



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

FAT LAD / FAT DAD

WHEN I was a nipper in Ebrington Primary School and its equivalent in Ballymena in the early 60's, geography was still a useful subject.

They taught – and you learnt – useful stuff about places and countries.

One of the first things drummed in to you whilst we sat behind huge desks in short trousers with our ties askew, was the six counties that made up our big Country.

They were:-
Fermanagh
Antrim
Tyrone
Londonderry
Armagh
Down

On the other hand, if you were taught in a school full of pupils that you were destined not to meet for the next 15 years, then the “L” of the fourth word became a “D” for Derry.

In those days, you didn't travel much, a trip to Castlerock was an expedition, a trip to Belfast was an adventure a trip to Dublin..... just didn't happen.

We were also taught about a vast body of water known as Lough Neagh which touched five of the six counties with Fermanagh being the only county to miss out.

So what could I do in the sporting sense to link all six counties of our fair land?

The obvious thing was to bike in all of them.
What distance did I want to do?

Probably a century of miles in total to make it honest so it looked a bit like 25k in each county then putting the bike back in the car, driving across the next county line, before reemerging onto the bike.

A challenge should however, be shared, to be even more fun so I phoned my best mate, Mark Kinkaid from Warrenpoint.

Mark and I have tackled many different sporting odysseys over the years and the craic has always been mighty.

It took Mark about a nanosecond to confirm that he was up for this latest episode.

“What date?” says Mark “The summer solstice!” says I.

The longest day with the most amount of daylight would always be an advantage when you have to do 6 x 1 hour bike rides and probably 6 hours driving in between.

Mark then had the idea of doing the rides in reach of the county towns but then just like Baldrick, he had an even more cunning plan.

He said “What about the famous/infamous Lap of the Lough?” “Brilliant”, says I “but what about Fermanagh?”

Where there is a will, there is a way so we decided to start off on the west of the province somewhere near Enniskillen.

The plan was to see Lough Erne then go and spent most of the day gazing at Lough Neagh.

Thanks to the old Interweb, I was able to suss out all different types of accommodation options but it wasn't just going to be an old boys' reunion from QUB Law School of 75-80.

Mark's son, Matthew, was going to join us.

Mattie, like my Patrick, had decided after his degree to go see the world.

Whilst Patrick lived and worked in China, Japan, India and Columbia, Mattie took himself off to Canada and New Zealand.

As Mattie was an accomplished skier and mountain biker, it was natural he would gain employment in those fields and three or four years were spent in the Rockies in the Northern Hemisphere looking after the skiers in the winter and the mountain bikers in the summer.

He then switched to the Southern Alps of New Zealand in the highest mountains between the Himalayas and Antarctica.

When I gave Mattie a big welcoming bear hug, I discovered that he was skin and bone and as lean as an athlete should be after finishing in the top 15 of the Elite section of a Half Ironman in New Zealand.

He may have exchanged the Land of the Long White Cloud for the Land of the Long Dark Cloud but he looked delighted to be home.

Travel not only broadens the mind but makes you resourceful, independent and self-reliant.

You become a problem solver.

If you are confronted with a problem and you are 12,000 miles away from home, there is nobody there to help.

You just learn how to solve the problem and move on. You meet people from different backgrounds, colours, cultures etc and you realise that, contrary to the popular saying, that the world is not a small place.

That it doesn't really matter what church you go to or don't or what flag you plead allegiance to or whose set of cultural norms you adhere to as long as you work hard and make the most of your talents and treat your neighbour – and your world – as you would like to be treated yourself.

We met up in Drumhoney County Park near Lisnarick west of Irvinestown in deepest Fermanagh.

Mattie and his dad were in fine form as they took their

bikes off the roof of their Jag.

Drumhoney was a great spot especially for families with a woodland walk, several lakes, pet rabbits, kid goats, Shetland ponies etc.

If you wanted to picture “rural idyll”, then Drumhoney painted it large.

We were up before 6.30am as we were men on a mission.

Unlike the weather of the previous week/month/lifetime, dry skies heralded the dawn of the summer solstice.

Whilst the druids were at the same time paying obeisance to the monuments at Stonehenge, we trundled onto quiet back water roads to search out a beautiful aquatic scene to give us a visual feast.

