



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

MUSIC and sport have always been important to me.

It was when I first saw an MBA match in Phoenix in the early 80's, that I realised that they could not only co-exist but that they could also complement each other. Think of the music now played before a boxer enters the ring or the Champion's League music pumped over the tannoy before a big match. I love both music and sport so I knew that I was in for a treat - last weekend when both my passions coincided. Unfortunately they were both practically on at the same time - so it was the usual case of trying to cram three halves into a pint pot....

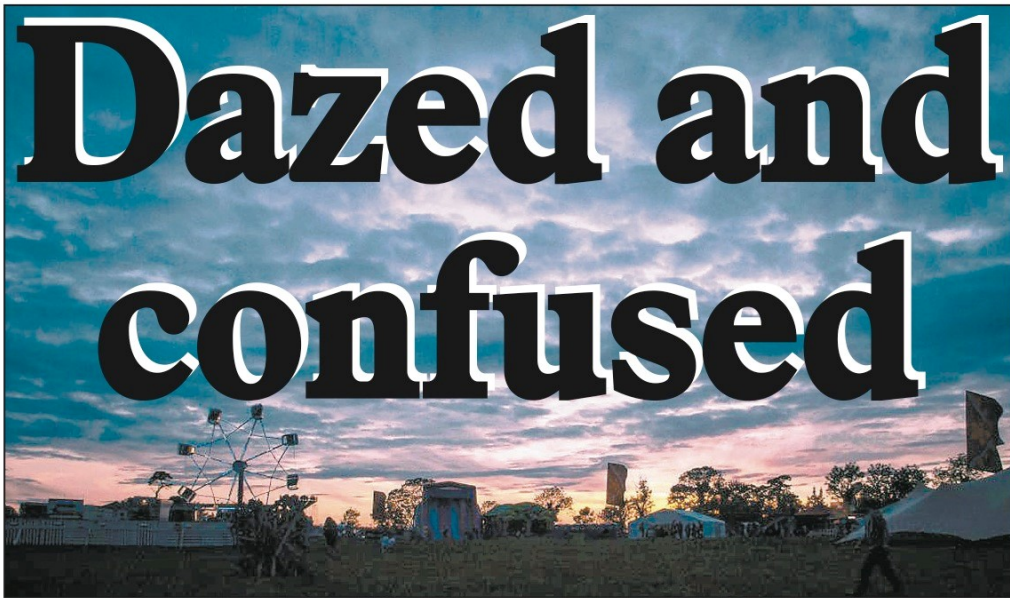
First up was Stendhal or to give its proper title 'The Stendhal Arts Festival'. Thanks to Ross Parkhill, John Cartwright and Colm O'Donnell, Limavady now has an event which was voted the Best Small Festival in Ireland. This year the boys were determined to make it even better, there were more acts, more stages, more art, more theatre, more stalls, more opportunities to experience all of the different branches of art and music.

What does the word Stendhal actually mean? Well, Stendhal Syndrome causes rapid heart beat, dizziness, fainting, confusion and hallucinations - sounds great!

The Jack Family wanted to give it the whole nine yards, so several decided to camp, the rest of us quite liked the comforts of our own bed, so our plans were to sneak back in the wee hours.

Limavady faces the classic dilemma of trying to compete with its two noisy neighbours, Derry and Coleraine, so sometimes we get drowned out. Thanks to the hard work from the Stendhal organising crew, we now have a jewel in the crown that would grace any Council area. A festival doesn't have to be the size of Glastonbury or T in the Park to be successful, but the guys put a lot more infrastructure in place to ensure that the site was drier with better drainage, but how could you have a festival without mud, glorious mud?

As soon as we excitedly ran onto the site just after 5.00 pm on Friday, our wellies were soon covered in glar thanks to another typical Irish summer, but everybody was in good spirits and the music on offer was superb. I was able to catch Ciaran Lavery, headline act Donovan, the Sea Legs and The Bonnevilles



The sun sets at the Stendhal Festival. NCL34-12s

just for starters. The main stage built for the Festival could have graced any arena anywhere in the world and when I saw my fellow Rotarian, Peter Vamos, in charge of the sound, I knew that the musicians were in good hands.

