



# SPORTING MATTERS

CAN an injury ever be a good thing for an athlete? Johnny Sexton has missed two of Leinster's recent crucial European matches in the last two weeks yet he will probably be fresher for the Six Nations at the Business end of the season. Kevin de Bruyne of Man. City has missed months through injury but he will be as sharp as a tack (unfortunately for United fans like me!) when it's getting to "squeaky -bum" time.

But what about Joe Soap? What about the weekend warrior who still participates in sport long after the tide has gone out on his so called athletic career?

I have been faced with this problem in the last six weeks. I went out for my usual five mile trot after work around the town one night in December. After one mile, I felt a sharp pain at the bottom of my right leg so I thought I would run another four miles on it to see if was still sore, funnily enough it was. Four days later I did 4.2K flat out on a treadmill as part of a mini triathlon, still sore – and they say stupidity is the preserve of the White House! Then I did two Cross Country races in a week – still sore. A friend of mine, who happens to be an Orthopaedic surgeon, diagnosed a partial tear of my Achilles. I just heard the word "partial" rather than tear so I thought I could still train.

Sometimes, when one door closes another one opens, so I thought this injury could be a blessing for my swimming. Then I found out that you need your Achilles to a push off the wall in the pool after every 25 metres so I resorted to try to push with just one leg – and discovered that I was losing two seconds a length. What about cycling, surely you don't need your Achilles for that? A mountain bike ride in the Cam soon reminded me that you need your Achilles for everything – so I learned how to turn the pedal without flexing my ankle at all – not ideal!

So as a Triathlete, if running is definitely out and swimming and cycling are on a knife edge, what can you do? There is always 'arm only' work in the gym or .... there's rowing! The Concept II rowing machine known as the Ergometer is the biggest, baddest, meanest bit of kit in any gym. It looks after/works out every muscle in your body – arms (obviously) but also legs, lungs but most importantly of all, your heart. I discovered that once I was strapped into it, it didn't hurt my Achilles at all, yippee!

My first real session on it was on Christmas Day on my machine at home. I banged out a 5K in 20.40 and felt I had done something to deserve the turkey tizzlers that awaited me. Several days later, I did a 10K in 41.50. I began to post (and hopefully not boast) about it on our TTC app and soon afterwards, Gerard Lundy, a twelve hour and zero minutes Ironman took up the challenge of a 2K race. What speed could we go

# Row, row, row y

over 2,000 metres? I mean, that's just over a mile, how painful could that be? I was soon to discover that pride – and pain – come before the fall.

I did a 7.47 for 2K and then nearly threw up afterwards, that is the equivalent of 1.57 every 500 metres. As soon as you pull a stroke on the machine, the computer that is inbuilt in every Concept II tells you your 500 metre pace, that's the yard stick, your 500 metre split. There are obviously 4 x 500 metres in every 2K and you want to be as consistently fast as possible, so what are the perfect race tactics? Go out just under your aerobic threshold and hold on? Or push the boat out, if you'll forgive the pun, get ahead of schedule and try and hang on for grim death?

In the middle of this conundrum, I realised I knew nothing about rowing and it was time to talk to an expert. Now Donald Trump and Nigel Farage don't believe in experts but I still do – so who would possibly be better as an adviser and coach, than the double Olympian, Richard Archibald? Richard is currently head of Performance Progress at the Sports Institute of Northern Ireland.

Richard is an incredibly modest young man who has nothing to be modest about. He was a member of the Light Weight Quads that made it to two successive Olympics, Athens in 2004 and Beijing in 2008. If it sounds easy being a "Lightweight", well no, it isn't. It meant that for eight years of training and racing, Richard had to keep his weight below 70Kgs and still do three flat out training sessions a day and if you are over 6 ft. like Richard, the lack of carbs and calories can be crippling. I remember having coffee with him a year out from Athens. Whilst the rest of us were cracking into the scones and the biscuits, Richard was having black coffee and no sugar and absolutely nothing to eat. Twelve months later, I was in the stands in Athens with my son Patrick sitting with his mum and girlfriend (now his wife). It was the Olympic final. It was 34 degrees centigrade. We had just stumbled off a plane and we could barely breath due to the heat and no air. For Richard and his crew mates, there lay ahead the most painful six minutes of their lives. They went into the race ranked six out of six so anything was a bonus. They thought they might as well go out with a bang and after 50 almighty strokes of the oars, they were leading after 500 metres. Of course, it all went to hell in a hand cart just after that and as they valiantly



