

# From Donegal to the Foyle via the Glens

**I AM sure you all know people who work out and train a lot but do they every race? If you are gym bunny only, is there ever any end product? Training without a goal is like playing football without, well, having a shot at goal.**

So what happens if you are runner who goes for a jog four or five times a week? Is it not eventually time to put the toe to the start line and more importantly, make it to the finish line? In some ways, a finish line is an easier place to get to than a start line. To get to the start line, you need to commit to a training schedule then enter (usually online these days) then actually turn up on race day/night. Did you know that in Triathlon and running races, up to 10 to 15% of people who enter don't actually make it to the start line?

I am convinced that some of my best performances were unfortunately not in a race but in a training session – where it all counts for nothing i.e. I have left many of my best performances back in the changing room.

So with that in mind, I decided to race more this season. To that end, I decided to do four races over two weekends in eight days to test my mettle to see if I could really turn up for “Show Time” when it is not a case of talking the talk but you also have to walk the walk.

My first race was a Sprint Triathlon in the beautiful setting of Lough Garton, west of Letterkenny. The race was organised by those fine people of the local 24/7 club. My memories of last year's race were of a warm swim (always a bonus for me as I am a bit of a namby pamby when I comes to cold water) I have been doing most of my outdoor swims in a local lake which has been as warm as a bath and thankfully Lough Garton was inviting, as opposed to intimidating.

I entered the water last as usual (I see it as a bit of good luck charm, it's a bit like some footballers leaving the dressing rooms last) and before we knew it, we had the “3-2-1” and the hooter sounded and off we went ploughing our not so lonely (120 of us) furrow towards the first buoy. Those with Garmin watches later told me that the swim was 875 meters as opposed to the advertised 750 meters but hey ho, that's life. Despite the short swim in the mild water, it's always nice to emerge without being kicked or punched.

When you rise from the horizontal of the water to the vertical of dry land, the last thing you need is a one mile climb on the bike to put you into the red zone.... And funnily enough, that is exactly what this course gave us. The danger is that you go too hard too early. You have to keep your effort just to the right side of your anaerobic (without oxygen) threshold.

Paul Brady once sang about “The hills of Donegal” which sounded very familiar as I laboured up hill after hill. Funnily enough, you don't remember the down hills in any bike ride, you just remember the uphill (when I am coming from Benone, I have no idea why the hill on the corner is called Downhill as opposed to Uphill). At times like this, you realise just how useful a

bicycle is. It was only invented in 1867 yet has transformed lives all over the world. It is cheap, reliable, doesn't need petrol, and gets you from A to B without polluting the atmosphere. We may use it as a frippery for relaxation and health purposes but if you have ever been to China or India or Africa you realise that without a bike, a lot of people just don't get to school or work. One of our Rotary projects is Bikes for Africa where unwanted bikes from this part of the world are repaired by detainees in an open prison in Monaghan and then shipped out to Gambia where they transform lives.

None of these wonderful benefits of a bike however were apparent to me as my pulse threatened to go through the roof. Not knowing the roads, I couldn't take advantage of any of the steep downhill with any confidence.

This time last year I did the Olympic Distance Race at twice the sprint distance where the remaining 20k out and back were on roads that were smooth and straight. The sprint course, however, was on roads that reminded me of a Silk Cut cigarette – not enough tar...

Eventually, I fought my way back to T2 where I gratefully racked my bike and I put on my trusty Asics. Usually, it takes a kilometre to find your running legs but I felt good from the get go. As it was an out and back course, I had the pleasure of seeing real athletes coming back towards me, including Frankie Dunlop who was in my age group. Frankie would beat me by three minutes most of which was gained on the swim – I have really got to stop seeing the swim as a mere warm up for the next two disciplines! I did however run sub 8 minute miles for the 5k which helped put me on the podium (at this stage I could spoil it all and say there was only two of us in our age group but we will just park that observation).

I was delighted to receive €20 in a white envelope on the podium. This is the first ever cash prize I have received in 35 years of competing. Is my amateur status now compromised? Am I now a professional athlete? Do I give up the day job? In retrospect, perhaps not.....

My colleague Anne Paul won the race outright. She has had more wins in her career than most of us have had race starts. She has an unbelievable strike rate and wherever she is, she gives it 100%. That is what racing is all about, isn't it? As John Madden, one of the best veteran cyclists in Ireland, would say, “You just want to have a honest effort”. Well, my effort was honest and there is nothing better than the feeling of a finish line after an open water Triathlon when all the work is done and you have a barbecued hot dog, a hot shower, a cup of tea (with sugar!) to savour, guilt free.....

The next day I had a recovery run in the Cam forest where I kept my pulse below 70% of my max. Monday and Tuesday were a swim and an easy bike, and on Wednesday evening, I found myself standing on the rocky bay of Glenarm preparing for one of the toughest sprint races in the calendar. I had a good warm up on dry land. There was no point however in attempting an



**The Glenarm race is one of 'toughest' sprint races on the calendar according to Peter Jack.**

inappropriately named “warm up” in the sea off the east coast of Antrim as thanks to Donald Trump, the Gulf Stream never seems to reach round that far. I knew it was going to be baltic. I guessed the temperature was a glacial 12 degrees and when I eventually immersed myself in it, I fervently hoped that the lake in Holland for my last Ironman on the 8th September would be a tad warmer as I will be in the water that day for about 6 times as long.....