We wanted to do a quick loosener of 11 miles and as luck would have it, Lough Erne appeared just like magic after 5 miles at a spot where Mark used to take Mattie sailing.

Lough Erne was sparkling like a polished jewel at 7am as the sun had already been over the yard arm and we luxuriated if not in heat, then in an abundance of light.

It was back to our lodge (£75.00 for the three of us for 5 star accommodation) for a shower and to fuel up before heading east to find an even bigger stretch of water then Lough Erne – the Big Canona itself, Lough Neagh.

The sun was now shining high in the sky as I looked at the vastness over to our right and the words and sounds of one of Springsteen's finest tracks came to mind, “Empty sky, empty sky, I woke up this morning to an empty sky.”

There was a dearth of buildings and a void of infrastructure, just a messianic massive sky towering over us, around us and above us.

Whilst Lough Erne has been looked after and protected and improved via its links with the Shannon Waterway, its counterpart has been sadly neglected.

For years, Lough Neagh has been used as a dumping ground by farmers and factories alike.

As it is 390 square kilometres in size, perhaps we all think that we can get away with continuing to get rid of our waste in it knowing that nature would somehow sort it out for us.

Of course, what is dumped in Lough Neagh will eventually end up being flushed down the Lower Bann and emerge at Castlerock or Portstewart but hey, as long it's not in our back yard.....

Lough Neagh has been diagnosed an International Wetland and EU Special Protected Area (so what happens after Brexit!) It is so vast that it even has its own shipping forecast on the BBC.

Lap of the Lough

There are tons of sportives up and down the country. Last Saturday saw the Causeway Sportive on the North Coast with over 1,000 riders.

One of the most popular is the aforementioned lap of the Lough. This year is scheduled for the 25th August.

I did it once years ago when it started in Antrim but now it starts in the metropolis of Moy and it wends its way round via four food and comfort break stops, with entry fee being a very reasonable £35.00.

If you are beside a Lough you would think it would be flat so how come we had 800m of climbing to do?

We were about to find out as we parked up at Tamnaran Park 'n' Ride where the good people of Dungannon leave their cars before getting the bus to Belfast for their daily commute.

The Lap of Lough is meant to be 89 miles and as we had 11 done, we would hit the century at the end of the day after a lovely spell of keeping the biggest body of water in the British Isles on our right – what could possibly go wrong?

Lough Neagh is of course not only the British Isles' largest inland water but it is also scandalously its least utilised tourist attraction.

Neither central or local government has harnessed its unique tourist potential.

I have always thought it would be an appropriate spot for a memorial to the victims of the Troubles.

The finest architects and engineers and nautical experts could be brought together to plan, craft, manufacture and install some kind of floating Island in the exact middle of Lough Neagh where a gleaming shining needle would point towards an empty sky.

Free boats trips would be offered to the relatives of the deceased.

The rest of us would be happy to pay to make a pilgrimage to a memorial that would never be defaced or vandalised and where an eternal flame would safely burn at the foot of the glass spire.

But how could we possibly pay for it?

Well, if we can afford to burn cash for ash and paint

expensive red lines, then we can at last also afford universally to honour all of our dead.

Despite living in the internet age, Mark had done his homework and had written down on various scrapes of paper our intended route.

After about 15 minutes, we came to a junction where there were no sign posts, no markers, nada.

We thought we were still in Tyrone but that was about all we knew. Mark biked over and talked to a local who was busy leaning on his front gate.

Mattie and I waited patiently for five minutes while Mark listened to a lengthy explanation of where we should head.

It turned out that the local hadn't actually been out of his parish for the last 50 years and perhaps wasn't the best source of information for three impatient cyclists.

He advised us to go back the way we came so we promptly ignored him and set sail, trusting our own indisputable judgement.... At this point, I recalled Mark and I doing the Coast to Coast Adventure Race (Sligo to Newcastle via canoe, bike and foot).

After what seemed like a lifetime of toil and travail, we found ourselves deep in the Mourne. “It has to be this way”, I wheezed to Mark and we promptly set off in completely the wrong direction for a hour while the organisers could see our transponder disappearing into the rain, as the mist descended and daylight began to disappear....

Meanwhile back in 2019, we saw helpful signs for Ballyronan and we found a café which is the race headquarters for the Triathlon expertly hosted by the High Elbow Club every August. I have done MC there with athletes of the calibre of Javier Gomez, former World Champion.

