

**SPORTING MATTERS**

**BY PETER JACK**

# LAST ONE STANDING (2)

LAST weekend saw the birth of a unique unprecedented race in the running calendar – it was a run until you drop type race. The race was as long as you want it to be. For some runners, that meant 12 miles, for others that meant 112 miles.

It was called Last One Standing (LOS) and was held at Castleward (where a lot of Games of Thrones has been filmed – there was even a tour for GOT fans during the race). The idea behind LOS was a really simple one – everyone started at 12.00 noon and ran a 4.2 mile lap. You then had the option of starting lap 2 at 1.00pm, lap 3 at 2.00 pm, etc. Some people wanted to run longer than they have ever done before, some people wanted to challenge themselves, some people wanted to win the event and be the Last One Standing.

My aim was more modest, I just wanted to push myself into uncharted territory. If I could do 10 laps, that would be 3 miles longer than I had gone before, but if I could do 12 laps, that would bring up the magic 50 miles....

The Springwell Running Club were well represented with nine weekend warriors. We were there, not only to represent our club and our town but to raise a few quid for two great Rotary charities, Shelter Box and Jole Rider. Could we run over 500 miles between us? To achieve that target would take a lot of effort but as the man says, "No guts, No Glory" and could we raise £1.00 for the charities per mile?

I travelled down the night before and stayed in a beautiful B&B on the other side of Strangford Lough. As I boarded the ferry the next morning on the way back to Castleward, I mused that the last time I had been here, I had swum across the Lough in the International Portaferry Triathlon. I remember the water as being some

of the coldest I had ever experienced. The good news was that I was merely running on the shores of Strangford Lough, not swimming in it.

I somehow managed to persuade the marshals to allow me to get my car onto the main Courtyard in Castleward, 5 metres away from the Finish Line, to be greeted by my Springwell colleagues, Peter Cromie, Stephen Rainey, John Butcher, Aidan Devine and Archie McNeill who had arrived nice and early. They all looked fit and ready to go. We were soon joined by Glenda Whiteside, Jason Scott and Fran McFadden. We started to prepare by putting out our chairs and laying out our food, drink and painkillers.

We commandeered a shed just 10 metres away from the Finish Line/Starting area. Soon the place was filling up with runners from all over the British Isles and even from France.

I got the impression that those athletes who had travelled a considerable distance weren't just here for the soda bread and the Tayto crisps – they were in it to win.

**CHICKEN SUIT**

I met a nice bloke called Richard who was dressed up in a chicken suit (as you do). His idea was to do the first lap in the suit and his las lap in it as well.

He wanted to go the whole 48 hours. He hadn't even booked a B&B for the Saturday or Sunday night because he didn't want a plan 'B' or a get-out clause. He was training to run from John O'Groats to Land's End, ie, 40 miles a day

for 30 days in a row. He also hung up a rubber chicken in our barn which I would squeak every lap symbolically, no idea why! But after 24 miles, it seemed like a logical thing to do!

I deliberately had not looked at our proposed 4.2 mile route as I knew I would be seeing enough of it over the next 5/6/7 hours. Earlier in the day, there was a race for normal people over 1 lap and also 2 laps, ie, 8.4 miles. Then it was our turn. In most events, you know where the Finish Line is but on this occasion we didn't. Would the Finish Line be 8.4 miles or 12.6 or 16.8, etc? You had to steel yourself mentally for the rigours that lay ahead. There was a great deal of anticipation during the minutes before kick off as we got ourselves ready. Most races start with a bang so it was a weird feeling on the start line to be walking over it, smiling and chatting. In most long races, you carry a back pack with food and drink but there was no need in this race because you would keep your supplies at transition. We had so much food and fuel there we could have opened up a small supermarket.

During the lap, you had time to think about what you wanted to do in 50 minutes time. As the day wore on, I changed my socks, the next lap I changed my shoes, the next lap my shirt, etc. Near the end, when my stomach could no longer accept food, I just concentrated on liquid, be it water, coffee or soup, etc.

