



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

WHAT will you be doing on the evening of Saturday February 20?

Perhaps reading a book? Perhaps enjoying a well-deserved glass of wine while watching the telly from the comfort of your sofa? Well, there are nine brave souls from the Springwell Running Club who won't be having a nice lazy night – they will be giving their all, physically and mentally, in one of the most demanding events ever staged on the island of Ireland. It's in Castleward, County Down on the shores of Strangford Lough and it's called 'Last One Standing'.

A few years ago, there was a very successful TV series called 'Last Man Standing' which pitted competitors against each other in tough situations overseas in fantastic locations until there was only one guy literally left standing. The event on February 20 is along similar lines but obviously there is a slight change in the name to avoid copyright problems. It's called 'Last One Standing' (as opposed to man or woman) and it will test every one of the 150 entrants to the limit.

So what's involved? It's a very simple concept, you run 4.2 miles, i.e. 6.8K at 12.00 noon. If you do that in 51 minutes, you then have 9 minutes to rest, eat, drink, phone the bookies whatever, but at 1.00 pm you go again and do the same thing. At 2.00 pm you do the same thing, etc. The race, believe it or not, will go on for a maximum of 48 hours, ie. there may be competitors still standing on Monday February 22 at 12.00noon. If there are, that means the runner – or runners – male or female will have completed 200 miles....

The world of Ultra marathon running is a relatively new one. For years, it was thought that a marathon was at the very limits of human endurance. They then invented the Ironman Triathlon where the marathon run was tagged onto the end of a marathon swim and a marathon bike, but Ultra running can mean anything over the bog standard 26.2 miles or 42.1km distance.

I have only done one in the past, ie, the Connemara Marathon (now cunningly titled 'The Connemara Marathon'). This was a 39.3 mile or 63k course in the beautiful hills of Connemara. We were lucky in that the

weather in April that year was very pleasant. I learned in Ironman races long ago that a long distance race is more mental than physical. When you believe that physically you are at the end of the road, you are not even half way there. Your mind is a lot stronger than your body. All you do is grit your teeth and get on with it – one stroke at a time, one spin at a time, one stride at a time. In Connemara, after the standard 42km, we turned right and the road went uphill immediately for at least 1k – welcome to Ultra racing!

If you are out for 10K run, your mind sends a signal to your body after about 8k that you are quite tired and you really are looking forward to the Finish Line. When you do a marathon, that signal is sent out normally at mile 22 or 23 (otherwise known as 'hitting the wall'). When I did my Ultra, I discovered that that signal is delayed and isn't sent – or least, isn't received – until you are at mile 35 or 36 out of the 39. The end result is the same however, once you cross the Finish Line your body – and mind – and feet and joints all scream in unison, "Enough!"

VARIOUS ULTRA MARATHONS

There are various Ultra marathons all over the world. The USA has some iconic races including Bad Water and Death Valley, etc. Europe has several 100km races over the Alps – as if doing a century run in normal terrain isn't enough!

There is a 24 hour track race in Belfast every June organised by my good friend Ed Smith (for the first 12 hours you run clockwise, then to give you a whole new angle in life, you run the next 12 hours anti-clockwise. I am not sure if the scenery changes that much though!) There is also the Titanic Ultra every autumn. First, it was 100 miles to commemorate the anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic, the next year it was 101, the next year after that 102, you get the idea.

If you really want, you can do an Ultra race in places as diverse as Egypt, Kenya, Libya (probably not recommended at the minute), Nepal, Jordan, Vietnam, Berlin and even closer to home, in the Isle of Man. There is even one in Sweden called Ice Ultra, which is 250km long. What is it that makes people want to do these things? I have no idea

Last One Standing

either but I can't remember when I was this excited about any race.

To call it a race however would be a misnomer. A 'Race' in the normal sense is all about who is fastest, whether it's 100 metres or 100 kilometres. The LOS is a different beast, every hour, on the hour we line up and we will be standing beside the winner. He or she may even finish last every lap in 57 or 58 or 59 minutes but many, many hours later, they will still be going strong when I have fallen in a ditch, stupefied by my efforts, worn out, ground down and losing what is left of my sanity due to lack of sleep.

