



# SPORTING MATTERS

Who is most powerful sporting couple in the World of Sport? No, not Posh and Becks because Victoria is not a sports star! A few years ago, it would have been Rory McIlroy and Caroline Wozniacki but that all ended up in tears. Greg Norman (golf) and Christ Evert (tennis) were married but that ended too. There is the English Babington pair Chris and Gabby Adcock who have won Commonwealth Gold but haven't impacted upon the nation's conscientiousness. So, who does that leave us with?

There is a strong case for arguing for Jason and Laura Kenny, GB Cycling superstars. Between them, they have won British, European and World Titles – and 10 Olympic Golds as well! They have even written a bestselling book. Laura's popularity has increased even further when she became a mum, to Albie and it was my privilege to see Albie's mum and dad in action at the Manchester 6 day cycling extravaganza at the Velodrome.

Why was I there? – well, thanks to a generous Christmas present from my son, Patrick, who now lives in England's North West within a stone's throw of Old Trafford in the hipster district of Chorlton. Manchester, as a city, has improved a lot over the last several decades. There is huge investment and the building cranes are bobbing up and down all over the city centre indicating a massive amount of construction. One building that has always been attractive to my eyes is the home of the Red Devils, Old Trafford, near Salford. After a 90 minute hike on Saturday morning down to the Mersey and back on foot, Patrick suggested that we trundle along on bikes to see what we could see. I was on his girlfriend's bike and before you could say the word "Bradley Wiggins", we were progressing along things called cycle lanes. Limavady doesn't have a single cycle lane to my knowledge but over in MCR, they are common place. The last cycle lane I saw back home was leading onto the new A26 Ballymoney to Ballymoney upgraded trunk road. The bike lane lasts for precisely 20metres then you are on the race track/dual carriageway to be confronted with a sign that says "Cycle Lane Ends" – good luck to you after that! It gets worse, there are now no Cycling Proficiency

Classes in Primary Schools any more!

The Mayor of Manchester is Labour Politician Andy Burnham who lost out in the leadership of the National Party to one JC, Jeremy Corbyn, so he went back north to become leader of a huge metropolis of 2,500,000 inhabitants. Mr Burnham has been working hard with Chris Boardman (ex Olympic Gold Medallist Yellow Jersey wearer at the Tour De France, World Record Holder, Founder of Boardman Bikes and now cycling spokesperson) to get more cycle lanes built. It is obvious that more cars = more pollution = more danger on our roads. More bikes = cleaner air = healthier citizens. It's a no brainer. So why aren't there more bikes lanes in our wee Province? Oh, sorry we don't actually have a functioning Executive. Maybe, as this is a non-controversial issue, they could just get the basic stuff like this done. I will have to put it on my Christmas wish list....

Cycling along specially made lanes with my young superstar, I realised that I wasn't used to cycling purely as a method of transport. I usually view cycling as a means of flogging myself while anxiously looking at the numbers on my bike computer and continually trying to push harder. Here I was, dressed for the destination, not the journey, enjoying myself. It was training but not as I knew it. I was here as a commuter, not relying on a computer. It was very liberating! Inside ten minutes, we were at the hallowed ground i.e. the Theatre of Dreams. We did a flying lap underneath the stands at the ground. On match days obviously, your chances of doing this would be nil but here on a quiet Saturday morning, we flew round for an adrenaline fix. As my hands were cold, I had an opportunity to visit the Megastore for a pair of Manchester United branded gloves (any old excuse to get some merch!) We then biked over a bridge past the fabulous Imperial War Museum North, down past Media City where the BBC and ITV are based. I just didn't have quite enough time for the Coronation Street Tour but maybe next time? And then back for a well-earned croissant.

We ditched the bikes for the convenience of the tram and we found ourselves at the National Cycling Centre near the Etihad Stadium (home of some soccer team called Manchester City, I believe). As soon as your ticket is checked, you walk in to Britain's first big Velodrome (the one in London was only built for the London

## The Golden

Olympics in 2012) and the first thing I saw was an old basic bike, mounted on the wall in front of the photograph of the aforesaid Chris Boardman riding said bike on this very track on the 27th October 2000. When Mr Boardman broke the World purists' Record covering 49,441metres in one hour. I even remember where I then was, in our Toyota Previa, near Enniskillen listening to it on Radio 5 Live with the family. It was an epic ride where Chris was aiming to set a new World Record before riding off into the sunset for a well earned retirement.

