



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

Comrades on the bridges!

YOU have a school of whales, a murder of crows but what is the collective noun for a whole lot of bridges?! I am not sure either but I ran over 42 of them last Saturday!

The famous Round the Bridges course (exactly 10 miles) has eight bridges on it and as I had planned to run the route five times – and also an extra 5 miles – I was due to see a lot of bridges! But would I make it over the last one?

I was doing my version of Comrades, the World Renowned Ultra Distance run in South Africa which is between Durban and Pietermaritzburg. No need to travel 6,000 miles to Natal in the east of Africa – I only had to drive 3 miles to the start line!

I was up at 6.00am to leave my supplies off at various junctures on the course, ie, 3 miles, 4.5 miles and 7 miles as well as the start/finish line. I left out water, gels, bananas, Rice-Krispie bars, Mars bars, Snickers, raisins, coffee etc. – I was certainly not going to go hungry or thirsty! Even when you think your stomach doesn't want nutrition or hydration, the key is to keep consuming. I must have got the strategy right because I weighed myself before and after my 12 hour ordeal and I lost precisely 200 grams!

In the Comrades run in Natal, there would be 22,000 other racers to keep you company. During my Limavady version of Comrades, I expected to run solo but I had company the whole day!

At 7.45am, when I eventually made it to the start line, the legendary Helena Dornan from Ballycastle was there to run 15 miles with me, and then she would do the Walled City Marathon the next day! Helena has won the Last One Standing event in Castleward (where I managed 50 miles in 12 hours, Helena went way over 100); four weeks ago she won the inaugural Dublin to Belfast 105 mile run in under 17 hours despite doing an unscheduled extra 5 miles when she got lost in Dundalk. She ended up with no supplies, no food and no money to buy food but despite that, she triumphed. Helena is not interested in winning though: "It's about the Finish Line, not the Finish Time" is her mantra.

She is also an awesome bike rider. She completed the Mizen to Malin course (411 miles in 23 hours 50 minutes) and never once got off her bike – tough as nails doesn't even begin to describe her.

It was an honour to run with her and also with ten of my Springwell colleagues last Saturday. Ireland's other finest ultra runner, Limavady's very own Fran McFradden, came out to cheer me on a couple of times despite suffering from a stress fracture which prevented her from running.

START SLOWLY

I explained to my crew on the start line at 8.00am that I had to start slowly because later, I was going to get even slower! My first 25 miles were scheduled at 12 minute mile pace. I had a target for each of my 55 miles. Miles 26 to 35 would be 13 minutes a mile; miles 36 to 45 would be 14 minutes; and the last 10 were at 15 minute pace.

I am not naturally a clock watcher but I had to ensure that I started every mile on time. The ideal way was to walk as much as possible so I

could run as little as possible. My coach, Bill Black from London, had worked out a schedule and I stuck to his training plan religiously. My taper week had 2x5 mile runs on Tuesday, a 30 minute romp on the beach and 4x800 metres on grass which I did in 3 minutes 30 with 90 seconds recovery.

Bill told me my training would be at 12 minute mile pace but, I must confess, I never had the patience to go as slowly as that. I ended up doing a 2 minute walk and 8 minute jog for every 10 minute mile, so race day was going to be a novel experience for me.

I decided to do the first 2.5 miles out towards Cornfields then back to the start line. Cathal McFeely and his merry crew very patiently slowed down to go at my sluggish pace. Before I knew it, it was back to the car to start my official lap.

The guys ran some of it with me before turning back where they could at last have a chance to speed up. Helena was still with me and we were joined by TTC's William O'Kane who was half way through a 20 mile run (before his 95 miles bike ride the next day). Company is a good thing in a long endurance event and good company is even better.

After 15 miles, things were still on track. Helena went back to Ballycastle to get ready for her marathon, William left too but I was then joined by Brendan O'Brien, my usual running partner. Brendan was a top class Junior International biker and decided 10 years ago to do a marathon, despite having absolutely no long distance running experience.

We both entered the Dublin race and started together. When I finished, I had been delighted to break 4 hours and I phoned him: "Where are you Brendan, I am back in the hotel room." I added: "Ah no, what went wrong?" he replied: "Not a thing Peter, I did 2 :56!"

It just goes to show, form might be temporary, but class is permanent.

25 MILES DONE

I was joined for the next lap by Roger Poland and Gearoid Conerney, both from TTC. By this stage, I had 25 miles done so after just more than one other mile, I had a marathon done. If I was a pint of milk, I wouldn't have actually described myself as "fresh" but I certainly wasn't past my sell by date – yet!

Thomas Moore even joined us to bike a lap, despite having done two races in Donegal in the previous 24 hours. My daughter Hannah, who was back from Liverpool for a few days, ran with me for 4.5 miles out to Swanns Bridge where I noticed

on my very first lap of the day that the tide was out and 11 hours later it was fully in.