Once the event had started the crack on the finish line with MC Glen Grant and music from the

PA kept the atmosphere going. After the dreaded first 60 minutes had passed I heard Queen's 'Another one bites the dust' though I didn't hear Elton John's 'I'm still standing' which would have been more appropriate.

The first mile was dead flat (it was the only bit in the route that was). It was beside the Lough with stunning views over the water. Later on as it got dark, a full moon illuminated the fools on the hills down below in County Down trying to push themselves to grind out one more lap....

After the first mile, the course took a sharp left up into the forest, this was muddy and slippy and a big change of terrain. We had all said we would walk the hills. The course then had a mixture of down and up (but mostly up) for another mile to the half way point which was at Castleward House itself which was elevated high on a hill.

**HEIGHT GAIN**

John Butcher told me, thanks to his Garmin, that there was more height gain here than in our practice lap in the Roe Valley Country Park. There was also a tent where you could help yourself to water and jelly beans. Then it was a strength sapping slog up to a tarmac road (hooray!!) before turning left again into the forest where, finally, you get a bit of downhill. As the course at this point was steep and slippy, you had to be careful there too. Eventually there was a long mainly flat stage through the forest back to the Finish Line, then we rolled back into the wel-

coming area of our barn. I had started with too many layers, including a coat which promised to be rainproof, windproof and breathable, it may have been the first two but it certainly was not breathable. I ditched it and tried something else. The announcer's voice could soon be heard – "5 minutes to go"...., "4 minutes to go". Before you knew it, you were out of your foldable chair and back on the start line but not before you had squeaked the rubber chicken of course! It was that kind of day....

We were lucky with the weather. Barra and his ilk had done their best to put us off with weather forecasts that promised us 40 mile an hour winds and various tempests but it remained dry for the first 18 hours of the event. Obviously, when you are getting tired, your morale can be affected by stupid things like blisters or wet feet or hunger, so you have to hang on and stay 'up' for the whole thing. I had done all my training in the dark in the Country Park and I knew that the event wouldn't really kick in until the grey of the day was replaced with the black of the night.

After our sixth lap (25.2 miles), we donned our head torches and the familiar started to become unfamiliar. What was getting hard in the dusk was getting harder in the dark. You had to keep an extra wary eye out for those tricky tree roots, the puddles seemed deeper, the hills seemed higher. I was running more, walking less and still coming in with less recovery time before the dreaded "One minute to go" announcement. Then it

was time to snap out of my reverie, stand up from the chair, gourd the loins and step once more into the breach.

**TACTICS**

Tactics were important, the faster you ran, the more recovery time you had, but the slower you ran, the more energy you conserved.

Peter Cromie blasted out a 35 minute lap at one stage. Pete is an amazing athlete, he is training for Marathon des Sables, the toughest seven day running stage race on earth. Seven marathons in seven days in the Moroccan desert over sand dunes in 40 degree heat, while carrying all your gear and sleeping in the freezing desert at night. Pete was in Castleward for the long haul, as was Fran McFadden, another Springwell machine. Fran was knocking out 42 minute laps, chatting away to Glenda Whiteside who looked so relaxed and the amazing Helena Doran from Ballycastle. Helena would bike 50 miles to a running race, win the race, have a fag, then bike back. Doesn't seem fair, does it?

My Springwell colleague Aiden started with an injury and his participation had been in doubt all week. Somehow Aiden managed to do more than a marathon before he had to abandon ship.

The rest of us battled on, locked in a lonely struggle, not only with the course, but more importantly with ourselves. You had to really question why you were doing this. If you were in it for the fame and the wealth and the sponsorship, you had picked the wrong race, but if you were in it for a potentially never ending challenge, you could maybe prove, if only to yourself, that in the words of the much missed David Bowie, you could be a Hero – Just For One Day.