We had a total of 30 miles in our legs by this stage and we feasted upon Coffee and Fruit Cake.

We then crossed the Moyola River and as we didn't know what quiet roads the Lap of Lough should be on, we didn't stray from the main road so it was a very busy and traffic filled trip from Toome to Antrim.

As the Lower Bann and the River



Mile Water were also soon history.

We bypassed the airport and then ensconced ourselves in Café Keenan in Crumlin for as many calories as we could mangle.

We were 56 miles in with the equivalent of a Half Ironman bike ride completed.

All good things must come to an end so we set sail again.

At this stage we hadn't seen Lough Neagh for about an hour. I then saw a sign for Gawley's Gate which I remembered was on the original lap of the Lough Route, “Brilliant, Pete” I thought.

We swerved off the main road to cycle another 10k to find...nothing. Gawley's Gate was apparently a post box and when we talked to its not particularly busy postman, I realised that Gawley's Gate made sense if you were coming in the opposite direction.... Lough Neagh, which was meant to be on our right, was now on our left.

How did that happen, how can a Lough the size of Liechtenstein, suddenly move?

Whilst I loved geography my sense of direction – as Davy Blair can testify due to my complete inability to read a map for orienteering – was never the strongest.

I remember marching up a street in Delhi convincing Patrick that a huge river would be at the top of a particular road.

When we got there no river, not even the smell of a river and I handed over navigational duties back to Patrick after that....

So, we had a detour but at least we saw the highlights of Lough Neagh again.

Mark had the sensible idea of heading for big spots which whirled vaguely in the right direction.

We skirted round Ackley and Moira with Kinnego Marina somewhere to our right and as Lough Neagh was now hopefully to the North and not the West, we fought our way into Lurgan for a much needed Lucozade and Mars Bar stop.

I gave a lawyer mate of mine a bell and he came to join us.

You can cut the sectarian divide in Lurgan with a metaphorical knife, apparently.

One side of the road pleads allegiance to one flag, the other side of the road marches to a different drum under a different flag.

The colours and the patterns of the flag/flegs on our way round Lough Neagh told us the depressingly familiar story of which community we were in.

What is it about us that we are so unsure of our cultural identity that we feel the need to plaster “our flag” on every lamppost and paint every kerb stone?

I have travelled through countries 10 times the size of Northern Ireland and seen 10 times less flags.

I made a mental note to buy shares in a flag making factory.

I also made a mental note to write to the Roads Minister to complain about the appalling state of the road surface but wait a minute, we don't have a Roads Minister or a Health Minister or an Education Minister or God Forbid, a Justice Minister.

When you live in a vacuum and read on anti-social media all your familiar posts, you end up living in an echo chamber where you don't want to listen or talk to anybody who might be different or even talk with a different accent.

Lurgan became Craigavon and Craigavon became Portadown and I thank the good Lord of both communities that I have the good fortune to live with fresh air and clean water on the North Coast with access to mountains and forests and sea. Stumbling through the traffic of Portadown at 4pm on a Friday afternoon, Lough Neagh might as well have been as far away as the moon.

At last we gave in to the creature comforts of the 21st Century and Mattie brought up Google Maps on his Dad's phone (as neither Mark nor I were smart enough to operate a smart phone) Mattie cycled along with one hand on the handlebars and one hand on the phone as we left busy roads and crossed the M2 via a tiny bridge and somehow miraculously managed to find our way back, if not to home and hearth, then back to car and comfort.

The Lap of Lough was meant to be 89 miles and somehow despite adding an additional detour we manged only 83 miles.

Aw well, we might not have enjoyed the leafy countryside of quiet county back roads but at least we got to experience the roundabouts of Craigavon.

You win some, you lose some.

What did you do to celebrate the Summer Solstice?

Well, we managed to see all six counties despite no sign posts signifying any change of county, we chalked up nearly a century of miles under our belts and more importantly, I got to catch up with my best mate.

Maybe I will spend the Summer Solstice of 2020 doing the Seven Summits of the Mourne, drinking in the views over Newcastle and the Silent Valley but in the meantime, 55 years after those seminal geography lessons, I discovered there were no Fat Lads in our trio just one Fit Lad and two Fat Dads but those two fat dads still have plenty of adventures ahead of them.

