



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

IF you are a sports nut (guilty! m'laud), then last week end was just about as good as it gets, both from a performer's point of view and also a spectator's.

What a feast of Rugby we had on Saturday, as Ireland were battling for a second 6 Nations Championship in two years and needed not only to take their destiny into their own hands in their own match, but they also needed the roll of the dice to go their way in two other matches.

Some people complained about the three matches which would decide the Championship (and also the infamous Wooden Spoon) being played back to back, as opposed to simultaneously (as it is on the last Saturday of the Premiership), but the decision to have Wales play first (when they were lying third); Ireland to play second (when they were lying second) and England to play last (when they were leading the Championship) was actually taken two years ago by the television executives.

Away from the sofa, I had decided some time ago to do two races back to back, a 10K one weekend and a half marathon the next.

'CLASSIC 10K'

So ten days ago I was in Mid Ulster for the Magherafelt Classic 10K. What's the definition of the word Classic? If I look up the word in the OED it certainly doesn't mean "hilly or undulating" but that's exactly what the course was! There were about 180 of us and we registered in the Meadowbank Sports Arena, (one of Europe's largest) and on the stroke of midday we all took off onto the watchful eye of Dame Mary Peters MBE. I was introduced to Mary before the race and I reminded her that we had already met at the Olympics in Sydney in 2000 and also in Athens in 2004. On this occasion, she was in Magherafelt as the race was supporting her Foundation, which supports Northern Ireland athletes of quality who need help to compete abroad where they can be exposed to red hot international competition.

There were mile markers and I went through the first mile in 7-20 which pleased me, but had I gone out too hard, too soon? As we went up more hills (how come I don't seem to remember any downhills?). I went through half way in 22-15. I knew that if I doubled that time I would finish in 44.30 but maybe I would blow up a bit, so I would be happy with a sub 45.

IT DOESN'T GET MUCH BETTER....

I somehow put the metaphorical bit between my teeth and finished in 43:43 i.e. I had a negative split, which was immensely pleasing. Meanwhile at the sharp end of the field, Gemma Tuley, my club mate from Springwell romped home ahead of my club mate from Triangle, Julie Murphy for yet another first place. We had some great grub and a free tee-shirt as part of the entry fee, so it was great value. When safely back in civilisation (i.e. the Roe Valley), I went down to the rugby grounds to cheer on Limavady -v- Larnain a virtual title decider (we came second) while a large crowd in the club house watched Ireland play Wales, (where we came second again). Then it was on to Benone to do MC for the Northern Ireland Chest Heart and Stroke 5K and 10K, where the guest of honour was BBC's Sarah Travers. The organisers, 26 Extreme, had set out the course so that the runners had to wade through the Umbra, so I got a bit suspicious later on when Sarah made it back to the Finish Line with dry feet. Somebody had stopped in a car and given her a lift across the stream in both directions! Ah well, I think that's the least Sarah deserves for being the patron of the race and for all her fund raising activities.

LARNE HALF

One week later, there was another battle between my running shoes and the remote control of my television. There was the Larne Half Marathon on Saturday morning and then there was the climax to the Rugby Championship. Greedy as ever, I tried to squeeze all of it into the same pint pot. Thomas Moore and Kenny Coulter had organised a bus from Limavady to call at Coleraine and then Ballymoney to pick up further Springwell members. We left at 8.00 a.m. but it took us nearly 1 hour and 45 minutes to get there due to the crazy road works currently infesting Larne, but we were eventually able to park in the Leisure Centre car park, one of the perks of arriving by bus, because there were over 1,400 competitors and parking anywhere near the Leisure Centre was just not on! I quickly retreated to the cafe in the centre for my first fix of caffeine of the day. Last year, I had found a lovely café with a view over the sea and then I was to com-

plete the course in 1 hour 50 minutes and had been content. One year later however, I knew I was in better shape and my target was 1:44-48, which is exactly 8 minutes per mile. I can't remember what my PB for a half is. I never really seemed to nail a great half marathon time in my peak (back in the day, as they say i.e. away last century!). I can remember my 10K, 10 mile and marathon PBs but I can't remember my best time for 21K.

Two wheelchair athletes started a few minutes ahead of us and we all clapped them warmly. We only thought we knew a bit about struggle and hardship. For these guys in wheelchairs, this race was probably the easiest 90 minutes of their week. The first mile took us through the streets of Larne, which was traffic free and where there was a DJ, punnelling us with waves of musical support. They say the best thing about Larne used

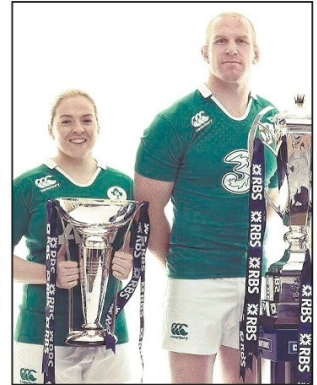
to be the road out of it! But now, believe me, it's a great community spirit as the entire town got behind us in this very well supported run.