Pressure mounting as Peter reaches the halfway mark in his fitness challenge. 04228KDR

approached the last 100 metres, Richard was as close to unconscious as you can be and still be apparently functioning. Such was the pain in his legs on the finish line he couldn't get out of the boat for thirty minutes. The RTE crew had to interview him whilst he was still sitting down. With commitment like that, I thought I could learn a thing or two from one of the country's top sportsmen.

Did you know that Coleraine has produced four Olympians in the last decade? There is not only Richard but Alan Campbell (whom I saw win his bronze medal in London in 2012 in the single sculls) and the Chambers brothers' (silver medallists in Rio). If you were a Martian or even a visiting tourist to Coleraine would you even be remotely aware of this fact? There is statue to Bertie Peacock (a footballer) in Coleraine in the town centre, there are the names of three golfers as you drive into Portrush but what about our Olympians? When Limavady still had sporting links with Vigneux-sur-Seine, we sent a team to compete (and win) their annual triathlon just outside Paris. Their local Leisure Centre was full of photographs of their local resident who had represented France in the Olympics, in Judo. Why are there no photographs of our four Olympians in the Coleraine Leisure Centre or even a themed café with a rowing boat stuck to the walls with photos in international jerseys and world championship medals on the walls? Why is Coleraine Rowing Club still as outdated as a Victorian outhouse? How can we possibly hope to inspire youngsters to be the sporting heroes of tomorrow if we don't even remind them of our glorious recent sporting past! Or is being able to kick a football and roll around after a tackle as if you have been shot, the only thing that matters?

Richard soon had me doing structured training sessions i.e. 30 minutes at 2.05 pace, then I did 2 x 20 minutes blocks at 2.04 pace, then I did 4 x 1K at 1.56 pace at 22 strokes a minute. There then came a horrific session that still gives me night sweats. The theory was that I would do 5 x 1K starting at 1.56 and get 2 seconds quicker after every kilometre with a 5 minute break between each effort. It went 1.56 .1.54, but instead of going 1.52 and 1.50 I did 1.53 and 1.53 and seriously thought I needed open heart surgery – I just could not face the last 1K as I thought that the paramedics would not be able to get me on their gurney down those steep stairs at the Leisure Centre. I felt as hollowed out as a husk. I crawled home and my system was such a

mess I couldn't even eat (usually the only consolation for an athlete).

Still, I trusted in Richard's methods. His plan was to find out where my limit was, well we both found it! Forty-eight hours later he had me doing 10 x 250 metres at a pace of sub 1.48. This was violent, savage and unleashed the inner caveman in me. It was just me versus that infernal machine and I certainly wasn't going to let Richard down twice in three days. I went home with a veritable spring in my step remembering that Richard had coached me about ten years ago for a sub 19 minute 5K when I managed 1.53 for 10 consecutive 500 metres.

Meanwhile, Gerard posted a 7.38 for the 2K, then we both went radio silent! We didn't let on what the other was doing. If I improved by a second over the 2K it was worthwhile, my ideal however was to improve by 2 seconds every 500 metres and get somewhere close to Gerard's 7.38 i.e. 1.54 pace as this would represent substantial and meaningful improvement. One thing I knew I needed was a fan on race day. I love the Roe Valley Leisure Centre gym but its air conditioning is as effective as an ice cube in the Sahara. When you are desperately trying to suck in some moving air I would rather the air not be already hot.

A quick check of the records in the Concept II website told me that the World Records for the over 60's is an unbelievable 6 minutes 40 seconds i.e. 1.40 pace per 500 and the actual world record has been set by an English man child at the age of 19 in 5 minutes 38, I just didn't want to think about what pain he was in after that.

As no other old bloke has posted a time in 2019, maybe I will be the world leader with a 7.39 but I won't be holding my breath....

