



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

BATH is known as being a pretty city in the South West of England, full of lovely Georgian buildings, a burbling river, a very prestigious University but it's not so well known for its sport.

Last weekend, after having discovered that young Hannah Jack had never been to watch a Rugby Match in Bath, I went over to rectify this omission. What made the match even more interesting was that the opponents for Bath were Saracens of London, or Sarries as their supporters lovingly call them and they are Ulster's opponents in the quarter finals of the Heineken Cup in four weeks' time and I wanted to cast a wizened eye over what lies between us and a home semi-final in Dublin.

Bath also had a road race on the same weekend, the Bath Half Marathon, which of course I tried to enter, only to be rebuffed. Although the field had an entry limit of 15,000, it was sold out months ago. Unbelievable! The race raises millions for local charities and also has 'celebrities' (ok, a Coronation Street actor). The whole city was awash with yellow AA signs on the Friday when I arrived from Bristol Airport warning me that the roads would be closed on Sunday for the race.

The Bath Rec is where Bath play their Rugby and it's a bit like the Stoop ground at Gloucester. They are both tight but tidy grounds which are always sold out and where passion and pride have produced two very successful teams over the last few decades. Bath have been having the best season for many years and were undefeated since November 2012 (when funnily enough

degrees above

Bath Sport

freezing and you could see the breath of the Rugby players in the air as they attempted to warm up before kick-off. Bath, in their famous blue and white strip, went into a 3 nil lead with a penalty and things looked good. Their scrum half was Peter Stringer, the ex-Munster and Irish player, but he was taken out by a psychopath in the Saracens pack called Burger who was about three times the size of the nippy scrum half and Bath never recovered. Saracens were remorseless and their pack bullied their opposite numbers allowing their own packs to bulldoze their way over the Bath gain line with unceasing ease. Bath should have really gone for an early Bath because they were never in it and Saracens won at a canter. Their ex-England Captain, Steve Borthwick, was majestic and looked like a guy who wanted to prove Steve Lancaster, the England Rugby Coach, wrong. There was a lot of argy bargy between the two sets of forwards near the end but that was as close as Bath got to their opposite numbers and they trooped off the pitch rather sheepishly at the full time whistle.

I love sport but I also love the English language and the next day we were fortunate enough to hear the English language at its very best. In the morning we were at a Jonathan Dimbleby lecture in the Guildhall as part of the Bath Literary Festival where

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BATH HALF

The next morning we were up early to go and see the Bath Half. As Hannah's house is practically on the Race Course, we didn't have to far to go. Hannah had two of her flatmates attempting the distance. Lots of students had entered as they realised that their carefree, halcyon four year existence as a bohemian in one of England's nicest Campus University towns was coming to an end.

We wished Lucy and Hayden well as they left to get down to the busy start line. Why are Half Marathons so popular? In sunny Northern Ireland, we have at least two in the early part of the year i.e. the Omagh Half and the Larne Half. I hope to do Larne in two weeks time if I have recovered from a broken toe and a chest infection. Then there is the Belfast Half later in the year. A lot of people attempt a half as a build up to a marathon but for many people, it's an end in itself.

I just don't like the name of the event itself! A Half Marathon - Whoever wanted to accomplish or achieve a half of anything?! We all know a marathon is 42K so why hasn't some vital rebranding been done i.e. the race should be called 'The 21K' or a '13.1' (for the Imperial equivalent). Those wise

people in the World Triathlon Corporation saw the potential in a Half Ironman years ago.

Realising that most of us mere mortals can only do one Ironman a year, the WTC popularised the Half Ironman brand i.e. a race of a 1.2 mile swim, a 56 mile bike and a 13.1 mile run, but cunningly labelled it a '70.3' i.e. the total distance in miles. There are now over 30 '70.3' events in the USA alone and they proliferate all over the world. Most athletes can do three or four of these a year i.e. the WTC get a lot more 300 dollar entry fees from the super keen athlete - what a cunning plan.....

LOCAL EVENTS

In Limavady, we have the Round the Bridges 10 miler in June, we have the 8K Roe Valley Trail Run (which took place last Saturday). Slightly further afield is the 10K and 5K Sports Relief runs on the East Strand, Portrush in a few weeks time so ably organised by Andy Deal. The only local Half Marathon, sorry '21K', is the Derry Half and the last time I did it, the course was dreadful, up and down a dual carriage way and in and out of an Industrial Estate (mind you I had biked 112 miles the day before, so maybe that's why I didn't feel too hot during the race itself....)

The organiser in Bath had paid a few middle ranking Kenyans to come and show the rest of us how it's done. I must confess I am not a believer in this. The organiser may have ended up with a course

record of 63.13 but why don't they put the appearance fees money into the prize money and just encourage the best athletes to take part? In Dublin last year for the Marathon, the prize money was very attractive, no appearance fees were paid and the event was won by locals. We have to encourage our own top athletes and not just go for headline grabbers.

The world record by the way for a Half Marathon is just under 59 mins so maybe the possibility of a sub two hour marathon can be attained by our successors in the next 20 or 30 years.....

The weather for the Bath Half was dry for kick-off but it got very wet and miserable later on. Lucy, who had run the course in practice



Rachel Cochran, runner up in the Girls Primary School race at the Roe Valley Country Park trail run on Saturday. 10206KDR

four days previously, had a PB in 2 hrs. 10 mins. and Hayden (who had got lost in a practice run on the week before and ended up doing 22 miles - who said students weren't keen!) had a great 1.43 despite or maybe because of enough Ibuprofen for a knee injury to give a mule a stroke....

My TTC colleagues, Kevin Murphy and

Paul McErlain completed the course in 1:30 and 1:35 respectively along with two of their Magherafelt Harrier team mates.

Well done to all the participants. Now, if only we had an equally big race in Limavady, wouldn't that give the local economy a boost? Ah well, we can but dream. See you on the start line in Larne on March 22!



The Magherafelt Mafia! NCL11-30s



The start line for the 2014 Bath Half Marathon. uk1115



Bath's Anthony Watson gets tackled. Picture from www.bathrugby.com uk1116