



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

Highway to Hell!

I AM not sure if you have ever had a weekend and where

1. You enter a country without a passport
2. You finish a half Ironman Triathlon in the worst possible weather and

3. You end up giving it large at an AC/DC concert with 60,000 other head bangers,

but that was my experience last week.

It all started with the idea of a warm weather race. I was fed up with the rain and the wind of domestic races. I toyed with the idea of Malta but decided on Lisbon as we had never been there before. The temperature was in the mid - high 20's at the start of the week and the water temperature was bound to be a lot more appealing than the Newry Canal where I had done my last half Ironman Race last August.

Sharon and I fought our way through Dublin Airport with a bike bag (which for me not only included the inevitable method of conveyance, but also wetsuit, bike shoes, helmet, run shoes and all of the other exotic paraphernalia needed to complete three races in one). The flight was bugged and the ground staff very kindly offered to take my carry on suitcase to avoid the crush on board. Just before we landed I realised with a heart descending lurch that our Passports were in said suitcase... and of course, Passport Control was before baggage reclaim. I rather sheepishly approached an official in the airport, who then transferred me to a Police Officer / Border Control Guy. Thankfully, other idiots had done something similar in the past

and after writing down our dates of birth, we were allowed into Portugal to retrieve our suitcases - and outrageous Passports. I thought at one stage we were going to end up like Tom Hanks in "The Terminal", endlessly wandering around the sanitised area of an airport, not in a country, but not out of it either.

We bumped into a big crowd of Pulse Athletes from Dublin, who had also left behind lousy Irish weather for the balmy Iberian Peninsula... only to discover that whilst the mercury continued to rise at home, it was plummeting in Portugal and Spain.

Before a race, long or short, you should try and stay off your feet as much as possible, 24 to 48 hours before the kick off. But of course being curious, I couldn't resist the many attractions of Lisbon which included Castles, Cathedrals, trams, funiculars, the harbour, steep hill climbs and fab shops (including a pair of red in your eye red patent shoes which will now be my post-race attire of choice) i.e. I didn't spend too much time of my feet, but hey, it was only a half Ironman not the real deal.

Patrick had sent a message from Tokyo wishing me well for the race, but also informing us that AC/DC, one of the world's biggest heavy metal / rock bands were coincidentally playing in Portugal's capital on the night of the race. Five minutes later I asked a waiter what he was doing on his day of and he replied that funnily enough he was going to be giving it dixie at the

AC/DC show and that strangely his brother had two spare tickets for the sold out gig. Being an opportunist, I was able to seal the deal to come back the next day to pick them up. I of course didn't even try to contemplate how tired I would feel after the race, but I am a firm believer that energy creates energy.

I visited the expo area before the race and got my bike adjusted and tightened up for the rigours that lay ahead. My trusty Cannondale has never let me down, but would it get me through this time? I had punctured on my previous ride on bank holiday Monday just before the end of 80K so hopefully that was all my bad luck out of the way. A hearty Chinese meal and a half bottle of the local very acceptable red stuff sent me off to the land of slumber early. Of course, I woke up at 2am bright eyed and ready to kill dead things. Suddenly however it was 6.13am, so I must have dozed off again. Fortified by a good brekkie, we left the hotel with wetsuit in hand. I always like to put it on at the last possible moment. Until then the race is just a theory, not reality. As soon as you strap yourself in, put your timing chip around your ankle and spit in your goggles, you are then in the zone. I had missed the briefing in English the night before as the bike check in queue was so long. 1,500 people were in my race plus others in the Olympic Plus Category. There was even a Clydesdale section. If I ate 15kg worth of the delicious Portuguese custard tarts, a whole new range of 1UK plus

options would be open to me!