No matter what the weather, the Concept II can still come out and play. You have to set it up properly though, there is a "gear" on the machine between one and ten (with ten being the hardest to pull but covering more metres per pull) and also a damper which is meant to read between 130 and 140 and you test it with five strong pulls. For me, that was the equivalent of 6.5 or 7 on the gearing.

I had been training every Monday, Wednesday and Friday for a month and my FA cup final was the last Friday in January. 5.00 p.m. was D Day, it was time to put up or shut up, time to get real, time to put all the eggs into one basket and isn't it true, if you want to make an omelette, you have to crack eggs. I just hoped after my 2K, eggs would be the only thing that would be



10 June 2006; The Irish men's lightweight fours (LM4-), from left, Paul Griffin, Richard Archibald, Eugene Coakley and Gearoid Towey in action at the Irish rowing team's training base on Blessington Lake, Blessington, Co. Wicklow. Picture credit: Brendan Moran



BY PETER JACK

# your boat...

cracked...

I have met and introduced on stage Matthew Pinsent the multiple Olympic gold medallist. I was beside the finish line in Sydney in 2000 when Steve Redgrave won his last ever Olympic Gold medal. I wasn't due any medals last week but all I wanted to do was to produce the best performance I could with my physiology and my psychology. If I could do that, then I could hold my head up. I discovered that when I did the Park Run in Portrush last Saturday, that my Achilles was still sore and my chiropractor was on the money when she told me it would take me six weeks of rest despite me trying to negotiate it down to four....

So, rowing was all I had left, bring it on!

## D DAY

Before I knew it, it was 5.00 p.m. on Friday. I tried to prepare as best I could. My last food was four hours before hand – you need to feel “light” when you are doing a sprint race because this for me was a sprint. The good Lord gave me a pitch load of slow twitch fibres but only a six-yard box worth of fast twitch fibres, so sprints for me are harder than endurance. I worked out that my last Ironman finish took me 115 times longer than this 2K race would take but the 2K was probably going to be 115 times more painful! An Ironman is all about a slow burn and a gradual expending of energy, this row however was going to be a long burner – and a lung burner.

Richard sent me great advice for race day itself so I did 10 minutes at 2.10 pace then had a wee walk then 7 minutes at the same slow pace but 3 x 10 strokes fast near the end. That was to jack the heart race up. I am a notoriously slow starter and usually end up having a negative split but only because I go too slowly for the first half. The old adage is true, the shorter the race the longer the warm up. I had already warmed up for twice as long as the race itself, my aim was to finish strongly which would be better than trying to “fly and die”.

I had brought two fans with me, the first one I plugged into the gym wall to try to cool me down, the second was Sharon who was there to cheer me on! I activated the Ergometer computer and set it to 2,000 metres i.e. every stroke would bring that distance tumbling down. In the righthand corner was a strokes per minute counter. In the middle was the dreaded – but vital – average per 500 metre pace.

What was my target though? I had been agonising about this all week, obviously I wanted to beat my previous time of 7.47, a bit of me also wanted to beat Gerard's previous great score of 7.38 (he couldn't make it on Friday night itself

