



## SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

ON September 1 1984, I took my first faltering steps (and strokes and spins) in a new sport called Triathlon. I had been running for seven or eight years and wanted a new challenge.

In those days, triathlon was a fledgling experimental sport which could have been a fad for a season or two. Instead of that, we are now regarded as a normal main stream sport that has world championships in three different distances. We are recognised by the Olympics and some triathletes have graced the front as well as the back sporting pages i.e. Alistair and Johnny Brownlee.

I can't remember what happened last week but I can remember September 1 1984 vividly. It certainly was an Orwellian Brave New World. I was 26 years old, young, dumb and full of crazy ideas that I could be vaguely competitive in this bright young sport.

I had just taught myself the crawl. I had bought a rudimentary bike, what could possibly go wrong?

The legendary Dessie McHenry (Hawaii veteran, prolific winner of triathlons up and down the country) was in transition to assist and guide us and answer the stupidest of questions ('What way do you put a helmet on? Do you dry yourself after the swim?'). The distances were weird - 3/4 of a mile swim, a 16 mile bike and an 8 mile run as opposed to the now accepted distances of a 1.5K (i.e. 1 mile) swim, a 40K (25 mile bike) and a 10K (6.2 miles) run. When I finished, I was knackered but ecstatic. Every muscle, fibre and sinew had been given a good kicking. I was sore all over but the intoxicating endorphins were fizzing through my system - I wanted more of this!

A total of 32 years (bar three days) later, I was standing on the shore of a wee lough in the middle of the metropolis known as Ballybay, Co. Monaghan (I was nearly on home territory as my mother-in-law is from here).

Whilst my TTC mates were peppering the podium in a sprint race in Castlewellan, I wanted to complete an Olympic Distance race so that at the end of the season, when it is cold, grey and miserable, (i.e. ten months of the year), I could look back at 2016 and remember that I had done the wholly grail of triathlon, i.e. all four distances - Sprint (Liam Ball in May); Half Ironman (Lisbon a week later); and the full Iron distance (3.8k metre swim, 180km bike and a marathon) at Challenge Venice and now it was the Olympic/standard distance - Ballybay.

Although the race distance is known as the standard, there aren't many standards during the year. Race organisers have caught on to the fact that you can organise a sprint, charge people nearly as much yet only have your marshals out on the road for half the time.



Northern Velocity in action. NCL36-24s

### Perfect timing

The timing of the races was perfect for me, i.e. 12 noon so I could get down and back in the one day. As it was in a lough, there was no need to worry about things such as tides and currents.

I found somewhere in town to abandon the car, assemble the bike and trundle it along with my race kit down into transition where the organisers were having a collective heart attack as they attended to the 101 things that need to be done before you can allow 120 people to start a three discipline event that commences with an open water swim.

Most were doing the sprint distance but about 30 of us were doing the Olympic distance. We received our pre-race briefing, did some stretching and warm up (up down, up down, now for the other eyelid) and the next thing you know, we were in the middle for a deep water start.

Some 32 years ago, I was as excited as a puppy being given his first bone, now I knew to keep my powder dry and just get into a rhythm without too much kicking or gouging in the first discipline.

# 32 years and counting!



PJ's TTC clubmates. NCL36-25s

My sighting around the six buoys that marked the course was a lot better than 48 hours earlier when I had partaken in the Tyrone Titan race organised by Mervyn Kelly, Stephen Graham and Gavin O'Kane of Northern Velocity at Lough Eskragh in Dungannon where there were two race options available - 1.5K or 3.8K. I plumped for the latter and tried to look disappointed after Stephen Graham pulled me out after three of the scheduled five laps due to the imminent danger of a massive storm (lightning, water and rubber wetsuits aren't a good mix).

When I did emerge, one of my Limavady friends showed me a new trick of how to kill any bugs that you may have swallowed - people have now given up on Coke and are now using brandy! Heather swished it around and spat it out, what a waste of good brandy I thought, as I knocked back more than a few thimble fills.

Two days later I emerged out of the water in the middle of County Monaghan in 31 minutes, content with my time.

### Kit additions

I had several sartorial kit additions available to me. Was it going to be the TTC bike jacket or the gilet?

It may have been too warm for the jacket but I remembered my mother's sage advice: "You don't want to get a chill in your kidneys", so the gilet was put into use.

My wet suit had been a bit snug on me, perhaps it had shrunk? I had weighed myself at the start of the summer - 76Kgs, then the bathroom scales stopped working for three months. Patrick miraculously fixed them as he had to weigh his rucksack before his trip to India, so I sprang onto them a week ago to get confirmation that I was still 76..... to be astounded and amazed that they now read 79 - how did that happen?

As you get older, you put on ? kilo a year, so you have to train harder, but 3 kilos in 3 months? When I mentioned this dreadful event to my Rotarian friends, they chortled and replied: "Where did you put that on, your little finger?"

When I mentioned it to my triathlon friends on the other hand, there was an uneasy silence as if I had just confessed to opening up an off shore account in Panama....