I quickly settled into a rhythm and I was proud to be running beside my purple shirted Springwell colleagues; Kenny Coulter, Cathal McFeely, Eddie Clyde and Noel Harkin. I told them all it was a privilege to be with them. I don't care how much a lone wolf you are as an athlete, but you will always feel stronger when you are part of the bigger picture i.e. if you join your local club. You put on the shirt and you are representing something. You never want to let that shirt down. You want to wear it with

pride as I knew my compatriots would do later that day in Murrayfield.

As the others drifted ahead of us up through the field, Kenny and I fell into easy conversation. We were going at the same pace and Kenny's Garmin was telling us every mile what pace we were doing. Sometimes too much information is a bad thing, because you end up being dictated to by heart rate monitors on your run and power metres on your bike, but this information was helpful to ensure that we didn't get too carried away as the early miles ticked by.

The coast road out of Larne is stunning. Again, we had no traffic to contend with and we also enjoyed a clear vista across the Irish Sea over to Alisa Craig. The sun shone, there was a gentle breeze, everything was under control and we went through half way in a smidge under 50 minutes, which meant we could afford to lose nearly 5 minutes on the second half and still hit our target. But of course athletes being athletes, you get greedy and you just try to see exactly how much juice is left in the tank. We needed to expend quite a bit of juice in the next mile and a bit as it was all up hill. We climbed steadily for the next 10 minutes and when we eventually



Double delight! The two captains Niamh Briggs, and Paul O'Connell. NCL13-907s

reached the top of the seemingly never ending switch backs, we turned for home just under the hour. We were well pleased, but we had just run our slowest mile of the race. Would we recover? Or would we suffer like dogs in the second half when the spirit would be willing but the flesh weak?

Before we knew it, we emerged on the other side of one of the iconic tunnels on the coast road and the Leisure Centre was in sight. We were passed by two of our Springwell colleagues, Amanda and Linda, but Kenny and I did some over taking of our own too. We would both struggle at times, but the beauty about pairs running is that you can seemingly transfer your pain across to your partner and also draw strength from their strength. We eased up a wee bit between mile 11 and 12, but I then managed to wheeze to Kenny, "To hell with a target of 1:45, I think we can break 1:40!" We took off with renewed vigour, of course there was one last hill before a long run up to the Finish Line. We yet missed out on a 1:39 finish by an agonising 13 seconds. Last year I was similarly disappointed to miss a 1:49, so I had improved by 10 minutes.

If I make a similar improvement in the race next year, I will be writing the coaching books, not merely reading them!

After a welcome shower, I queued for a massage from Steve of Sports Lab. My hamstrings were already as tight as a guitar string due to a great gym and circuit session during the week. Steven managed to inflict more pain in 10 minutes than I had suffered in the previous 100 minutes of the race, but I knew it was needed because the next day was not a day of rest, but was the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice Try-Athlon. No rest

for the wicked etc. My recovery on Saturday night consisted of a bottle of red pain killer and some dancing. So I was a bit uncertain of the state of my condition the next morning when my mate Darren Mornin and I registered for our race.

'TRY-ATHLON'

Organised by my good friends Mervyn Kelly, Aaron Steele and Gerard Lundy, it consisted of a 15 minute swim, a 45 minute spin to music, then the 5K run of the Roe Valley Sprint Triathlon course up to the Country Park and back. Young 15 year old Conor Magowan lapped me three times in the pool, (honestly some children have no respect for their elders!) and also ran away from us later in the run (the cheek of it!), but in the spinning session, we all gave it dixieto a deafening rock and roll back drop. Darren had completed his first ever Triathlon, first timers were given some confidence before their big race on the 9th May and the organisers had raised nearly £600.00 for the Children's Hospice.

As I successfully concluded my weekend of sport I knew that the men and women's Irish teams had won their respective 6 Nations Championships. All in all, a great outcome. When Manchester United beat Liverpool at Anfield later, I reflected that as sporting weekends go, it just doesn't get much better!!

Then I remembered this weekend there is the Limavady Sports Council Dinner on Friday night, compered by Nikki Gregg of the BBC, on Saturday morning there is the first ever Park Run 5K in Limavady and on Sunday there is the Triangle Triathlon Club Mountain Bike Duathlon on Benone Beach at 10.30..... Sport, the gift that just keeps on giving!



Darren Mornin and Peter Jack. NCL13-905s



Springwell Runners who travelled to Larne to take part in the Larne Half Marathon. NCL13-908s



The entrants in the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice charity Triathlon on Sunday at the Roe Valley Leisure Centre. NCL13-909s