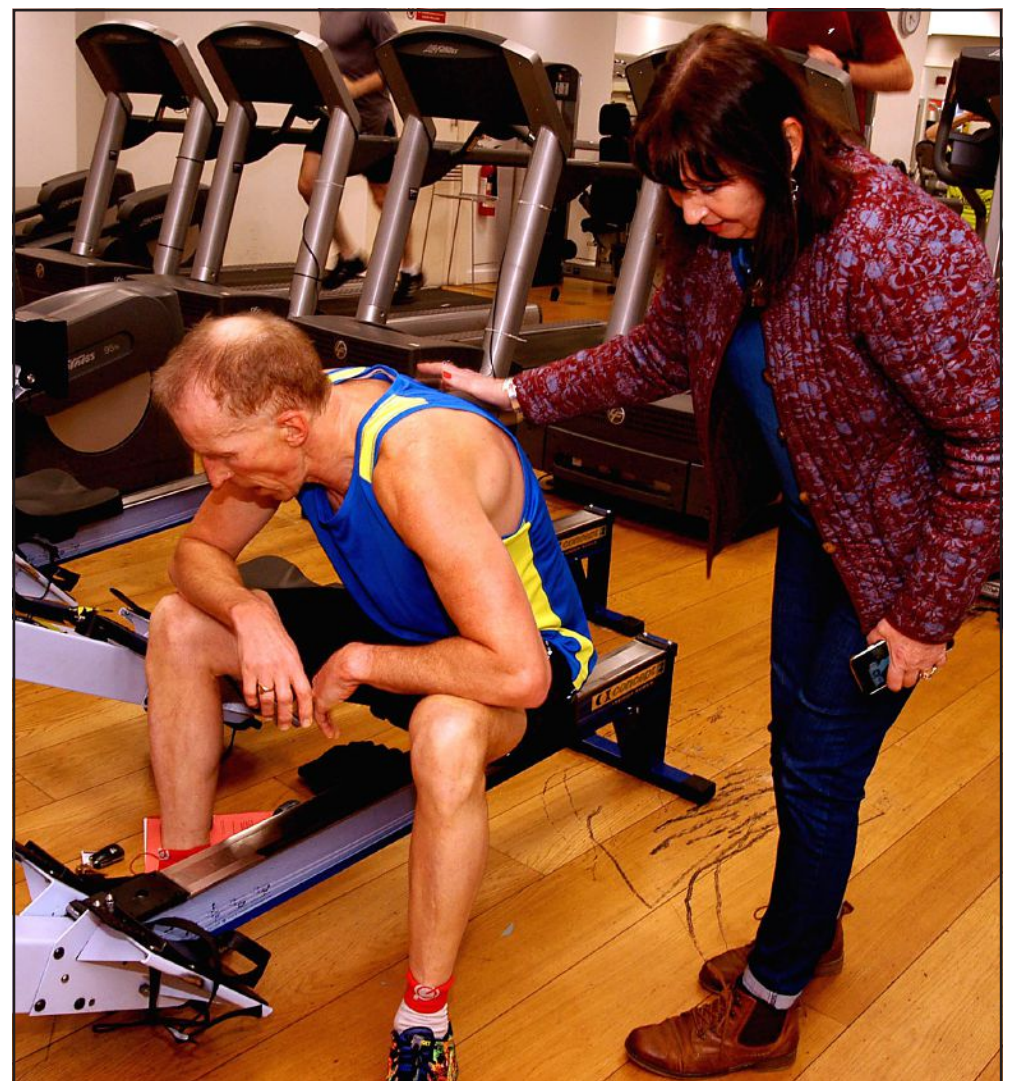
and Richard thought I could do 7.30. Maths has never been my strong point but 7.30 meant 1.52.5 per 500 x 4. When I had tried to do 1K at 1.52 pace only 10 days ago, I couldn't do it and I blew up. If I blew up tonight during the 2K I would obviously still finish but there would be a whole world of pain for the last few minutes knowing that the numbers on the screen in front of me were going the wrong way. Rightly or wrongly, I settled on 1.53 which would equate to 7.32.

I took off my watch and necklace to save weight, I took a sip of water, my gearing was set to 6.5 on the damper, the machine was ready – but was I?

This was a case of me versus machine and at the end of the day the machine always wins, so it was really a case of me versus me. All I wanted to do was to expend every single morsel of energy I had in my system and to pour it all out in a combined effort of arms and legs and lungs and heart. I gave the straps, cementing my feet onto the paddle boards, an extra tightening. Sharon gave me the thumbs up and off we went.

Richard had told me that the first 30 strokes would be for free, what he meant was that you are so full of adrenaline that 1.52 seems easy and he was dead right! What your mind thinks and what your body is feeling however can be two different things. Whilst it felt easy, it would still have a cumulative effort on my system. If it went crazy in the first minute then the next 7 would be ultimately self-defeating. I tried to settle into a rhythm. You break down a 2,000 metre race into four main sections, the first 500 when you launch out of the blocks, the middle 1K where most of the hard work is done and the final 500 which is the sprint for the line. Between 500 and 1,000, you have this awful dawning of realisation that you are already on the ragged edge but you know you are not even half way there yet. I was doing 26/28 strokes a minute trying to use my legs as much as possible and pulling the handles into my stomach to get a full stroke. I was dying for a drink of water but the water bottle would remain tantalisingly out of bounds, you can drink when you are running or on a bike but not when you are on a rower!

