, but she didn't look good. I later learned that she eventually recovered but her race was over. I decided to curb my enthusiasm on wet tyres, on wet, unfamiliar roads.

In the "failure to prepare" stakes, I again had excelled myself, I had put on my go-faster deep rimmed wheels, which didn't have the right technology to link with my bike computer, i.e. I had no idea what speed I was doing, how far I had gone, what my average was.

I committed the same cardinal error in the Ironman race in Copenhagen two years ago, where I had sailed along drinking in the soups and sights of Denmark's pretty capital, being oblivious as to how near I was to the bike cut off time.... Anyway, I went north into Lanesborough, then west to Rosscommon, then south, eventually back towards Athlone. I came across quite a few punctured, dispirited looking cyclists who had perhaps been biking in the hard shoulder, that's never a good idea, because that's where all

the debris from the roads ends up, especially if it's wet. I got five punctures in an Ironman race once, and I don't want to repeat that. I like establishing a presence on the road, not the hard shoulder and making the car driver aware of my presence.

We had two food stops at 40K and 70K, so I had a vague idea of my pace. I loaded up with energy gels and lots of fluid, as it was now oppressively warm. I thought it was only Melbourne that had four seasons in one day, but Athlone can now lay claim to that particular versatility as well.

Failure to Prepare Part 5

Last week while out on an early morning bike ride before work, my gears refused to move out of the big ring, that maybe ok on the flat roads around Benone, but not so good on hills when your legs are getting trashed after three hours of effort and you should be spinning more and grinding less. The wind was momentarily on my back so I changed up into the big ring and for five minutes I could have given Bradley Wiggins a run for his money, of course when I tried then to change down, my gear ring stubbornly refused to my entreaties, curses and threats...

I entered the welcom-

ing sanctuary of Athlone after 90KM, after a total bike time of about 3ish hours into the relief of T2. I tore off my sodden bike top to reveal the splendour of the TTC tri suit. I was so proud of my two TTC club mates, Stephen Keown and Geroid Comerney, who, seven days previously, had conquered Ironman Nice in their club kit and they still had the energy after 14+ hours of effort to jump up and touch the overhead clock on the finish line, so I donned my Hoka shoes and off I lurched into the unknown....

Although I had been commenting in Athlone for donkeys I had no idea of the course, so it was great to be not only talking the talk, but walking the walk.

We had three laps of just over 7K to do, that took us down past the oldest pub in Ireland (Sean's Bar) where I grabbed a mouthful of beer from a startled punter on laps two and three and then away into the countryside on an out and back course where I could see my fellow strugglers. After each lap, you get a different coloured hair band to signify your progress. As I hit the first lap I glanced covetously at blokes with hairbands which were red (lap 1) white (lap 2) and black (the much prized 3rd lap memento). I was beside a bloke who was one more wrist band than I did. "How much would

it cost for me to buy that red hair band of yours?" He wheezed back "it's priceless" and indeed it was. An hour later I was trotting in that space between sanity and insanity when a bloke beside me remarked "I never thought I would suffer from hairband envy". I wonder if that is a recognisable medical condition ("Doctor, I have this problem, I have a desperate urge to accumulate different coloured hairbands....").

My first goal in a race of this distance is to finish. My second goal was then to set a realistic time. My third goal was not to stop running. I started the 3rd discipline with about 4 hours 18 on the clock so I thought I could finish before 6.30, then I got greedy. I have only run the half marathon distance about 4 times this year, but I felt great. In the words of the late great Lowell George of Little Feat, "Feet Don't Fail Me Now" and they didn't as I brought it home in 6.13.

My clubmate Cheryl Cardwell, Philip Owens and Brian Scullion all were well under 5 hours 20. Cheryl finished 4th in her age group shortly after her bronze medal in the European Duathlon Championships in Madrid.

I may have been 2 hours and 15 minutes behind the winner Kevin Thornton, but boy, I bet you my glass of Erdingerbeer afterwards tasted just as good as his!



Female winner Derval Devaney. NCL29-301s



Swimming action in the Middle Distance Championships in Athlone last weekend. NCL29-302s



The swim in a Middle Distance Championship Triathlon is a mere 1.9KM (1.2 miles)! NCL29-303s



The Men's winner Kevin Thornton winning 3.58. NCL29-300s