


SPORTING MATTERS
BY PETER JACK

My lucky double rainbow!

helped onto the bike every morning...

My back wasn't great and I couldn't stand up straight but I didn't need to stand up, I just needed to sit all day!

If I had to swim (which I did a few weeks ago in a 3.8K Iron Law Relay Challenge) or if I had to run a marathon (which I will do later this year), I would be in trouble but all I had to do was sit down and pedal for a long, long time.

After 6.6k, we came to our first challenge of the day, the aptly named 'Old Long Hill' (known locally as The Wall) 4.3K long with an average gradient of 5.5%, that means that for every 100 metres you go forwards, you go 5.5 metres up. It was 7.15 a.m. I hadn't even travelled 10 miles and I still had 115 to go, it was still cold but hopefully I hadn't fired too many bullets. I even got off my bike to push a bit, I did this before I had to, i.e. I was still in control. Later in the day, I got off and pushed, out of necessity not through choice.

The second monster was the legendary Wicklow Gap itself which consisted of a 6.7K climb where the average gradient was 4.9%. At one stage, I thought I saw a huge crowd of brightly coloured people all walking ahead of me, on closer inspection they were cyclists who were moving very, very slowly. We then came to a feed station at Baltinglass, 74K done and progress was being made.

My Suunto told me that my average speed was 3 minutes 30 a kilometre. I used to be able to run a kilometre at that speed. I only noticed the water stop after I left the feed station and I had one bottle left. We then seemed to enter a desert of wasteland, devoid of human beings or shops with nowhere to beg, borrow or steal fluid.

I hadn't gone to the loo in several hours which was another sign I wasn't drinking enough.

You can get away with that on a short event but not on a monster like this - this was a beast of a sportive.

Guys were passing me - for the second time i.e. I had passed them at a stop. If I got off my bike

anywhere, it was for the minimum period. Other guys seemed to want to chew the fat, if I lingered in a chair at a food-stop I would seize up.

There's a maxim in cycling that you can bluff in the flat but you can't bluff on the hills, they just zap you.

Thankfully the previous week I had taken my bike in and I had a 30 tooth cassette fixed on it as opposed to my usual 27 i.e. it had a granny gear.

There were to be many times during the Wicklow 200 that I wished I had a great granny, not merely a granny.

We had a 1.3K punchy climb at Hackettsown then a 900 metre tilt at the aptly named 'Up Mountain' but little did I know the worst was yet to come.....

I had no water left, the sun came out for the first time and a river of sweat started to pour from my face and I had to start Slieve Maan - 3.3 kilometres of sheer grinding. If you didn't pedal, you fell over, it was that bad. It was relentless, remorseless, infernal, eternal.

The worst gradient was 13% the average was 7.8% and this is were I seriously questioned my sanity, what was I doing here?

I thought wistfully of the option at Laragh at 25K where I could have taken the easy option of doing "only" 100K.

At least at the top of Slieve Maan when I eventually arrived, there was a water stop where I filled two bottles and drank one of them immediately. If I thought going up hill was bad, then going down was even worse, with a nightmarish screaming descent. Obviously, the guys who were flying past me knew the camber and the contours of the corners but I didn't

so I spent all the time yanking on the anchors.

Despite not pedalling, my pulse was racing. There was then the cruellest part of the entire course, a 3.1K climb with an even higher average gradient of 8.3%.

If I had the energy to cry I would have, but no one would have noticed as there was so much sweat pouring off me.

There was an enterprising young man selling Coke (the drink, not Michael Gove's after dinner favourite), I drink one can of this a year,

my furious brake pumping, so I just prayed, I was fit for nothing at the bottom. Both legs had started to rebel due to the terror of the previous two descents and I felt as if a lot of my muscles, (calf, hamstring and groin) were all suddenly going to go 'ping'. By this stage, I was trying to discover if there was anywhere on my body that didn't hurt, my left ear perhaps, but then again, I am half deaf so that doesn't really count.