The numbers on the top left of the screen told me 999 meters to go, anybody looking at the state of me by this stage would have been dialling 999 but I managed to gasp “halfway” and heard this alien dry voice which sounded as if it was coming from a distant planet. I was on 1.53 pace, all I had to do was keep it there! I had only 3 minutes and 16 seconds to go, practically not even enough time to make a cup of tea, how long and painful could 3.16 actually be? My focus was solely on the screen, on the numbers. The distance to go



**Mission accomplished! Congratulations from wife Sharon for her husband Peter Jack as he gets his breath back and temperature lower on the successful completion of his fitness challenge. 04229KDR**

column was coming down about 12 metres every time I pulled the handle, the strokes per minute was fairly constant about 26, the output was 1.53, all I had to do was keep going. My energy system was changing from aerobic to anaerobic (without oxygen) my system was converting itself from endurance to sprint but I needed both power and speed. Suddenly, I was in the last 500, I felt like a dying man who was clinging onto the edge of a cliff by his fingertips. Success was within reach but it could all disappear in an instant. My lungs felt as if I had been deep sea diving and they had shrunk to the size of a walnut, they were simply not delivering the oxygen I needed. I reached deeper within myself trying to summons up what passes for courage or stupidity, depending on what way you look at it. The numbers now showed 99 metres to go, the finish line was there, all I had to do was fall over it if I could get another eight or 9 strokes done at this ferociously punishing pace.

In the dark dim recesses of what was left of my mind, I had Richard's pie in the sky target of 7.30 in mind, that for me meant 7.29.9. My last couple of pulls were at 1.48 and the metres to go number finally was at zero. My finish time flashed up – 7.30.6 I reached forward to pull my feet out of the straps and plant them on the floor as its much easier to breathe in that recovery position. My lungs were on fire my pulse was beating like a hammer. I couldn't feel anything except the need to try to breathe. My lungs felt as if they had been vacuum packed but at least it was over, it was all over.

The scores on the doors told me I had done the time Richard set me, a time way beyond the arc of what I thought was possible but a bit of me was gutted that I didn't dip under the 7.30 mark. Sporting targets are a bit like life or work targets, you like to under promise but over deliver! I had wanted Sharon to take photographs during the race but she told me I was in too much distress! My thanks therefore to David Larmour for recording it for posterity. I am fairly sure there is a correlation between running and rowing as my PB for a marathon in both disciplines is the same. So, if you want to know how hard it is to row 2K in 7 minutes and 30 seconds, try running the same distance in the same time and let me know how you get on. At the end of the day, I hadn't let my coach down. If Richard can get a performance like that out of a has been like me, its no wonder he's in charge of our elite athletes in the Sports Institute of Northern Ireland

pushing them to glory and success on the International sporting stage. John Hyatt has a great track, “Have a Little Faith in me,” well Richard had that faith and I hope I repaid it.

Richard is a former World Cup Regatta winner. He has stood on top of podia all over the world with gold medals round his neck. He has a sporting CV to die for including World Championship, silver medal from Japan, bronze medal from England, gold medals from Poznan and Lucerne and the overall winning world cup winner 2006 as well rowing into Olympics and making it to the final of one of them. I didn't have a gold medal, my only reward would be a long shower and a very slow glass of much anticipated red several hours down the track, but I am so grateful to one of sport's most talented but modest superstars for guiding me from 2000 metres to zero in as short – if incredibly painful – time as possible. Now all I needed was for my achilles heel to heal so that I am not even tempted to go anywhere near that dreaded Ergometer ever again...



**What a record! Peter excelled expectations by completing his 2000m challenge in just 7 minutes and 30.6 secs. 04230KDR**



**Peter Jack commencing his fitness challenge. 04227KDR**