At 1.00am on the Saturday morning as we were still partying, it dawned on me that in 6 hours time, I was off to Dublin for the biggest Triathlon event ever to hit these shores. As you may know, the most important nights' sleep before a big race is not the night before, (which will probably be fractured in any event, due to nerves and an early start), but two nights before, i.e. in a perfect world I should have been off my feet on the Friday night taking it easy trying to get 8 hours of kip and yet there I was in a muddy field, surrounded by hundreds of fellow revellers.

I am not sure if you have ever danced in wellington boots to a Jamaican reggae band while pumping the air and shouting "45" at the demented lead singer, but it's a lot of fun - but probably not conducive to a great athletic performance 30 hours later.

DUBLIN AIRPORT
At 10.45am I rolled into a hotel car park near Dublin Airport to be met by Matt Porter who, until recently, was in charge of the International Charity racing efforts for Rotary Ireland.

I was due to take part in an event to raise funds for Project Rombó in Kenya which is a fantastic scheme run by Rotary to educate kids and to give them health care, edu-

cation and hopefully employment.

It is run by a woman called Elaine Bannon from Ireland who went out there on holiday two decades ago and is still there.

The woman is a saint and has changed - and saved - countless lives, so I thought I would try and raise a few quid for Elaine and her team at Light of Massai. Matt kindly got me a bracelet made by the women of the Massai which I wanted to wear on race day to remind me that when the going got tough, I had a reason to continue.

So how big a deal was this event? Well, it was being run by the World Triathlon Corporation aka 'Ironman'. What started in Hawaii in 1973 is now a world-wide brand with unbelievable cachet. The 2500 available places for the race in Dublin sold out at 250 a pop in two hours. The event itself was merely a 'half' Ironman but the strategists in WTC knew that the word 'half' doesn't inspire too many to part with their cash so the branding experts promptly called it a '70.3' i.e. 70.3 miles consisting of a 1.2 mile swim, a 13.1 mile run and voila, a new phenomenon was born.

When you compete in the 30 or so Ironman events world-wide the ultimate goal is to qualify for the World Championships in Kona, always on the second Saturday in October, so they came up with a similar idea for the 70.3 event of which there are more than 50 world-wide. The 70.3 championship had always been held in North America but this year it's in Europe and

next year it's in Australia, so they were 'growing the brand' each year and because it's only 70 miles you can enter a lot more events to get that elusive world champion's hip spot..... I wasn't, however, in Dublin to qualify for a race 12,000 miles away, I was there as usual just to try to make it to the finish line.

For some reason, I decided to prepare for Dublin by hammering myself at training all week beforehand, this included 20 hill reps, with the Springwell Running Club, gym work and a bike time trial and run time trial back to back, sprints in the pool and also the much anticipated and much-dreaded first sea swim of the year. I have been in a few loughs and reservoirs this year, but that's child play compared to the mighty Brinye. As I stood on the shore and peered at the cold black massive ocean, I asked the lifeguard what the temperature was, he replied: "It's meant to be 14..... but it's not as high as that".

I swam at Benone, but it felt like the Baltic, I stuck it for 20 minutes. An hour later, my hands and feet still didn't feel as if they belonged to me.

Meanwhile, back in Dublin, to actually take part in an event of the magnitude of a 70.3, particularly where the swim starts in one place and the bike start is in another place, means registering in Phoenix Park, then taking your bike to Dunleary and leaving your bike bag (helmet, racing belt, shoes, gels etc.) and run bag (shoes, hat etc.) in various massive marquees. Thankfully I

was able to abdicate all responsibility to Matt who drove me about. All I needed to do was swim/bike/run - then raise funds for Rombó!

EATING FOR IRELAND

After eating for Ireland on Saturday night, I was off to the land of nod for a few hours and before I knew it, I was being deposited at Dunleary by the Porter family before 7.00am the next morning. The road was about to go into lock-down, there was a helicopter in the air for TV shots, the MC (Paul Kay from South Africa who is very good at his job) was booming over the 1,000 watt speaker system and all the hoopla and all the bells and whistles attached to an Ironman were in full swing, whoa, what a spectacle!

It was a privilege to be part of it; I felt so excited for those people taking part in their first event of this magnitude, it's what we train for, it's why we suffer and sweat and toil away, then bang, we are in the middle of a sporting spectacular that makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck.

As an old bloke, I was due in the last wave at 7.50 so I was able to watch as thousands poured into the sea before us. Eventually it was time for us and we went in like lambs to the slaughter, some running in, some a bit more tentative.