Swann's Bridge is a beautiful area, lots of picnic and barbecue tables, a beautiful river, steps on both banks to get in and out of the river for canoeists and a fantastic vista of sylvan forests all the up to Binevenagh.

During the day, I reminded myself to look up (at the views) to look forward (to the finish line shute) and not to look back. Whether you are on a bike or just in your running shoes, never look back – always onwards, always upward!

After 27.5 miles, I was half way which is always a cause for celebration and Davy McCool had joined me for that lap. Davy has transformed his health and life by deciding to take up sport a few years ago. He is a terrific example of the positive benefits of sport.

My philosophy is always to get to half way, then every stride or spin or stroke is one more towards to the finish line. The only trouble with the finish line is that I would see it six times and every time, there was the temptation to jump into the car!

It reminds me of several Ironman finishes, both in Venice and Copenhagen, where I passed the lights, the glamour and the excitement of the finish line far too many times for my own sanity before eventually being allowed to run down it.

I wanted to honour the clubs of which I am so proud to be a member. I wore my Rotary tri shorts all day, my Springwell top got me through past half way and I wore my TTC tri top for the next 20 miles. I had a special top in the boot for the last 10 miles when I would really need to dig deep.

MUCH NEEDED CAPPUCCINO

Jeremy Bell, a friend from QUB of four decades ago and now a proud Limavady Rotarian, turned out to give me a much needed cappuccino.

Brendan got me a coke (I never drink the stuff but when you are stuffed after 40 miles, it's like being plugged into the mains). Davy Gault came out on to the course to give me a much needed Lucozade sport drink and Eddie Clyde even had a bottle of beer for me. I turned down his kind offer at mile 47 but thankfully, my running mate at that stage, the one and only Mervyn Kelly, was able to make sure it wasn't wasted!

Several miles later, Mervyn's wife Marlene brought me a choc ice which hit the spot exactly. A lot of carbs, sugars and everything easy to absorb.

The support I got all day was just fantastic. I felt humbled by it. The Rivers Family even came out to give me a cheer and a shout out. Samantha

Convery dragged her family up from Magherafelt to come up and give me a cheer and it was a real honour to see TTC's Paul McErlain, (who last week did three Ironman distance events in three days involving 7 miles of swimming, 136 miles of biking and 78 miles of running) to give me some more inspiration. In a world filled with headlines of barbarity, of horror, of mayhem and of unspeakable hatred, we should remember that the good guys outnumber the bad guys by a million to one.

They say Melbourne is the city of four seasons in one day and I really did think I was in Victoria's Capital last Saturday. I had sunshine, humidity, wind, showers, rain – and torrential rain that would have graced an Amazonian rain forest. You want to use your energy to run, not to try to keep warm.

THE LAST LAP

At the end of lap 4 (45 miles), there was a crowd there to wish me well for the last lap. The skies opened, I ditched the baseball cap, put on a beanie and a rain jacket and also a shirt that I had picked up 18 months ago and hadn't the heart to wear since.

It was a dayglow 5 euro vest form Tenerife after my mum died out there. I had been surrounded by my favourite clubs all day, Springwell, Triangle and Rotary and family and friends so it was fitting that I was able to bring it home with my mum's final destination on my heart.

Mervyn is a perfect running mate, I didn't have to waste too much energy by talking – Mervyn took care all of that, all I had to do was listen!

The miles ticked down. Soon we were in single figures, then I hit mile 50 – only 5 to go and I had 75 minutes to get it done.

By this stage, I was walking so slowly and 'running' so slowly that there wasn't much difference between the two! I won't lie folks, it wasn't easy to break back into a jog every time. I had 55 walks and 55 jogs, sometimes the running seemed easier than the walking and when I stopped running, I started to stagger.

I couldn't face food of any description at this stage and I looked at my watch and knew it was time to go again. When the going gets tough, the tough get.....walking!

My Fitbit told me I had done 103,000 steps and expended 7,430 calories, but by this stage, I was only a mile and a half out and my darling daughter Hannah joined me which was lovely. I hit the bypass for the last time, past the 9 mile marker, mile 54, walked a few minutes, then I broke very reluctantly into a slow trot.

A few sore minutes later, I was on Killane Road for the sixth and last time that day and there was my posse on the finish line. There was never a sweeter sight or sound in all of sport.

I looked up at the heavens to acknowledge Mum and fell into the embrace of Sharon, Hannah and my good good, friends. I couldn't have hoped for a better day – or a better finish – after 11 hours 53 minutes.

I may have missed 'Comrades' in South Africa but I had my comrades in Limavady and I was the better for it.



Peter with some of his friends who turned out to join him for the start of his marathon 55 mile challenge at 8am on Saturday morning. 22327KDR



Peter taking on his marathon 55 mile challenge on Saturday. 22336KDR