

SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

'Veni Vidi'



Swim over, halfway through biking. NCL25-28s



Completely finished on the finish line. NCL25-27s



A well earned post race recovery drink. NCL25-22s

WHEN Julius Caesar issued these immortal words "Veni Vidi Vici" as he was laying waste to most of Western Europe, it was unlikely that he had an Ironman Triathlon in mind.

But that was my plan. Could I say after Ironman Venice that "I came, I saw, I conquered" too? There were six members of the Triangle Triathlon Club on the start line. We had entered months ago in the long hours of darkness and it seemed light-years away. Suddenly it was upon us. My club mates William O'Kane, Iain O'Kane, Alan McElhinney, Stephen Morrison and Mervyn Kelly were all in good nick. Although this was my 'A' race this year in terms of priority, I hadn't exactly given it the ideal preparation.

Organising a race and doing MC in London and Galway in the weekends before had taken up a lot of physical and mental reserves. I wouldn't say I was running on empty but I did as little as possible in the week before the big day. I managed a straight 3.2K swim in the pool and a couple of bike rides and that was it.

After two bus trips, we were in TI in Dublin Airport lugging the worst bit of kit anybody travelling could wish for - a bike bag/box. We landed on a day of holiday in Treviso Airport and buses were like hen's teeth. So we managed to get five blokes, five rucksacks and five bikes into the back of a taxi - no mean feat!

When we got to the hotel, we nervously opened up our bike bags to see if our method of transport was still in a serviceable condition. Thankfully all was good. We built the bikes, left them in a service room and got the bus over the causeway into Venice.

CHALLENGE VENICE

The race was called Challenge Venice which was a bit of a misnomer. If you were doing a race in Venice, you might think that parts of the swim, bike and run course might actually pass through the ancient city... you would be wrong.

In the same way that Ironman Barcelona is actually based in Calella (25 miles north), Challenge Venice only had the swim start in one of the world's most famous cities.

Some races dominate the local landscape, for instance, the race in Roth in Southern Germany. Roth is a town of 15,000 souls, yet it attracts 200,000 spectators to watch 2,600 athletes do the Iron distance. There were 800 or so entered for Challenge Venice, but as

Venice has tens of thousands of tourists a day, we were never going to leave more than a mere footprint. Talking of footprints, we had been told at the previous briefing to be careful of our carbon footprint and not to litter on the course, otherwise we would be DQ'd. We hadn't come all the way from Limavesgas to Venice to get a DNF/DQ.

On Friday we saw the sights and did what tourists normally do - walk around Piazza San Marco, got lost in the myriad of back streets and gazed in awe at the timeless sight of Gondolas (there used to be thousands but there are only 407 Gondoliers, each with a licence to print money) plying up and down the amazing network of canals.

Venice is city built entirely on water and is nearly 1000 years old. It was built with millions of the myriad of back streets and these were successfully overlaid with horizontal planks and then marble like Istrian stone slabs, which served as the foundations for the magnificent buildings perched on top of them. No cars, no vehicular transport of any kind, just Gondolas and Water Taxis. The last place I had been without roads or vehicles was eastern Nepal, but this was rather different...

For 7.50, you were transported from the train station on the edge of Venice back in time under the Rialto Bridge (Shakespeare wondered in 'Romeo and Juliet' if there was any news from the Rialto - well, the latest news for the Bard is that the famous bridge is currently closed for repairs).

PREPARATION

Our hotel was the race headquarters which made everything fairly handy. The logistics however, dictated that you had to get to the race start, you had to then get up before 4am (not a problem if you're already awake from 2.15am with pre-race nerves), wolf down an early breakfast, then walk more than a kilometre to check your bike, then get a bus for 4K into Venice then walk or get the water taxi to the start line.

We had registered on the Friday which went very smoothly. We were given the usual array of bags - one for your bike clothes, one for your run clothes and one for "street clothes" which is what you changed into after you had finished. We also had stickers for the bike and a helmet and a list of 'Do's and Don'ts'. I looked at the Challenge Venice pre-race newspaper and although it was in Italian, I was startled to discover my name printed there twice. I have no idea

what I am meant to have said or done as my Italian is non-existent, hopefully it was all good!

When the taxi left us off, we had been joined by Steve from Monterey, a fellow Ironman and Rotarian. Rather than take the water taxi, we enjoyed a slow 20 minute walk through the famous back streets.