On our way to the start line the first drops of rain began to fall. It didn't let up for the next 10 hours! One of Portugal's most famous sons is explorer Vasco Da Gama who circum navigated the world (and who has a massive shopping centre now named after him), but it's no wonder that he left home for several years if the race day weather was typical. Coming from Ireland I am used to weather, but boy, this took the biscuit. It chucked it down. Whatever genius of an architect designed the concrete roof of the 1998 World Expo Arena which also doubled as our transition area, had certainly not ever contemplated rain. The roof acted like a bowl and when there was enough water, the water poured like a waterfall. My bike was safe enough in transition at the far end of a very long rack. This was good news because when I eventually emerged in my befuddled state after the first discipline, even I should be composmentis enough to locate my trusty steed. This was the first big race I had done since my mum had passed away and as I walked down to the water, I pointed up to the sky in some attempt at communication. I met up with my fellow Islanders, and found out a little bit about the course. We were to do a two lap swim on a sheltered inlet of the River Tejo around the aquarium building then four laps bike and four laps run.

Lisbon had a lot of competing attractions on. There was a Japanese cartoon artist (Nami) who was having an exhibition of his work, this attracted several thousand kids all dressed in wild, weird and whacky outfits to pay homage to their hero. Sporting Lisbon, Benfica's big rival, were playing at home. There was also AC/DC, but before I could even begin to start pogoing to them I had the joy/job of tackling a 1.9K open water swim, a 90K bike and a 21K run.

Water temperature earlier in the week had practically been wetsuit illegal i.e. over 21°C, but on race day it was down to 15°C i.e. one degree more than Dublin Day where I had got frozen last August in a similar sized race. Our wave was the last on i.e. the oldies and crinklies. I thought that they might have had a bit of respect for their fellow soon to be bus pass holders - but no, they still gave me a slap on the head and a kick in the stomach as we fought our way around the first buoy. I emerged pleased with my swim time still

knowing my own name. It was off with the wetsuit and on with the new compress day glo yellow socks - hey, if I was still out after dark, at least the marshals will be able to find me. I also put on my Triangle bike jacket, but the vast majority of my Iberian peers/rivals seemed to eschew any form of heat protection and took to the mean streets of Europe's most westerly capital, clad only in their tri suits. Most of them had their names printed on their ass so I was able to encourage them as I passed them (I know my club mates back home will find it incredulous that I was able to pass anybody or anything, but I was on a good day).

I felt like Chris 'va vroom' Froomeon the way out because I had a hurricane behind me. On the way back however, it was a different story. We were on a closed off motorway, the road surface was great but boy, was it exposed. Some guys had crashed, especially those with disc wheels as they were tossed about by the gale force winds. It took me 50 percent longer on the way back on each lap than I was taking on the way out. At the start of the second lap we were offered a quarter of a banana and a quarter of an energy bar, great weight loss strategy! Thankfully I had some gels of my own which went down the hatch. I tossed in my by now empty water bottles into the bucket and grabbed two full isosorb bottles from the soaked marshals. One Irish guy was hospitalised later on in the day due to not only hyperthermia but also de-hydration - just because it's raining doesn't mean you don't have to drink... the spray on the way back was horrendous! It was as if someone with a bucket of water was throwing it at you every two minutes. This is weather you wouldn't contemplate going out in... you wouldn't ever put your badly behaved cat out in it. We were surely on the Highway to Hell! This was proper gym weather. I reminded myself of what Peter Cromie had told me two weeks previously after his epic feat in finishing 30th out of 1,800 competitors in the Marathon Des Sables. "You have to really want it, you have to remember why you are out here. You have to remind yourself constantly that you will do whatever it takes to make it to the finish line. If that belief goes you are finished. You have to have an answer to the question "Why?". And the answer had to be better than "Why not?". At least I only had half a day



Yet another rock n' roll casualty. NCL20-20s

of tempest and fury to contend with, not a week of sand dunes and desert scorpions like Peter...