With fifteen minutes to go, he had slipped behind the target and his wife Margo came down to the track to gulder at him. Chris thought better of letting the wife down and managed to get back on track, as it were, for the target needed. He managed to break the record by a measly 100m, brought his bike to a standstill (no mean feat when you are absolutely exhausted and there are no brakes or gears) he slumped to the side of the track and never rode a bike again in any competition. He had done it on a bike which was fundamentally the same as Eddie Merckx's bike 30 years previously. The don't make them like that anymore!

Chris not only has his bike on the wall in the Velodrome but has a bar there named after him. It would have been churlish



Journalist Patrick at the Theatre of Dreams, Old Trafford, home of Manchester United.

therefore not to raise a pint in honour of Chris's finest achievement – (or maybe that was when he visited Limavady to talk at a cycle event organised by the Roe Valley Cycling Club a few years after his retirement?!)

There was no sign of Chris at the track alas but there certainly was of the Golden Couple, Laura and Jason. They were both participating in a race called the Six Day which rather confusingly was over 3 days.... Are you still with me? The Six Day event started back in 1878 when two



The Golden Couple - Laura and Jason Kenny.



The scene of the Sixth Day

BY PETER JACK

# Men Couple



The hour recording breaking bike.

blokes had a bet (even before Paddy Power was invented) about whether a cyclist called David Staunton could ride a thousand miles in 6 days (thus keeping the Sabbath free). These days, the Six Days wasn't about riding a thousand miles just about girls and guys hammering around the 250metre track at quickly as possible.

They say that variety is the spice of life, well there were more races here than days of the week. There was the Sprint (consisting of riders with thighs the size of tree trunks) all lapping in between 10 and 10.5 seconds; the Madison Chase (where riders pair up; while one sprints, the other

ambles round the track and they then grab their teammate's hand and slingshot off each other. This race featured sprints every 10 laps); then there was the Points race where you try to sprint off the front and gain a lap on your rivals, it's bit like chess except played at 40mph where if you make a mistake, all the chess pieces go crashing down onto a very hard unforgiving surface as apparently happened on the Friday night; then there is the Team Elimination (where every three laps the last rider is eliminated and that leads to a frantic sprint every time you hear the bell); there is the Sprint competition (where you try to chivvy your opponent into going in front



Big PJ and old PJ.

of you so you can slip stream him or her). In one race, we saw both cyclists came to a halt on their bikes perilously staying upright despite a) not moving at all and b) being at an incredibly steep angle up the bank wall of the track. And then lastly and most strange of all there is the Derney....

How would you explain the Derney Competition to a visitor from Mars? With difficulty but it basically consists of 8 riders all sprinting but they are each behind an old bloke on a motor bike.... You are allocated your motorised companion via a roulette wheel. You do a few warm up laps then the gun goes and it is just mayhem! The Derney Riders are usually ex-pro cyclists who know the score. They increase their pace and the rider tries to stay exactly on the motorbikes back wheel. There are no mirrors on the motorbike so how do they know the rider is still stuck to them like glue behind them? No idea. Then one brave Aussie went for glory a bit early and his motorised pace man got a bit carried away and the rider was left floundering without the benefit of a slip string – not ideal when you are trying to do an average of 60kph!

There were eleven different races over the 5 hours of the evening, in that sense it reminded me of a night at the baseball in New York, plenty of opportunity to eat hotdogs and guzzle some cider (made from apples so does it count as one of my 5 a day?)

