



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

MUD is part of our Ulster and Irish psyche, particularly after a week end of collective remembrance with evocative images abounding of the mud of Passchendaele and Ypres.

Mud is the back drop after a week of incessant rain and when we are merely dealing with fields of mud as opposed to fields of blood, there is no better way for an athlete to test him or herself than in the most basic survival of the fittest competition of them all, cross country.

What are your memories of cross country from school? Mine consist of bad weather and trying to hide behind the bushes in a heath land bog behind Ballymena Academy, hoping to miss at least one lap of torture. The teacher who took us for the weekly mud bath was nicknamed Hitler by us, as we saw four or five laps of muddy pain as the personification of evil. As kids you exaggerate, as adults you exonerate. As an adult athlete however, I wanted to test myself on the surface which can be treacherous even at the best of times.

The NIAF Winter Cross Country League has been up and running with events in Comber, Jordanstown, Coleraine and last weekend, Ballyclare. I remember competing there years ago for Pegasus in a sodden field, with wet feet and no shower afterwards. Twenty five years later there is a

brand new spanking Ballyclare Leisure Centre for changing and showering. So maybe cross country runners are getting softer?

I travelled down with Richard Baker, an all-round sportsman who is now adding Cross Country to his roster of achievements which include ice rock climbing, cycling, triathlon, Park Runs etc. We were both really proud to be wearing the purple of Springwell Running Club, a local club that now has 400 members including 200 juniors. They have bases in Coleraine, Ballymonee, and Limavady and are phenomenally well organised. They were awarded the NIAF kite mark for accreditation and excellence in coaching, administration and race organisation. Last year the ladies won the 2013-14 Cross Country League with the men finishing third, two great achievements, when up against the established might of Annadale Striders, North Down, City of Derry etc.

The first twelve athletes home in the race score points for their club and I was confident of scoring points – merely because there were only twelve of us there! So all I had to do was finish...? The previous week-end I had been marshalling in the Coleraine event. The Springwell Ladies won the team race from their much vaunted Newcastle AC rivals and were led home by Eimear Mullan. A few years ago Eimear was a

MUD, GLORIOUS MUD!

novice triathlete dabbling in the sprint distance. Fast forward four years and she has won races all over the UK and Europe. Four weeks ago she won Ironman Majorca. Two weeks ago she won a Half Ironman in Italy. She has raced 11 long distance triathlons this year and has been on the podium in 10. When I interviewed her in Dublin last Saturday at the Triathlon Ireland Awards Dinner, she had just been voted Triathlon Ireland Athlete of the Year against really stiff competition. I had foolishly assumed that, as a marathon runner (which she runs in three hours after swimming 3.8 kilometres and cycling 180 kilometres), that she would be very ponderous in a race 37 kilometres shorter than her usual distance. Instead of that, she danced away from the

field and won an 18 minute race by 400 metres in an unbelievable performance of power and pace. Her partner, Ritchie Nicholls, an extremely accomplished Scottish long distance triathlete himself, won the men's race by the proverbial street as well. One week later Eimear had flown to Mexico and the Springwell Club had drafted in a super sub...Me!

By the time Richard and I arrived on the course, the women's race had started so we ran outside the ropes on the opposite direction to cheer on the Springwell ladies. This time it wasn't Eimear Mullan in the box seat but another leading triathlete, Aileen Reid from the City of Derry. Aileen is another bonafide world star, ranked eighth in the world in the last

two seasons. Tell me this, do we have a footballer, rugby player, Gaelic player or cricketer ranked top ten in the world from this area? Aileen competed on three different continents between April and September this year and here she was, in her off season, exchanging her green Triathlon Ireland tri suit for the red vest of City of Derry.

Aileen wasn't having it all her own way as her rival stuck at her shoulder for the first two laps. When Aileen heard the bell to signal the start of the last lap however, it was a case of "Good night Irene" as she stepped up a gear and on to the top of the podium. It makes me proud, not only of my compatriots but also of my sport when athletes who only spend a third of their training week running, regularly turn up and hammer their running rivals. In Eimear and Aileen, we have two world class super stars which I trust will be remembered at forthcoming local sports awards ceremonies. Although my training week had consisted of swimming, weights, gym bike and a pyramid run session, I knew I would be a country mile behind the real aficionados of the cross country scene.