I had hoped that the waters would be slightly warmer than Benone, alas, they were just as familiar - and cold. Your face feels like a block of ice, your head like an ice-cream cone, but you

just get on with it. To make matters even worse, there is a current trying to push us to Holyhead and choppy waters to make you sea sick. Apparently the course was even longer than the advertised distance. Maybe they were giving us more value for our money? If you stop to adjust your goggles you ended up drifting further away from your target and as for the cold..... I was now beginning to lose focus and lose track of where I was and who I was. I just couldn't think straight. Eventually the swim ended and I was being hauled up out of my nightmare and out of the icy waters. I found myself in the changing tent. I emptied out my bike bag, I was disoriented from the cold, I saw lots of things on the ground, apparently they were clothes but what order did they go in and what was I to do with them? Was I meant to put them on all by myself with fumbling fingers while shivering on a chair?

A Led Zeppelin song sprang to mind, 'Dazed and Confused'. Well I had a new version 'Cold, Old - and even more Dazed and Confused'. I was so far gone, I felt I was suffering from Stendhal Syndrome! Somehow I managed to do the necessary and stumble out on to my bike, my bike was easy enough to spot in the gigantic transition area, it was one of the few left! I really needed to warm up and the only answer to that was to pedal hard.

As we swept along beside Dublin Bay on traffic free roads and into the middle of Dublin, we were suddenly beside the banks

of the Liffey beside The World (an ocean going liner which doubles as a retirement home, I felt like seeing if they had a spare cabin). I knew I needed coffee. I spotted a bloke enjoying a well-earned carry out from Café Costa. I stopped and persuaded him that he would really like to share it with a stranger from Limavady.... A few minutes later, now half warmed up and half caffeinated I was on my merry way. I was at the back of the field but didn't care, I was there to finish, that was the only thing that counted.

THOUSAND FOREIGN ATHLETES

There were a thousand foreign athletes from 40 different countries and I passed a few from South Africa, USA, Germany, South America etc. (their names and colours of their countries being printed on their race numbers) and chatted to them. We are all relieved to be out of the sea and in one piece.

Some athletes however were so cold in the swim that they had to be fished out and their race was already over. They were back in the transition area covered in foil blankets.

I had had a poor swim and I was having a poor bike, I just couldn't get going. My average speed would have been laughed at by a snail. To wake me up, there was a wee short sharp hill 5K from the end and I spotted one bloke who was off his bike, I shouted over sympathetically "Mechanical?" He replied "Nothing wrong with the bike, it's just me that has

broken down!". I wished him well and before I knew it I was back in the comforting environment of Phoenix Park, the lungs of Dublin and into T2 to get rid of my bike, stick on my running shoes and I was glad to be back on Terra Firma.

"I may have had a lousy two thirds of a race but I felt I could salvage some pride in the last discipline. Phoenix Park was closed to traffic for us but full of thousands of spectators to cheer us on. It was great to see my club mate Roger Poland striding to the finish line as I was on my first lap. The club were well represented with Thomas Moore (who went Sub 5), Roger, Paul Campbell, Samantha Convery, Cheryl Cardwell, who ended up 4th in her age group; Derek Hegarty, Joe Doran, Ben Steen, Thomas Evans, Aaron Ballantyne and Gerard Lundy putting in great performances. I was obviously just there to make them all look good!

The last time I was running in Phoenix Park was the Dublin Marathon a few years ago when we had been warned that a deer or two could run across our path, I don't think I would have noticed this time if they had.

We were to do three laps and I loved every second of it. I wanted to break two hours for the 21K which I did by 5 minutes.

At one stage, Matt ran a few K with me which was great, Rotary brothers in arms. At another stage, I recognised a marshal who shouted at me, "Is that Peter Jack?" I replied "It used to be..."

He and I were both in this sport 30 years ago - and still are - and I have no doubt that both of us could not quite believe the transformation that has revolutionised our sport in three short decades. Then, we were a minority sport on the fringes of the fringe, now we are practically mainstream. With an event like this that can stop a city in its tracks with thousands of willing participants, hundreds of marshals (many of them from Rotary!) and Police, Civil Defence and countless numbers of spectators.

In Copenhagen, 200,000 spectators watch the annual Ironman race. Dublin 70.3 is big but will be even bigger next year. On the Finish Line, I consoled myself that although this fantastic weekend of music and sport was over, I had only 364 sleeps to go before next year's Stendhal and Ironman combo - bring it on!!