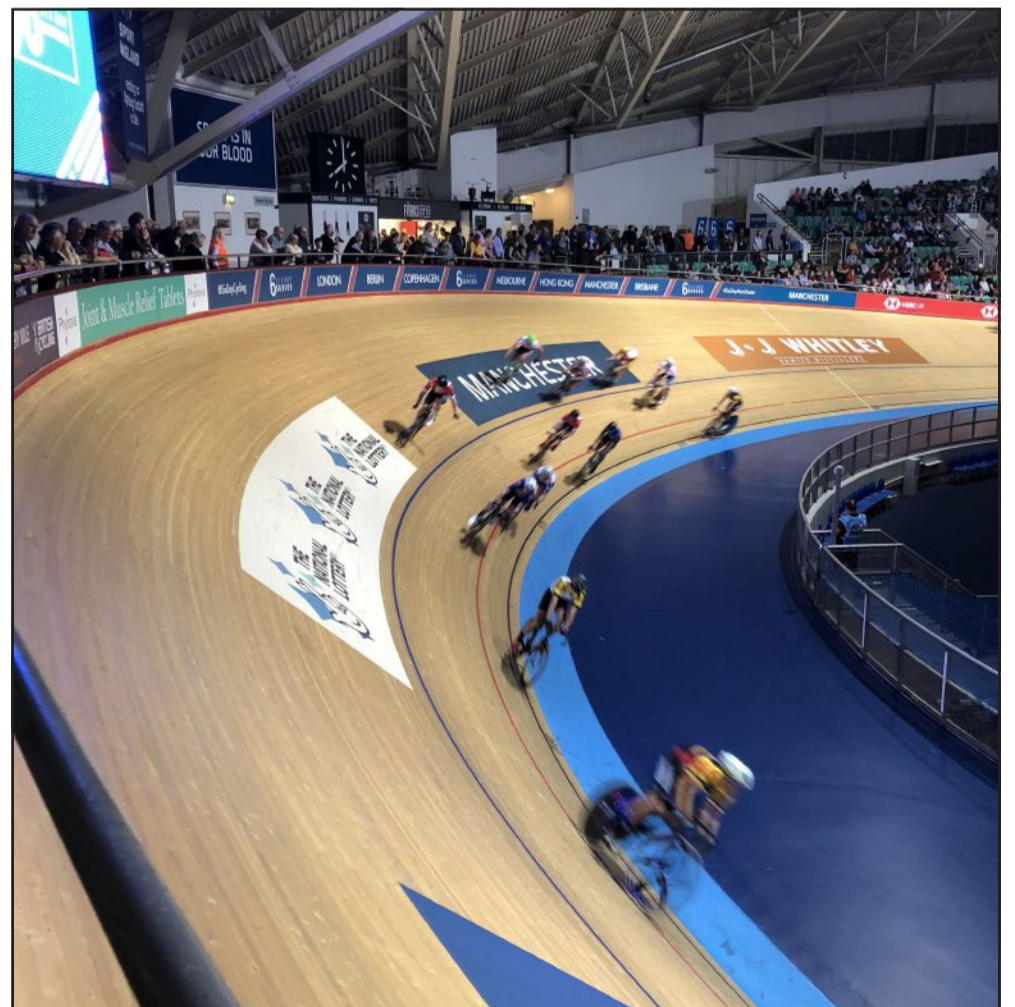
I was surprised that we were so warm up in stands. The venue was obviously heated for our comfort not the riders who were extremely hot in their skin tight lycra with their pulse going at nearly 200bpm. Some of the riders wore sophisticated body monitors which told us their pulse rate, their wattage etc, which all helped the entertainment/knowledge factor. The crowd were a knowledgeable cycling crowd and seemed to sense what the riders were going through. They weren't like punters at a football match where most people can't kick a football and run at the same time, this crowd looked as if they couldn't wait for their Sunday morning 50 miler.

The last time I had been at this Velodrome was when I had the privilege of commentating on my good friend John Madden's attempt at the Irish Hour Record a few years ago. This visit was a bit less stressful but it did remind me of my

attempt at a flying lap in the London Velodrome last year. Unlike these riders, I certainly wasn't able to take my hands off the handlebars and wave to the crowd while half way up the banking!

I was great to see three Irish girls, Ellen McDermott, Alice Sharpe and Mia Griffin mixing with the international superstars from all over the globe including Kirsten Wild from Holland who changed into her World Champion's Jersey for a live interview for TV. Talking of World Champions, how were Laura and Jason getting on? Jason won the 250 metre flying lap in a time of 10.013 seconds (about 56mph!) and came second in an elimination race and meanwhile the golden girl of British cycling (and British sport), Laura was peppering the podium all night with several seconds winds and a third. If you look at Laura you would think she would struggle to stand up in the wind instead of which, she can generate 500watts on a bike and leave you stranded in her Jetstream. All the winners were graciousness personified when they were immediately interviewed afterwards by one of the two MCs (who were both excellent). In the build up to the races and during the racing itself, the in house DJ was giving us his top tunes which were pumped out at volume where even a half deaf bloke from Limavady could appreciate them. With a pint in one hand, with great mixes being presented for our aural apperception and an international field of top class sports stars, this was truly a veritable feast for our eyes and ears and what was there not to like about a night our like this? And all this for half the price of a trip to a soccer match.

The Six Days series started in London in October, then the carnival moved to Berlin, Copenhagen, Melbourne, Hong Kong then Manchester before the grand final in Brisbane in April. It's a great night out for the family which won't break the bank. You get a great view of the action from every seat. You get to see the history of the sport with photographs on the walls of previous champions (Nicole Cooke, Mark Cavendish, Sir Chris Hoy etc) and the action never stops. You get to see real sportswomen and men who display their talent and their dedication yet combine it with modesty and humility. One lucky dad from Limavady even got to share the whole experience with his much missed son, it doesn't get much better.



The start of the action.