



PURPLE REIGN!

IT'S 9.30 on a Saturday night. I am sitting in a pop-up chair in a park in Belfast, under the flight path of Belfast City Airport as a Flybe jet roars only 100 metres above my head.

I have just come from the massage tent. The whole area looks like the Stendhal Festival – but without the alcohol.

The only drug here is running. Everybody in this huge tent and village is either running, or about to run, or has run or is supporting runners.

My legs are feeling trashed. I have already run a half marathon in my first two hour shift – and I am only a third of the way there.

How did this all happen? What am I doing in the middle of all this madness?!

It started, as many mad things do, with an innocent conversation.

Strangely enough, the conversation was at the corner of a muddy field at Greenmount at the Antrim International Cross Country Race back in the depths of winter. Mind you, six months on, not much has changed.

We had no Government then and we have no Government now!

Anyway, standing in the corner of the muddy field was a long-time acquaintance, Ed Smith.

I did my first Ironman with Ed back in 1990 in Holland (funnily enough, I am doing my last Ironman at the same place this September but that's another story for another day). Ed went on to become the head of BBC Sport in Northern Ireland.

He has also climbed Elbrus in Russia (highest mountain in Europe) two years before I did it.

He also has a successful ascent of Aconcagua in South America (the highest mountain on the continent).

He knows about endurance events, and whatever suffering is needed to make it to the Finish Line!

I asked Ed what he was up to as my cross country shoes tried to prevent me from slipping into more winter mud.

"I am organising the Energia 24 hour race in Belfast in June – you should enter a relay team!" I, for some reason, possibly because of lack of oxygen in whatever remained of my brain) merely replied, "Great idea, see you there!"

In the car on the way home from Antrim, I asked Will Colvin and he was immediately up for it and we needed two other lunatics, sorry, runners.

He said he would ask his good friend, Steven Miles and I said I would ask the running machine and legend, that is, Fran McFadden.

Inside 24 hours we had a team.

Next problem – team name. We were all from the Springwell Running Club, whose colour is purple.

What name could we come up with that would suggest to the outside world our magnificence!

In honour of Prince, we came up with "Purple Reign". Next problem, what slogan for the back of our specially made running vest?

We devised "Run, Eat, Don't Sleep – Repeat" and we were now all set. All we had to do now was train.... Will, did his second marathon in Derry at the start of June in four hours.

Steven completed that marathon as well. Fran is a star in endurance running circles and has completed many ultras (any run over the marathon distance) and also several 100K races and been on podia all over the country i.e. our team is basically going to consist of Fran and three blokes trying very hard not to let the side down.

I have done several ultra, my first was in Connemara, (a 39 miler, where it was either all up or all down).

I also did my solo 55 miler last year i.e. 5½ laps around the bridges in just under 12 hours and also "Last One Standing" in Castleward, 12 x 4.2 miles on the hour every hour.

This would be my 4th ultra, but different tactics were needed. The idea was to run two hours on, six hours off, then repeat, then repeat.

My current training for my last Ironman



The team members and moto for Purple Reign! NCL27-04s

project consists of a lot of swimming, the odd 60 or 80 miles on a bike and work on the turbo trainer and the occasional run, the most useful of which consisted of running from Benone Sports Complex to the Point Bar in Magilligan and back on the road, which is exactly 13.1 miles.

We had used that route for the run section of the 2000 Ireman.

All I had to do now was the 13.1 mile distance in under two hours which I was doing in training – but afterwards, I had the consolation of flying down in a dark room for the rest of the week.

I had a good weeks training in the lead up to the 24 hour race but in retrospect maybe five days rest might be more beneficial.

Before we knew it we were at Roe Valley leisure Centre where Colin Loughery, (club record holder of Round the Bridges), Coach and top athlete from Springwell was presenting us with our vests.

The night before, I got a bit carried away with the whole purple theme and I got Sharon to paint my finger nails purple (make mental note, find and use nail varnish remover before I stumble into the office on Monday morning).

We were all as excited as eight year olds on Christmas morning. As soon as we rocked up in the car park in Belfast we started to see familiar faces.

There was Dessie McHenry, former world age group triathlon champion, there was Helena Dornan, who won this year's Belfast to Dublin running race.

We had Irish record holders, British Champions, there was Colette O'Hagan who has done 551 marathons.

There was Ann Bath from Epsom who set a world record of 116 miles as a 65 year old.

There was a bloke from Queensland who had run 160 miles in 24 hours. There was a runner from Tokyo.

There was a professional boxer threatening a knock out performance.... Eoin Keith, the National Champion, was there, there was even a visually impaired runner, Sinead Keane, from Cork as well as an artist in residence who was there to produce a work of art every hour for 24 hours!

There were several different events within the race. There was a 12 hour race, there was a 100K (a 62 mile race, where the winning time would be under 8 hours!).