Mind you, I was grateful to be able to take part even if it was in the fatty division. Two weeks previously, my back had gone into complete spasm. I couldn't walk, couldn't sit, I could only shout for pain killers which, when they were produced, carried all sorts of dire warnings to the unsuspecting user - 'These are powerful, do not exceed the recommended dose; do not drive, these will make you sleepy; you may become addicted after three days, you may turn into a crystal meth head; you may start wearing flares and kaftans and suddenly know all the words to every Jefferson Aeroplane song ever written.'

So I took two tablets, binned the rest and here I was, two weeks later, on my bike, on the road between Ballybay and Castleblaney as happy as a sand boy without the troublesome sand.

You spend about 48 percent of your time of a Triathlon on the bike, so that's when you can make up significant ground - or lose significant time. I was merely trying to stay where I was. The road was lumpy which was probably a good thing.

How did Alistair Brownlee do the same distance on a much tougher course in Rio, in horrendous heat, in only 1 hour 45 mins? No, I have no idea either.

I crossed the finish line, nearly as happy as Alistair was, in a shade under 2 hours 58 minutes inordinately pleased with myself. There were no showers so I went and lay in the lough and stretched out and looked up at the blue sky with the odd cloud overhead and listened to my heart rate slowly begin to drop as I floated in my aquatic cocoon. Life was good!

A cup of tea, a sandwich and a chance to share some craic with four girls from the North West Club who had all won their age groups in the sprint race earlier, made it even better.

### Senile section

No one was as more surprised than I was to discover that I had won a prize in the senile section. I was, apparently first in the over 50s, hey, a sachet of Complan and a packet of Steredent is always a welcome addition to a kit bag!

I was so happy that, on the way home, I was surprised I wasn't stopped at the border and asked to pay a Happiness Tax, in this post Brexit world. That was the standard race done and dusted.

Talking of dust, I felt that I better enter the DUST Tri in Portrush on September 1 as, although I had done a similar distance, a sprint race, earlier in the year, the swim was in a pool so it didn't really count.

There is nothing like beating the elements which will include waves, currents, jelly fish and maybe a basking shark or two to really feel that you are a true weekend warrior i.e. triathlete.

Meanwhile two of my TTC colleagues, Thomas Moore and Philip Owens were proudly about to represent Ireland in the European 70.3 championships in Austria. We took great pleasure in presenting them with their kit at the club swim night.

As my club mates Rhodri Jones, Alistair Bratten, Kay Hack, Michael McCarron and Alison Rankin, all won medals at the Castlewellan race, what a privilege it was to be able to wear the same red and black kit as these superstars, particularly when young James Walton finished top 10 in the superhot elite race in Dublin, coming back from a nasty knee injury. These lads and lasses just make me proud to make me a member of TTC.

Hey, if you want to join in the fun, then hopefully we will see you at one of our club training sessions in Magherafelt, Coleraine or Limavady or at Groomsport for the sprint or half Iron distance on September 17, or in Limavady on September 18 for the very important children's Triathlon/Aquathlon/Duathlon or also in Magherafelt on October 16 for our Duathlon.

Who knows, your first steps with us could lead you to a 32 year long affection for the best sport in the world!

Keep on tri-ing and you will be rewarded, like me, with meeting great people, having great times and making great memories.



PJ on the podium! NCL36-01s

My previous race had been in Venice which was pancake flat. That may sound good but you don't get a chance either to free wheel down a hill (bliss!) or have the exhilaration of having your computer speedometer confirm that you are actually moving at a speed exceeding 25 miles an hour. I also wasn't last which made a change as well.



PJ at the finish line. NCL36-02s

### Old fashioned race

This was an old fashioned race and none the worse for it. Things were low key, there were no bells or whistles or excessive rules but it was a sanctioned and insured event by TI and was therefore safe.

Just under 90 minutes after starting out, I gratefully racked my bike and got rid of the gilet and exchanged bike shoes for running shoes.

The start of the Third discipline in every triathlon is a reminder of the failings of the human body. Just two hours previously, I had a set of useful legs which did as I wanted, when I wanted. Now after a swim and a bike, it was if they belonged to somebody else. Signals were sent from the cerebral centre, down through the cortex but obviously there was nobody at home in the leg department to get the message.

The signal was fairly simple, "run, damn you!" The answer was along the lines of "you cannot be serious! Give me a break, is it not time for a wee lie down with the sports pages?"

"No, that will come later along with a beer and a curry. Now, get moving!"

Eventually the legs responded and the stumbling steps became some sort of a coherent rudimentary jog. I caught up with a local triathlete, Sinead, and we exchanged stories about what hurt us most - right knee, left calf, lower back, etc were all contenders but my aim is always to push myself hard so that my brain forgets about everything else hurting as it now has to cope with a set of lungs that are on fire and a heartbeat that is going like the clappers.

I learnt that the Lough Muckno Tri Club of Monaghan don't actually swim in Lough Muckno but in Ballybay, so why aren't they called the Ballybay Triathlon club? I got no answer to that one but I did tell my new triathlete friend that if we kept going at the same run pace, we would break three hours which I conspicuously failed to do at my last standard event two years ago in the Mournes.