The swim discipline was a perfect triangular course. When you are swimming, if you can get behind somebody's feet, you can save 25% energy. When I was half way between the two buoys, I must have been too close to somebody in front because the next thing I know, bang, I had been kicked in the face in my right eye socket with what appeared to be a leg of a mule. I saw stars, then felt water around my face as my goggles nearly disintegrated. I had to tread water, breathe, not panic, refocus, try and stop my head spinning, put my goggles back in place and then set off again – meanwhile while trying to avoid more stray kicks (I ended up with a very nice black eye for my troubles). I made it back to shore with an overwhelming sense of gratitude and relief. Again, I had had a lousy transition but was soon on my steed speeding along the scenic coast road north towards Carnlough before heading left – and up. My heart rate monitor told me I was on 90%. Surely I couldn't keep this up? The course went up remorselessly into the Glens of Antrim and I was already in the granny gear i.e. the easiest possible gear. Some other athletes passed me and I passed some others including a bloke on a “fixie” i.e. a fixed gear – good luck with that, my friend!

This had to be one of the cruellest bike courses in a sprint race anywhere. Out of fourteen miles, about nine of them seemed to be uphill, how was that possible? Eventually, what goes up must come down and I relished roaring down the Glens of Antrim at 30 miles an hour now in a giant gear and with my heart rate still hammering at 90%. I was whooping with delight, full of adrenaline and joie de vivre and knowing that this is what we train for, this is why we make sacrifices, and this is what triathlon is all about. Open water swimming, a hilly bike ride and now a fast run (even if I did end up feeling I had been on the wrong side of a karate kick).

Just before the end of the bike, I saw an athlete lying very still on the pavement underneath a blanket being looked after by two paramedics, never a good sign. He had obviously over cooked it on the last corner. I racked my bike with more than the usual relief and shoved my still icy feet into my trail shoes and took off like the proverbial scalded cat. I was still full of adrenaline and aggression and anger after the face kicking incident and I channelled all of that into my run.

My heart rate now went up to 95% of my max as I started to reel in some athletes in front of my who were obviously better swimmers and runners. As ever, when you get to the third discipline, it's not about the size of the dog in the fight, it's all about the size of the fight in the dog. If I am one thing, it's dogged. I will not give up especially when you have the psychological benefit of passing people – and not being passed.

I saw the legendary Dessie McHenry on the top of a hill which I yet to climb and I worked out that I was two minutes behind the former age group World Triathlon Champion. Did I want to catch him? Yes. Could I catch

him? Well my lungs were on fire as my heart rate stayed at 95%. We went out to the last section of the course, my watch told me my deficit had halved now with one mile to go. I gritted my 60 year old molars. With half a mile to go, my pulse was now over 100% – was this possible?! Would I know blow up and the wheels come off? I decided to ignore the numbers and focus on the humans in front of me. I passed a few but they didn't register on my laser focus. I saw the blue and white tri-suit of Dessie, was he getting slower? Was I getting faster? I came alongside him and wished him well but didn't linger, there was no way I wanted that warrior hanging onto to my heels.

I now longed for the finish line before my heart exploded. I crossed it and slumped to my knees. The stats would show that I finished 68th with a run time of 22:47, 16 seconds quicker than the one and only Anne Paul who had just won her second race in five days. What a pity that Anne had taken 8 minutes out of me in the swim and the bike! The stats also showed that I wasn't first yet but I was first in a class that I have never heard of before – vintage! I felt like a bottle of wine or a bit of furniture or an old Massey Ferguson! This time, the organisers had arranged for a burger that was to die for – what a race! It had everything, a challenging course and great grub on the finish line. I just wondered if the organisers had a spare ice pack for a black eye.... Two races down two to go!

The Portrush Park Run produced another podium (second in the vintage section) – that is, if the Park Run did podiums, which they don't. I ran a negative split on the way back down the beach and tried to keep my pulse below 90% (and failed). Three hours later, with my legs still trashed from the sandy sprint, I was on the shore of the river Foyle with 77 others putting a tentative toe in the muddy waters. The good news was that it was warm, the bad news was it was so murky you could barely see your hand.

We were part of the Foyle Maritime Festival. We do the afternoon's entertainment after the panache of the Clippers which were all successfully berthed in the marina.

About 500 metres after the start, I was swimming under the Foyle Bridge, the scene of so much heart breaking tragedy. I had run underneath the bridge on the Walled City Marathon, I had biked over it usually into the teeth of a head wind and now I was swimming under it. We were advised to swim out into the middle of the channel to “catch the current” I have no idea if I succeeded or not but at one stage I was a lot closer to the east bank than the west bank. It got somewhat choppy and was difficult to catch a breath when being battled by constant waves in the face but at least it was better than a kick. It was surprisingly enjoyable and easy, thanks to the current. The distance was meant to be 3k but everybody meandered so much that some guys did 3.2 while others did 3.7. An ability to sight i.e. to take a good line, is an undervalued skill. We passed hundreds of clapping spectators on our funnel up to the finish line which was a plastic inflatable near the pontoon. My TTC colleagues Mervyn Kelly, Thomas Moore, Conor McGowan, Alberta Kelly, Davey Gault, Gerald Lundy and Paul Dornan all did well. I was glad to be emerging in one piece, I had survived the Foyle – and I had travelled from the Hills of Donegal via the Glens of Antrim. Ironman Almere, here I come.....



**Swimmers begin the 875 metre swim in Lough Garton, but thankfully the water was more inviting than intimidating for Peter.**