



Sweet Sixteen

T minus four days

IN four days time, I intend to attend at the Esplanade, Weerwater, Almere, Holland at shortly after 7.00 am to start my last ever Ironman Distance race.

It will be my 16th and I am already feeling nervous.

You always do before your "A" race of the year.

All my literal eggs are in the one basket.

If I finish the race, my sporting year will be a huge success.

If I don't finish it will be a failure, it's a simple equation.

So what lies ahead of me on Saturday?

A 3.8K swim 180K bike and a 42 K "Run" (although I use that word loosely).

I have done 15 of these races before and every one of them stretches you to your limits – and beyond.

You find out things about yourself which have remained hidden until then.

You never know what you can still achieve when you know you feel you have absolutely nothing left to give.

You know there will be bad moments in all three disciplines particularly in the water as I am not the world's best swimmer.

I am quite sure it's not going to be a great sensation because five minutes after my wave starts in a field of 600, 800 athletes who are merely doing a half Ironman set off and inside 20 minutes, most of them will be swimming over the top of me.

Mind you, I have had the experience already this year of having been kicked in the eye socket by a size 12, at a race in Glenarm.

Although it was horrendous at the time I was able to re-focus, take a deep breath and finish.

In retrospect, that was a great experience from which I learnt.

At least in Almere, temperature wise, the water should be ok.

I was having a swim a few weeks ago and the water temperature was probably down to about 13 or 14 after a week of cold rain (the temperature of the pool in your local leisure centre is 30 degrees).

It took me two hours on the bike afterwards to properly warm up.

My longest swim of the year has been 3.3k in the river Foyle so I have just got another 500 metres to find, but I have got confidence in the programme set for me by my world class coach, Bill Black from London.

Bill has more belief in me than I do! I have to exit the water by 9.45 a.m. (2 hours and 10 minutes after the start) otherwise my race is over.

The bike ride is mercifully flat (one of the reasons why I picked this course).

I can bluff on the flat but I certainly can't bluff on the hills.

The course is two laps of a 90K triangle, we head west to the coast of Holland, then north and then south east and then back to the start.

Every leg of the Triangle is probably about 30K.

I have, of course, been studying the long range weather forecast like a fortune teller examining tealeaves.

So far it has predicted rain, then sunny.

The latest forecast is rain, with a high of 19 degrees, but with an average 22 kilometre wind from the west, with gusts of up to 30K an hour.

A cyclist doesn't mind rain, but by golly, does he hate wind.

No matter the strength of the wind, you always struggle and suffer more in the head wind than you benefit from the tail wind.

To try to be aero dynamic on the bike, you get down low and try to punch a hole through the wind.

My bad back however is not keen lying flat for more than a few minutes at a time.

My longest ride of the year has been about 4 x 100k and 2 x 80 miles, one of them with my club colleagues, Thomas and Catherine which left me so knackered I had to go and lie down afterwards for several hours.

This Saturday when I get to 80 miles however there is no prospect of a lie down.

I will have another 32 miles to do before I cast aside my trusty Boardman.

The second reason for doing the Almere event is that is where I started my Ironman journey back in 1990.

Look at the changes that have taken place since then. Back then, we didn't have a functioning Executive at Stormont, oh wait a minute,..... Maggie Thatcher was

PM, the Channel Tunnel was

opened, inflation was 9.5 per cent, the footballer Aaron Ramsey and the actor

Deve Patel were both born and Sinead O'Connor was Number 1 on Top of the Pops with "Nothing Compares 2U".

I am now 28 years older but none the wiser.

I have lost hair, teeth and marbles but hopefully the fire in the belly and the grit are still there – you don't get an oyster without grit, do you?!

I know that I can have bad moments on the bike, I certainly had those 28 years ago, as I got five punctures and I only had three spare tubes with me.

I had to bike back on a flat wheel off course to the house where I was staying for a fourth tube and then after 90 miles when I got my last flat some guardian angel threw me his spare tube when I sat disconsolate at the side of the road.

I had lady luck on my side then and to finish any Ironman, you need a slice of luck.

I certainly got slices of luck in the past. For instance, when I was doing a race in the States and it was 35 degrees and I was about to keel over with heat exhaustion, I got the merest hint of a puff of a cool breeze which had the desired effect of giving me the courage to continue.

In another race in the States, my feet had swollen up so much with the heat, I had to abandon my socks and so of course, got blisters.

In Austria, my back was so bad I couldn't even stand up straight on the start line.

Every Ironman race has its challenges but also I have to remember how privileged I am to at least to be in a position to get to the start line for this one last hurrah!

I have had a surge of confidence in the

last week for three reasons, none of which were connected with my previous training.

The first one was watching the "Iron Cowboy", a documentary about James Lawrence who wanted to do 50 Ironman races in 50 days in the 50 States of the USA – and he succeeded! (He even started getting faster after race number 30!)

The second was a great programme on ITV about Ben Fogle, attempting to climb Everest.

Ben is a normal person, like you and me but is incredibly determined, motivated and focused.

He was even able to do a lucid piece to camera at the top of the world's highest mountain without his oxygen mask when he said "I may have be standing on Everest, but what is your Everest, when is your Everest, where is your Everest?"

The fact that I can stand here at 8,848 metres

its box.