When you do a 10K or a 5K on the road you can compare your times. When you do a cross country race, the time on your watch is largely irrelevant. It's just you versus your rivals, i.e. everybody that's not wearing a Springwell vest. Times are irrelevant, it's just "mano a mano." It's about scoring points, not point scoring. Every shirt in front of us, whether it be the red of City of Derry, the orange of Orange Field, the red and yellow of Newcastle or the blue of Ballydrain Harriers was the enemy and we were there to hunt them down.

Richard wisely suggested that we start at the back of the 150 strong pack, as that is most likely where we would end up 40 minutes later. Racing, whether it's an Ironman, a 25 mile time trial or a 5 mile cross country race is all about pace judgement. You want to run as hard as you can for as long as you can, it's that simple. There is no point in burning too many matches too soon. You don't want to flame out. All I had to do was to finish to score points, but while I was there I wanted to produce what my good friend John Madden would call "an honest effort." I would turn myself inside out to ring every last morsel of performance from deep within. I normally do long distance stuff (this year I have done a few events lasting 13 hours, 12 hours and 7 hours), but this short stuff is a pain of a completely different hue. It is intense but you know that it will soon be over. The faster you run, the sooner the pain ends. Most of the field took off like scalded cats, I thought maybe there was a sale on at the local Chain Reaction Cycle store, such was their speed of foot.

The last time I had donned my cross country shoes had been a race over the CAI pitches by the river Bann a few years ago and my calf had gone, so I had to limp home. I was hoping to be injury free here in South Antrim. The course was basically a one mile loop with lots of turns. The corners were particularly treacherous as they had been churned up and I slipped a couple of times and I resolved to treat myself to new spikes next week.

Colin Loughery, one of the Springwell's leading lights, unfortunately fell at one of the corners and lost a few places, but that's part of the challenge of this mud bath of an event.

When you do a Park Run or a 5k there are loads of fun runners. Here in the gloom of a wet November afternoon where the thermometer barely rose above 6 degrees, and where it had been seriously raining all day, I saw no fun runners – just fit runners.

I passed a few guys and before I knew it I was at the end of lap one. One down, four to go and I glanced at my watch, just over 7 minutes. Yikes, too fast, I thought, I would pay for that later. In a short race, there is no time to regroup, you are over the red line, and you are in that zone until the finish line is reached. I know that when I hit that red line, my ears pop as if I am on an air craft. Over the next four laps, my ears were to pop so much

Line beckoned and I have never been so grateful to cross it (or at least since my last finish line a week ago in the Portrush Park Run). Most of the rest of the field seemingly had already had their cool down lap and were dressed and drinking tea. It was all I could do to stagger over to the Springwell group to share war stories of pain and suffering but also of satisfaction and personal triumph.

Karen McLaughlin, Chair of the Springwell Running Club, had organised a cornucopia of delights in the car park and we feasted on sandwiches, cake, "fif-teens" and coffee. All the hard work was now being undone with loads of calories! It was still raining of course but as the sweat and steam rose from us like horses in the paddock, we didn't give a monkey's.

We were pleased with our afternoons work. I felt hammered but happy. All Richard and I talked about on the way home was the pride of wearing the Springwell jersey – and the anticipation of the next race...

Join the club, grab a vest and see you on the start line!



Springwell Mens Team at Ballyclare. wk4626



Springwell Ladies Team. wk4627

I thought I was in a popcorn factory but I was giving it everything that I had to give. It was just a case of trying to hang on, not to concede any hard earned gains and if possible to bag one more scalp...

While the rain fell, the mud got churned up with each lap and as you were getting more tired, the chances of slipping and tripping in the sludge increased. While I was still on lap three the leaders passed me by as if I was standing still. I recognised Allan Bogle, one of the country's top orienteers and off road marathon experts as he steamed passed me. With every lap done, I was one lap closer to being able to subside onto my hands and knees. As the mud oozed around my ankles, what remained of my energy levels oozed from my body. At the start of Lap 5, I passed a rival and put in a major lung bursting effort to blow him away so he wouldn't stick to my heels. It seemed to work but had I gone too hard too soon? Would I blow up and allow him to regain that precious place? It was determined to have another sub 7 min. 20 sec lap and so kept on pushing.

Eventually the Finish



PJ trying desperately not to finish last. wk4628



Richard Baker and PJ - Made it ! wk4629