



# SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

**WE HAD been on the go for nearly 12 hours, having started at 6am.**

We were on the second day of a brutal challenge. We were in the Mourne's somewhere very high, it was raining, it was misty, we had no food, we had run out of water, we had a wind chill factor of zero and we were dressed in shorts. We were soaked through – and we were lost.

How on earth did we get here? And even more importantly how on earth were we going to get back to somewhere, anywhere, safe that remotely resembled civilisation?

It had all seemed a good idea at the time. My best mate from Warrenpoint had suggested a few months ago that we have a weekend away doing an event called Coast to Coast, organised by 26 Extreme. "Sounds great," I replied on the phone while still reading the sports pages. Mark signed us up, came up with the team name, 'Lazy Legals', and we were on our way.

This event has been run for four years and it involves transporting yourself from one side of Ireland to the other under your own steam. There were two versions available, solo

or team. Being part of a team sounded more fun. For the first time there was an option to go Non Stop. Mark and I liked our sleep too much to even consider that, so it was the two day event for us. You literally couldn't do the race without a crew and Mark's long suffering better half, Catherine, volunteered for a weekend of looking after two moaning cejjits – lucky girl!

The event involved two sections of running, three sections of biking – and one of kayaking. The last time I was in a kayak/canoe, was in the South China sea off Borneo where I had canoeed 16 kilometres around three islands in blissful temperatures. I guessed that kayaking through the Waterways of Ireland might be a different climatic experience, so I phoned up Ray Rowe to ask for a lesson. We found the time for just over an hour on the River Roe from Swanns Bridge up to the Railway Bridge separating the river from the sea. Ray is a fantastic paddler who is capable of anything athletic. He recently ran the entire length of Hadrian's Wall. He had also entered the Coast to Coast as a solo Non Stop competitor

and I was really annoyed to hear that he had to pull out the day before with illness. I have no doubt that next year Ray will hammer this particular race.

We thought we would adopt the same strategy as the temporary residents of Bear Grylls' "Island" i.e. just survive. Mark and I had done lots of stuff in different countries but we hadn't done a two day challenge in many years. Usually it was just a marathon or an Ironman. At least when you woke up on race morning, you had the consolation that whatever pain and difficulties lay ahead, at least you would be wearing a Finishers t-shirt later that same day/night.

Our last two day challenge was the Maracycle. This was a brilliant event organised by Co-operation North

# Coast to Coast – and Beyond!

which involved thousands of cyclists going from Belfast to Dublin and back usually with a sore head at the start of day two. It was a thoroughly enjoyable experience particularly when you were in a peloton of 50 riders sharing the work with a tail wind behind you and on other days, you would have seven hours into a head wind with only your hangover for company...

The good thing about Coast to Coast I reckon was that the prevailing wind is always from the West i.e. we would practically be blown across the country, all we would have to do would be to sit on the bike and steer it. On Friday afternoon after a two hour drive to Warrenpoint, Mark drove the lot of us for 5 hours to get to the far side of Sligo, namely Inniscrone. As I sat there in comfort in a nice warm car, I thought we would have to complete this entire journey over the next two days under our own steam and the only horse power available would be self-generated...

We attended the briefing where I came across my fellow TTC member Paul McErlain of Double Ironman fame, Limavady's Ryan George and also the formidable father and son team of Paul and Blaine Cole. They are all great athletes. Blaine was doing the event to celebrate his 18th birthday, I celebrated my 18th birthday on a train to Dublin for a rugby match and I sure wasn't capable of tackling what has been billed as "Ireland's toughest two day race" and "One of Europe's toughest adventure races."

I felt great to be off the bike. Ten minutes later however when my shoulders turned numb, I pinned to be back on my Cannondale!

The scenery was great with lots of leafy foliage on the river bank. Soon we had our first portage where we had to stumble out of the boat, trying not to fall head first into the river. It felt like we were searching for Colonel Kurtz up the Mekong Delta in "Apocalypse Now". At each of the portages, we would pick up the boat, which suddenly seemed to weigh a ton, and haul it 100 metres to the far side of the lock gate and start again. We had 5 or 6 of these trips to make and at least they woke me up as I felt my eyes closing. At least on the kayak I could close my eyes while still paddling – poor Mark couldn't as he had to steer.