If you were to abandon out here, I am not sure how you could actually make it back to the car and



sanity, you just had to plough on.

There was another feed station at Rathdrum where I monosyllabically pointed at coffee and sandwiches. I tried to have a conversation with a bloke beside me but I didn't seem to be making much sense so I tottered out trying to work out how I was going to get on the bike, which leg is first etc.

My brain was now as numb as my bum but I didn't need a brain, all I needed was for my legs to work, nothing else mattered.

My bike computer had gone on the blink earlier but I got it restarted at ground zero.

All I had to do now was 36 miles. On a good


Backstage with Faithless

flat day, that would be only a tad over two hours, this however would take me way over three and a half. When Billy Bragg sang of "The Milk of Human Kindness", he wasn't to know that all it took for a passing cyclist to say "Keep going, well done, nearly there".

Hundreds were still passing me, a lot of them in chain gangs.

Ciaran Hampson of the Foyle Cycling Club asked if I wanted on the back of the FCC Train but I politely declined, it would have been great to get a tow for a few miles but not so good when I ran out of gas, this was about solo suffering. I marked off each of the 36 final miles as if it was a birthday and Christmas rolled into one.

Funnily enough, there were two more climbs. I staggered into a pub in a rare town, it might have been Greystones to use the facilities, I could have fallen asleep at the counter. I emerged hoping that my bike had been stolen but alas, there it was, looking at me reproachfully, telling me that we still had a long way to go.

We were suddenly on a main road where there were things like cars meaning I had to concentrate. Concentration meant using energy which I didn't have.

There's a red light, what does that mean? Oh yes, stop. By this stage, the heavens had opened and there was a down-pour of biblical proportions.

I was now shivering and getting hypothermic, my cycling gloves for some reason were in my pocket, not in my hands. I have seen drowned rats look happier.

My shoulders and neck felt as if someone had been using a kango hammer on them for the previous 11 hours.

My Ironman bike rides normally take me 7 hours so what was I doing on a bike for nearly half a day? Madness!

After another infernal sodden climb at Windgates (only 1.7K and only 5.2% gradient) I came across the only roundabout on the entire route with no marshal or sign on it.

I was incapable of

making any rational decision so I took the exit that said Bray, it was the wrong choice.

I spent the last 5K on my own with none of my fellow 3,000 Wicklow 200 mates.

I had to deal with buses, cars, downhill with dodgy brakes in the pouring rain with chattering teeth with the cognition functions of a newt.

I took a wrong turn and ended up on St. Peters Road, was it a sign? No?

It was a cul-de-sac. I turned. If I had the energy to curse, I would have.

I approached a corner. Another of cycling's great maxims is that you do not bike through a deep puddle because you have

no idea what is under the surfaced.

I instantly felt my bike lurch to the left and I had an imminent prospect of busting my left clavicle in another fall but this was somehow avoided by me managing to display more bike handling skills in one second than I had in the previous decade.

With my heart pounding nearly as hard as the insistent rain, I turned a corner and headed for nirvana i.e. Bray Emmets GAA club. What lay ahead of me was one of my hardest earned medals ever, a lukewarm shower and a four hour journey home. A must do race had been scratched off my bucket.

My two wristbands could now be retired. Maybe next year, I'll just

stick to the Access All Area's Festival.

But if you are tempted by the most iconic and challenging of all the sportives in Ireland on a wonderful scenic route (apparently, we trundled through Glendalough and the Vale of Avoca but I can't recall them as I was looking at the tarmac at the time) then I would recommend the following:

1. Drink more
2. Eat more
3. Make sure your brakes work
4. Do the distance in training
5. Do hills
6. Do more hills
7. Don't wait until you have blown out 61 candles on your birthday cake before you tackle the "Beast in the East".


The sound crew have a new member!

A young fan and PJ's co-commentator, Lewis Moses