Every lap had a dead turn on cobble stones in the wet. It was like the tour of Flanders at one stage. At least one guy fell off and broke his arm. It was like skating on ice. I was therefore extremely relieved to be able to rack my bike 3 hours 20 after I started. My bike was in one piece, and so was I. I was now in my favourite place in the world, T2. I hadn't drowned, I hadn't crashed and all I needed to do now was run 21K. As soon as I put my right leg on the ground however, I knew I was in for a long day in the trenches.

I had performed woefully on the Liam Ball Sprint Race the week before, not helped by a shooting pain in my right knee and calf every time my foot hit the ground. A week later it was no better, neither was the weather. I am fairly sure I saw Noah in his Ark shouting "Abandon ship." As per the "Perfect Storm" of the book and novel fame, the air was water, the world was water. I couldn't hear myself breathe, such was the ferocity of the rain and wind. To put the tin hat on it, some of the 5.5K lapped course was over a shiny slippery Broadway, which you could have practically skated on. Well, it was going to make the post-race bath and beer all the more pleasant. Time to grit the teeth, hunker down and try to commiserate some of my fellow drowned rats who had given up and who were sitting at the side looking miserable. I had entered the race as a building block for my main 'A' race of the year i.e. Challenge Venice four weeks hence. By that stage I wanted a big shiny medal from Lisbon that

shreaked "Finisher." In any longish race, you break it down into bite sized chunks. A 2 lap swim, a 4 lap bike and 4 laps of run meant 10 constituent parts. I found myself on Part 9 i.e. the 3rd lap of the run as I limped and loped my way to the turn. I reassured one of my Spanish friends, he tried to tell me he had an injury ("You want to hear about a real injury Sergio? How long have you got?" I felt like replying). I am no longer interested in a quick finishing time. I don't need a watch anymore, just a page of a calendar, having said that I really wanted to break 6 hours 30 mins. I just smiled and sauntered on, striding with my good left leg and pulling along my uncooperative right one.

Even the marshals on the run course had given up by the fourth lap, some of them apparently were suffering from hypothermia, they were colder and wetter than we were. At least we were moving to keep warm. Eventually - but still miraculously in daylight - I posed for my Finish Line photo and was awarded my black finishers medal and garlanded with not one, but two finishers t-shirts. I thanked the race crew profusely. Their dedication was above and beyond the call of duty.

Several hours later we arrived in East Lisbon along with the equivalent of the population of the North Coast to witness AC/DC. Even by Rock & Roll standards, the excess and bacchanalia of this Scottish/Australian group make other bands seem tame. The first lead singer had died from a heroin overdose, the current drummer was arrested for threats to kill, Brian Johnston, their stand in singer for

the last two decades had been told by a doctor he would go deaf if he continued to perform, so the vocals were taken over by former Guns & Roses front man, Axel Rose. He had just broken his leg so he was now performing in a wheelchair! No Slash on guitar obviously, but the one and only duck walking, Angus Young dressed in his very familiar cap and short trousers. Lead singers may destroy themselves, come and go but Angus Young is the living pulsating, heartbeat of the Rock & Roll circus that is and always will be AC/DC.

Thanks to my right knee I couldn't pogo to Thunderstruck, Shoot to Thrill, Hell's Bells etc. but I could at least shake two fists in the air as we joined in a mass chaotic celebration of animalistic energy and atavistic shared lunacy. I am not sure how many of my fellow half ironman finishers were there, but it sure did wrap up a memorable day. Hammered by the rain and wind I had emerged to prove that with a lot of stupidity and a little bit of Irish good luck, I could make it to a sweet, sweet finish line.

I had started my journey, suitcaseless, clueless and practically stateless but had emerged from limbo in Lisbon thanking my lucky stars that my favourite twin passions, sport and music, had merged into one triumphant Rock & Roll climax. As the band prepared for the encore, Sharon and I slipped off into the (Back in) Black Lisbon night. AC/DC had entertained me after my Lisbon race. If only Led Zep were to reform and play in Venice on June 6, I could then say I had gone from a Highway to Hell to a Stairway to Heaven.



Axl and Angus in full flow. NCL20-21s