I want to be out of the water in about one hour 20, have a 10 minute transition and then do the bike ride in seven hours 30.

I will definitely slow in the second lap but if my average speed is about 15.5 kilometres an hour I should make it.

It doesn't sound like much but that will include a few comfort breaks and a few attempts to get a cup of coffee somewhere! (in the Venice Ironman I found a wee café which I visited on each lap for a quick sugary cappuccino, best pick me up ever).

I have to be off the bike and start the run by 5.30 pm.

The overall finish time for the race is 10.30 p.m. ie 14 hours and 55 minutes after I start.

When I think of my last two Ironman races I just made the cut off by the proverbial skin of my teeth.

In Copenhagen, I managed a 14.48 meansand was the last official finisher but I had just finished a course of antibiotics the day before after a nasty chest infection and was in the words of Jackson Browne,

"Running on Empty."

My last race was even worse.

In mountains and had prepared in a Ironmaphysiology lab before he even set foot on Venice Everest.

I had a great swim, a great bike, followed by a non-existent run.

I didn't run a step. I couldn't run a step.

I had a calf injury but also if the truth be told, I hadn't worked after a 112 miles bike ride.

My "run" was slower than my bike split which just shouldn't happen. That race however was at the start of June and as May is my busiest month for organising and commentating at events, I went to the start line desperately tired.

Not a great way to be when you have got a 15 or 16 hour day ahead of you!

The good news this time was that I am injury free and healthy - the bad news is I have no more excuses!

I have taken confidence however from some great sessions which Bill, who has coached Spencer Smith to two World Titles, pencilled in for me.

There was a 50 mile time trial on the bike (5 times Round The Bridges plus 2 1/2 miles) sounds boring but good mental training.

There was a "Yannos" run session (10 x 800m - whatever time you do in minutes and seconds is an incredibly accurate gauge in hours and minutes for your marathon, sounds crazy but it works - I averaged 3 minutes 53 seconds for my 800m and my last straight up marathon at 3 hours 54 minutes!)

Then there was a crazy swim in a local reservoir (which I won't name since we are not allowed to swim there!)

It was a Saturday morning, there was pea soup of a fog over hanging everything.

I went in to the water and very soon I couldn't see five metres in front of me, generally not a good idea in deep water!

I ended up 15 minutes later swimming round in a circle without having a clue where I was and I ended up back to

where I started!

My longest run of the year was only two hours.

I did three or four trips from Benone to the Point Bar and back, exactly 13.1 miles on the road and I was also lucky to be part of a relay team which did the 24 hour race in Belfast i.e. I had 3 x 2 hour runs inside 24 hours, trying to motivate myself and indeed trying to keep awake at 1.00am which was a tricky job.

So how on earth did Peter Cromie do 48X50 minutes in a row with only 10 minutes recovery each time?

But all of these sessions were helpful because they made me suffer because believe me, if you want to complete an Ironman, you are going to learn not only how to suffer but to embrace pain.

One of the misconceptions of modern society is that if you want something badly enough, you will achieve your goal.

Be a dreamer and if you want it fervently, it will somehow happen.

I call it the X-Factor Fallacy and I blame Simon Cowell - the basic philosophy is, of course, just nonsense.

You can dream and wish and cross your fingers all your like, but it ain't going to happen without the necessary sweat. James Lawrence, the Iron Cowboy, set a World Record for Half Ironman finishes in one year before he attempted his 50/50/50 challenge.

Ben Fogle had climbed many mountains and had prepared in a Ironmaphysiology lab before he even set foot on Venice Everest.

Peter Cromie had run many Ultra Marathons before he stood on the start line at Florencecourt.

These guys do the hard yards, they supplied the perspiration as well as the inspiration.

I feel I have done most of the work but I know I will need help from Lady Luck.

In 1990 at my first Ironman in Almere I ran a sub four hour marathon but that is only because I had so much time off the bike due to my five punctures and I was able to run because a Good Samaritan through me that spare tube.

In Copenhagen, I lost my goggles in the water but a guy on a bridge above me pointed them out to me before they sank, in Lake Placid, I avoided a huge pot hole on the road which would have ended me as well as my race, in the Czech Republic.

I nearly keeled over in the heat but found some shade just in time, in Poland I was like a drowned rat due to five hours of incessant sheet like rain but eventually it stopped and I was able to warm up – if you are using energy keeping warm, that's less energy to propel you going forward.

In an Ironman, you not only need Lady Luck but you need to be able to eat and drink like a horse all day.

I am lucky that I have a cast iron stomach and can eat most things that are aren't moving.

I am taking plenty of the best protein bars in the world with me – £1.25 from Donnelly's in Ballycastle, a bar just made of oats, nuts, dates, and cranberries.

I also hope to see my family somewhere on the course so that they can slip me a nice salad roll or jelly babies or chocolates or basically anything that tastes good.

I have just had my last mini blast of training that included a 50 length swim with 4x200m in under four minutes with 10 seconds recovery, a 45 minute bike ride with 2x10 minutes above race pace and a 20 minute run with a negative split, all good grist to the mill.

If you are training you can't get nervous, the hard part is not to train and to do nothing but wait and wait and wait

Join me next week to see if I can make it to the start line let alone the finish line!

CHALLENGE
ALMERE-AMSTERDAM
we are triathlon!

Rabobank