On lap eight, my stomach started to send me all sorts of the wrong type of signals. I can put up with a lot during a long distance race, but once the stomach goes, it's time to pull the plug. I tried to steady the pace, to breathe out and use my whole diaphragm until the pain eased. Then all I had to do was worry about all the other pains that were assailing me – back, right ankle, both hips, etc but that's normal so you just dig a bit deeper.

My Springwell colleagues were continuing to make me very proud. Whilst I would start with most of them, they quickly disappeared from view – as Fran walks quicker than I jog, it didn't take long!

Soon, I would be talking to complete strangers in the dark asking how they were.

If they said: "I am quitting at the end of this lap", then I quickly left them as I didn't want to be surrounded by guys who didn't share my mind-set, I didn't want to go at their pace which was perhaps only 58 or 59 minute pace.

**THE USUAL LIES**

My good friend Mark Kinkaid from Warrenpoint appeared, fed me and told me the usual lies, "you are looking great", which every endurance athlete knows is nonsense but is still good for the morale.

Mark said he would drive me to his house so I could kip afterwards and that filip definitely got me through a few more difficult laps. There was a rumour of a place to shower and another rumour of a place to hunker down in your sleeping bag somewhere near the Finish Line, but they were unconfirmed, so the possibility of a real bed was sublime.

When you do any interval session, the penultimate lap is always the hardest and so it proved with lap 11, ie, miles 40 to 44. On the completion of lap 10, I had already waddled further than I had before so I was in PB territory, I was slowing down though. There was a bloke who was somehow limping on both legs and walking, yet he was still going faster than me! There was another bloke using walking poles, but where was my chicken suited friend. Richard had to pull out with plantar fasciitis. Anybody you talked to had a problem, but if you wanted to do well in a race like this, you need to find a solution.

The mind set was all important, I had set myself a goal of 12 laps. So on the 12th lap you could have offered me £10,000.00 to do one more lap and your money would have been safe. Once you reach your physical limit you can do one more on mental strength, once you reach your mental limit you can maybe do one more lap on some inner reserve, but once

that's gone, that's it, you are a busted flush.

But what is the mind-set of the potential winner? He or she had to make sure that their final lap matched whatever their rivals did, plus one more lap. Helena Doran managed that. An English female athlete wanted to do 100 miles, 24 hours, she did that then she immediately pulled out, job done. Helena then did what was needed, ie, 104 miles/25 laps.

Fran also did incredibly well to run all through the night before eventually ending after lap 18, ie, 76 miles.

**HANGING ON**

On lap 12, I found a lot of people like me who were hanging on just to complete that lap ie. 50.4 miles.

A few minutes before midnight, Jason Scott, Glenda Whiteside, Archie McNeill and myself all linked hands and crossed together, job done, permission to collapse granted. However, our brave colleague John Butcher managed to grind out another lap. Stephen Rainey kept going until his stomach rebelled on lap 15. Peter Cromie, joined the 100 mile club after 24 hours (when six people dropped out) and then went another 8 miles. Both Peter Cromie and Fran finished third which was an amazing achievement.

The two remaining athletes, Bobby and Pat kept hammering away at each other until Pat didn't make the cut and Bobby just had to do one more lap. For his 28 hours of effort, Bobby received a medal that declared him to be the Last One Standing. The rest of us received a Did Not Finish medal. I have never been so proud of a DNF in my life.

How far can you push yourself? There is one way to find out. The Last One Standing (year 2) is taking place on February 18 2017. Whether it is one lap or 28, you should give it a go. You have no idea how high you can fly until you try. We managed 543 miles between us on a fabulous day/night in Co. Down – can we beat that total next year?!



All types of competitors took part. NCL09-32s



Limavady athletes Peter Cromie and Fran McFadden with their hard earned medals from the 'Last One Standing'. 09006KDR