As young couples weaved their way back home after a late night of carousing, we were walking in the other direction trying to expend as little energy as possible. Wetsuits over our arms, we tried to lighten the mood by talking about anything other than the Challenge that lay ahead.

IRONMAN

We were there at 5.20 am which was well over an hour to the start and there was not much to do except get more nervous.

The PA system had been pumping out AC/DC and Aerosmith from 5.45am, but then just before the start, we were serenaded by Pavarotti's 'Nessun Dorma' just to remind us where we were. If we weren't up for this race before then, we certainly were now!

The youngsters i.e. my five club mates all under the age of 50, were wearing white hats and their wave was called forward-ed. There was a rolling start for each age group. The pros had a deep water start. Soon it was only the old timers left. Steve and I talked about our respective Rotary Clubs and before we knew it we emerged trying to get away onto the pier on the Jewish quarter of Venice. Five hundred years of history were all around us - could we make our own history? I had 14 Ironman finishes from 14 Ironman starts - could I make it 15 out of 15?

I knew this race was going to be my last. The constraints to racing in an Ironman means that you have to put everything else on hold. If you want to do the race justice, you have to forgo everything else. With so many other plates to spin, my only hope was that my plate

would still be spinning in about 14 hours time.

Steve and I were helped off the ramp into the water at about 6.45am and I immediately found my feet on rough stones. Some guys got cut feet which is not a good start to your day!

This fate happened to my club mate Alan, and he spent 40 minutes in the medical tent after the biking section before being allowed onto the run course, having his wounds treated.

Our Brazilian friend Ronaldo had a bike crash when he went over the handlebars at 53k after hitting a railway sleeper, both he and his bike were patched up and he still finished. Cut feet, bandaged arms, damaged bike and you still finish... that's what the Ironman is all about. If I finished I would get the same medal of Murano Venetian glass and t-shirt as the winner.

The Challenge race series is in opposition to the Ironman, they are rivals and different brands like Nike and Adidas. They both race over the same distance i.e. a 3.8K swim, 180K bike and a 42.2K run. Ironman was there first. Challenge want to provide a friendlier, less corporate alternative. If you finish high in your age group in an Ironman race anywhere in the world, you are invited to take part and allowed to go to Mecca i.e. the World Championships in Kona, Hawaii. You get to dance on the same dance floor as the Gods of our sport. Challenge has lots of races, in fact there is another in Galway in three weeks to which four of my club mates are going. At the prize giving on the day after our race, the Challenge family (as they like to be called) announced their first ever World Championship to be held in Slovakia in 2017 and you are invited if you finish in the top 6 in your age group - I don't think that would apply to me...

THE SWIM

If you want to run well in an Ironman, you have to bike well...why? So that when you start your run you are not ham-

pered from the bike. If you want to bike well, you want to swim well... so that you are not tired when you start your bike.

If you want to swim well in an Ironman... well, you have to have done a lot of swimming. I hadn't, but I found the swim easy. The course was super easy to navigate. There were wooden pylons in the Lagoon to our right with 3.8K of red and white (the Challenge colours) tape linking everything. To the left was the Causeway to Venice. We had two islands to swim past. The temperature was grand, zero visibility but this was a lagoon not the Adriatic (I'd be in that the next day off the Lido for a bit of R&R).

A Japanese competitor was in difficulties so I summoned one of the many rescue boats for her and I ploughed on. I didn't kick once. Crawl is normally about 90 percent arm, but 10 percent of your power is meant to come from your legs, but in a long race, particularly when you are wearing a wetsuit and when your legs are going to be busy for the next 14/15 hours, there is no point in kicking.

Eventually I heard the MC's voice booming out from the PA... always a good sign. I noticed buzzards circling above the second island looking down wistfully at some slow moving potential early breakfast - so I hurried along...

Two blokes on the finish ramp helped us out. Some guys again got cuts here but I was lucky. 1 hour 12 minutes on the watch, first discipline over, I felt I hadn't burned a single match. What's a match? Well when you do a long distance race you have the equivalent of 10 matches in a box - that's basically your energy system. You can burn them all at once or you can burn them slowly during the race but the idea is to burn your last one as you sprint up the finish ramp. Swim done and I still had 10 left.



The finish line the day before. The calm before the storm.