I have sought the advice of Bill Black, a good friend and world class coach, and Bill tells me that the skill of running slowly is indeed an art and has to be learnt. He recommends a mixture of walk, jog, run. We should walk up any and all hills. The whole idea is to get from the Start Line to the Finish Line with the minimum of effort. There is no point in sprinting one lap in 40 minutes and having 20 minutes to hang about getting cold in transition before we go again.

To practice the whole concept of slow lapped running, some of the Springwell crew have been enduring nights in the Country Park on a lap of exactly 4.2 miles. On week one we did 3 laps, ie, 12.6 miles, the next week we did 4 laps, then a week later we did 5 laps, ie, 21 miles. You have to get the pacing right, you have to settle on the rhythm of the event, this is all about mind over matter, ie, we no longer have a mind and nothing else matters!

Why are we putting ourselves through this torture? Well, not because we have to but because we want to. It's a privilege to be able to physically and mentally get to the start line of an event of this magnitude, let alone the Finish Line. I will be rubbing shoulders with a lot of the greats of Ultra running, not just at the start, but every hour on the hour!

I also get a chance to

run with my Springwell colleagues, namely John Butcher, Nigel 'Archie' McNeill (both of whom did 25 marathons last year!), Stephen Rainey, Jason Scott, (whose PB for a marathon is 2:58), Glenda Whiteside (marathon PB 3:15), Aidan Devine, (very experienced long distance competitor), Peter Cromie (long distance endurance racer, cyclist and adventure racer par extraordinaire) and then there is the legend, that is Fran McFadden, who is simply a running machine.

Fran competes every distance between 5k and 100k.

he has done more Ultras than you could shake (a tired) stick at. She is training for another 100 miler on the South Downs later this year.

When the dust settles and runner after runner drop out, my bet is that Fran will still be motor-ing on for yet more laps. Fran learned a long time ago that in an event like this, it is not just about superb physical fitness but it's about mental strength. As they say about climbing high in the mountains: "It's not

the altitude, it's the attitude that counts."

STUBBORNNESS AND STUPIDITY

From my point of view, I am going to rely on stubbornness for the first 6 hours, stupidity for the 6 hours after that and after that I would love it, just love it (to paraphrase Kevin Keegan)

to go for as long as my Duracell batteries on my head torch will permit me.

When I eventually collapse, I get a medal that says DNF i.e. Did Not Finish. Every competitor, bar one, gets the same medal. When everyone else drops out, the last guy – or girl – has to complete one last solitary lap and

make the time limit under 60 minutes to be crowned the winner. The only rule, – it's a bit like Fight Club – there are no rules except if you are not on the start line by one minute past the hour, you are out. It really is the case of Last One Standing.

The nine of us from Springwell are doing this event to raise funds for people who will benefit from two Rotary charities. Jolly Rider helps kids in Gambia with unwanted bikes from the British Isles so that they can cycle to school rather than walk 10 miles in the blistering heat. That means they feel less tired when they get to school and can learn better.

Shelter Box is the charity which provides emergency disaster relief whether it's in the Philippines, Nepal or Thailand or wherever

help is needed after earthquakes, tsunamis, etc. Many people in areas affected by disaster don't have an opportunity to get back on their feet by themselves.

Maybe you may wish to donate a few quid to get them back standing tall while nine runners from one club attempts 750 miles inside 24 hours when they will find out who will be..... The Last One Standing. My training from now until race day will be on my sofa where I hope to be the Last One Sitting!

Any donations will be gratefully received at the offices of R.G. Connell & Son, 13 Main Street, Limavady or by each of the nine Springwell runners. Any cheques should be made out to Limavady Rotary Club.



The competitors who will take part in Last Man Standing event. 06604KDR



Members of the team taking part in the Last Man Standing fundraiser. 06602KDR