There was the 24 hour race and then there were the tail-end charlies, like us, who were "only" doing the relay race.

I had thought we could manage to hit 156 miles, but I quickly scaled down our expectations after the first two hours each. Fran had produced a stormer of an opening session and made 14 laps i.e. 14.5 miles.

Will, who also competed in the worst of the heat, pulled out a 13 lapper and Steven ran a heroic 12.

That gave us 52 miles after a third of the

race, but there would have to be a payback for this outstanding start. Have you ever run 12 or 13 miles at 1.00 am?

The last time I was on the limit at 1.00 a.m., I was following a "Fantasia" type plethora of bobbing head torches in the pitch black at 5,000 metres on my way up from the Ice Camp, up to the top of Kilimanjaro at dawn on the summit of Africa's highest mountain.

I just don't do late nights very well. I remembered the time when I could have partied for 24 hours, now I was struggling to stay awake at one hour past midnight!

We were just hoping to put in an honest shift every two hours.

This wasn't a distance event, it was a timed event but what distance could we all manage in 120 minutes?

As it was a relay, your next runner wasn't allowed to start until the green relay wrist band was handed over and the ideal way was to arrive at the relay station at about 1 hour 59 minutes, 50 seconds for a sweaty "good luck."

All in all, there were 250 runners and we were all grateful to a great organising team from Left Field whose motto was "Great work makes dreams work!"

Sunday June 24 - 1.00 a.m.

If you have watched "The Night of the Living Dead", you will know the world has been taken over by zombies.

Well, Victoria Park Belfast at 1.00 am in the middle of a 24 hour race felt like the perfect location for a new zombie movie.

It was littered with runners, some of whom had finished their 12 hour race, some of whom were still doing the 100K race, some of whom who were only half way through their day from hell and of course there were also relay runners getting ready for their next night shift, i.e. me!

There were 16 relay teams in total, it was a surreal feeling to be standing in the relay check point waiting for Will to hand over the precious green wrist band.

I was feeling lethargic and tired with my legs still sore from the first half marathon.

At three minutes past the hour Will belted into view and handed over the metaphorical baton.

I quickly dashed onto the course - and that was the last quick thing that was to happen for me in the next two hours.

In my first stint eight hours earlier, I had ticked off each lap in exactly 9 minutes.

At 1.00 am however despite trying to steel myself, the first lap took 10 minutes.... The second lap took 10 minutes... and that's the way it went.

In the meantime a full moon was out - and I felt like howling at it!

What type of madness was I part of?! There were people shuffling, jogging, painfully going through the range of motions and e-motions.

A 24 hour race just strips you bare of everything. I had a chat with a competitor

from Germany during the night and he referred to doing a race like this to "find out more about himself," he learned something every time he did a mega ultra like this.

I am not sure if it was bravery or bravado or maybe a bit of both. Whatever their motivation, you simply had to admire them.

Victoria Park looked beautiful in the moonlight. The swans and ducks were out feeding taking advantage of the arc lights that had been erected to illuminate our route.

There was certainly no need for a head torch but it was disorientating running at night.

Although it was the summer solstice, it was dark for about 2 hours between 1.00 and 3.00 am.

It was a surreal feeling, my body was crying out for sleep and rest but despite my self pity, I had to feel for those like Helena Dornan who were doing incredibly well in their all day/all night challenge.

Helena ran 90 miles last week as a warm up for the race! She is just a nonstop machine who was to finish fourth overall but first in her national age group championship.

Then there was Eoin Keith, who after 12 hours was only 23rd out of 140 but he knew about pace judgement than anybody else as he worked his way up into the top 20 in the top 10, then the top five – but would he get top spot? (he would end up third with 239km – 1st female was Samantha Amend from Belgrave Harriers with 221K!)

The surface of the lap was flat as a pancake or so I thought about the first five or six laps.

After an hour, suddenly there was a slight incline every lap of about 3 or 4 metres.

After about eight or nine laps it transformed into a hill and after 11 laps it became a mountain!

I was ticking off every lap in the middle of the night in 10 minutes.

No matter what I did or how hard I pushed, my lap times didn't drop.

The very best I could therefore envisage was 12 laps x 10 minutes i.e. exactly two hours and I would be handing over to Steve at 3.03 am for him to start our fourth leg in our second session.

Eventually it was my last lap and as I tried to harness what energy I had left, the first pale glimmerings of pre-dawn started to appear on the horizon, there was no wind, just the moonlight and the sound of my own ragged breathing.

You would pass other runners or other runners would pass you, maybe a word or two was murmured in solidarity, sympathy or appreciation and on you would plod.

They say the darkest hour is the hour before dawn, I can now confirm that.

Join me next week to see how Purple Reign get on for the rest of our ultra marathon challenge.



The great Helena Dornan with five fans from Limavady! NCL27-03s