Soon we were on Lough Garridine and we had to navigate towards an island (which we found) and towards a big pointy bit of land (which we did-

n't find). It all looked so simple on a map on dry land... The 8 kayaks which we had overtaken navigated better than us and when we arrived at the half way point they had all caught us up. Catherine was there yet again with life saving coffee and soup and sandwiches and very patiently interpreted our ungrateful monosyllabic grunts as, "Thank you Catherine so much for spending all weekend looking after us because without you we simply wouldn't have a chance of finishing this event."

We noticed the Eanatta boys didn't even get out of their kayak to save time, the cunning rascals, but we appreciated the ability to stand up for

a few minutes to get the blood flowing. Five hours after we started we had finished the longest ever canoe of our lives. We had survived strong winds in three loughs which had tried to capsize us.

Our arms were like lead but we had made it safely to the marina at Ballyconnell on the Shannon – Erne Waterway. One quick change later and we were back on the bike for a mere 13 miles sprint, where for the only time all weekend, I actually felt I was able to contribute something useful to the Lazy Legal team.

Join me next week to see if we can make it across Ireland to finish Coast to Coast in one piece.



One of the leading competitors finishing the run on Inniscrone Beach. wk2222



6.30am Day 1 - Ready to Roll! wk2218



The calm before the storm. wk2228



Hurrah! Five hour canoe trip finished! wk2226



The Limavady contingent at registration. wk2227





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**MY MATE Mark Kinkaid and I had completed Day 1 of the 312 kilometre odyssey across Ireland.**

We had started in Sligo and were now in Lisnaskea, trying to recover before the second and final day of Coast to Coast.

The Share Centre was a tonic for the tired troops. We had a large chalet for the three of us, and we spent most of the time there eating and sleeping after the half time team talk from Ronan, one of the main organisers. As we sat there in the warmth of the restaurant, the non stop guys were hurtling across

Ireland. One bloke, Finbar McGurran was to finish the course in under 17 hours, a few minutes before 5am on Sunday morning in an unbelievable feat of endurance and mental and physical toughness.

Finbar, like us was trekking through the six counties of Sligo, Leitrim, Fermanagh, Cavan, Meath and Down. We had finished the first day in 11 hours – surely Day 2 couldn't be as tough?

Day 2 for us started again at 5am and at 6.12am precisely Mark and I rolled out of the Share Centre. At 6.13am precisely, I was already wet and cold and feeling as if my Duracell batteries

# Coast to Coast and Beyond

- Week 2

needed recharging... I put on a set of bib shorts later to increase my body heat. It rained on us for the next 80 miles and the temperature did not rise above 10°. Pleasant it was not but I discovered a long time ago that if anything comes easy it's not

worth the paper it is written on but if you have to toil and sweat and dig into a deep seam of determination, then you will truly savour the finish line. I was completely useless to Mark on the bike and couldn't even stay on his back wheel. Eventually we arrived at Rostrevor where Mark did well not to turn his bike into the front door of his house three miles earlier in Warrenpoint. I thought I was reliving a history lesson as we rolled through Augher, Clogher and Fivemiletown.

All that lay between us and the relief of the finish line now was a mere 21 mile slog through the mountains, a positive bagatelle after what we had been through.

Catherine and her three girls were there to meet and greet us and they cheered us up. After the usual task of trying to eat the equivalent of 2000 calories while changing out of sodden bike clothes into dry running clothes, we were on our way shuffling and stumbling and being accompanied by the bonhomie of Mark's mate, Osman. After an hour, Osman turned back and wished us well. We were now all on our own surrounded by the beauty of the Mourne. Of course just when you think you had it cracked, the weather turned against us again. It had been dry for a while but now it started to bucket. By the time we reached Spelga Dam after 3 hours via the Trassey Tracks, we fell into Catherine's car and we intimidated via grunts that she should turn the heat up to full. Five minutes later despite dry socks we were still shivering. Time to man up. So we opened the car doors and ventured out into a gale force wind and driving rain... Nice!

Soon we were off the smooth tarmac (which we had enjoyed for about a mile) and over a stile and down past a forest and beside another reservoir. Then we zigzagged across the foot of one mountain where a helpful guide steered us up a path. Stay on the path were his last words. About 45 minutes earlier the path went in two directions. Help! I suggested we

take the path to the right which (of course) took us off the intended route and we found ourselves in deep do do, which is where you joined us at the start of the article...

On the start line we were given a transponder and the organisers could now see we were hopelessly off course. Eventually I realised from my mobile phone that I had eight missed calls. Paul, one of the marshals, had danced his way up the mountain and would now lead us to safety but only through a sheugh where I went into the top of my knees because I had insulted Paul by thinking he was from Ballymena! These mountain men from Kilkeel don't like insults like that!

N.P. If you were to cut my heart open last Sunday night, you would have found the words "Hairs Gap" and "The Saddle" written in blood... We had already been in one saddle. Unfortunately, due to my navigational skills, it was the wrong saddle at the wrong wall on the wrong mountain! I begged and borrowed a jacket and some waterproof trousers from two very helpful marshals and we set off, all grim determination, all trousers and no mouth because we had no energy to communicate. We just yomped onwards and after another eternity (about an hour) we made it to

the right saddle at the right wall on the right mountain. We were told the mountain was "shut down" due to the horrible conditions. This was good news as we had already relayed ahead to say that we didn't have the energy to walk beside the wall up to the top of Donard – I'm fairly sure we actually had covered more distance than scheduled due to our unplanned deviation.

Soon through the mist we saw the delights of Newcastle and the end of the Coast to Coast was in sight. I'm not sure how the pio-

neers in the USA felt when they saw the Pacific for the first time but their relief was shared on the edge of this particular island by two bedraggled lawyers.

We stumbled down on battered quad muscles like drowned frozen rats through Kilbroney Park where we thought we would put on a show, so the four of us (as we had joined up with the Omagh Brigade on the way down) did our version of a run for the last 2K of the 312K along Newcastle Promenade. A finish line with a bottle of cider on it was never as welcome. We thanked the organisers for a fabulous never to be forgotten two day odyssey which taxed us physically and mentally. I was really privileged and proud to have finished such an epic event.

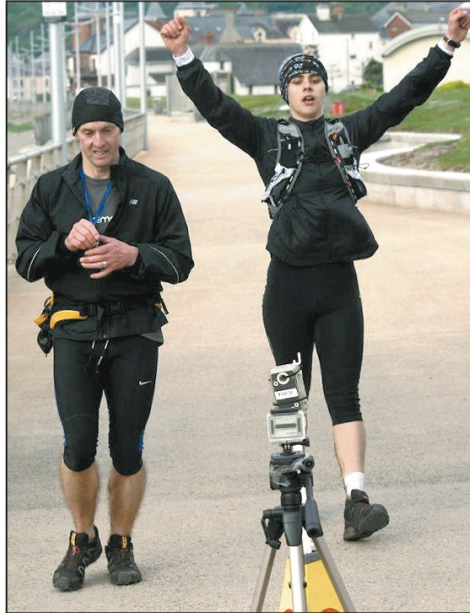
I would wish to thank the following: 1. The organisers Ronan and Ian and all their hard working team from 26 Extreme

for the superbly organised memorable event. As it says on the supercool finishers sweat shirt, "We don't do easy".

2. My long suffering mate Mark who dragged my sorry complaining ass all the way to the finish line from one side of Ireland to the other. I owe you buddy.

3. Catherine Kinkaid, our fantastic support crew, cheerleader, feeder, encourager, problem solver, navigator, supplier of dry kit – Catherine put as much hard work into this as Mark and I did.

P.S. Young Blaine Cole and his dad Paul powered their way through the entire event to win the pairs race in 19 hours 30 minutes non stop. What a fantastic achievement – they must be the fittest father and son team in the land! Congrats also to Ryan George and Paul McErlain for their solo successful efforts.



Father and son team triumph. wk2221



312km later and still a sprint to the finish line. wk2305



The Lazy Legal Team en route. wk2305



Made it! wk2306

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