

What drew you to triathlon and when?

Kinda got dared to do a triathlon for the craic in 2008. Low and behold twas great craic. This, despite stopping for a break every 25m in the pool, cycling like I was delivering the post and nearly falling flat on my face at the start of the run due to jelly legs. Completed four races the year after and it just snowballed from there.

What's your triathlon experience?

Nearly 70 triathlons, including one Full IRONMAN, One Full CHALLENGE , 10 halves, the rest Olympics and sprints.

Best tips for beginners?

- Build your own 'race car'. Get to know what works for you as an athlete, strengths, weaknesses, how to improve them. You are an individual, what works for others might not suit you. Learn what works for you and enjoy the journey
- Don't buy into gimmicks, keep it simple at the start. For example, you don't need the newest state of the art graphene coated, power ranger esque aerodynamic helmet. Think gear for purpose, not gear for show.
- Do Brick Sessions, don't have to be mad, 2km off the bike after a cycle is plenty.
- Train consistently but Train, don't Strain.

How has your training changed amid Covid 19?

Virtually (no pun intended) non existent, getting a bit of exercise in. May need to go up a size or two in my wetsuit by the time this finishes.

Race Report - Hell of the West

I've been giving a bit of thought as to which race I was gonna do a report on. In the end I've decided to choose the longest running races in Ireland, Limerick Triathlons 'Hell of the West'. My reasons for picking this race was it was my first Olympic distance triathlon and in hindsight no other race educated me as much as this race did. As a litmus test of my sanity (sheer lack thereof) I completed it 6 times since 2009.

Like most races, registration takes place the evening before, with limited registration on the morning of the race. HOTW was always renowned for its goodie bag. Now like all Triathletes, I still like to believe that after paying 60/70 quid for a race entry, that the t-shirt, gel, that flahavans oat bar and the assortment of 10% vouchers for local nail bars, tyre sales etc are Free. Blissfully happy with the complete lack of logic in this, I have to hand on heart highlight that one year at registration I checked out the goodie bag and on top of a jacket, water bottle, buff, usual bits and bobs, there was a super cool set of Giro cycling shades. Two fellow triathletes next to me from Nenagh Tri were both doing the same. We looked at each other, placed the sunglasses back in the bag and hightailed it out of there. No way we were handing them back.

Transition is and has always around the Bandstand on the Quays in Kilkee. Bearing in mind the race is running since 1985. For the nostalgic of you, check out this video on YouTube of it in the early days,

https://youtu.be/ltJi9FFY_cc

(spoiler alert, racing in budgie smugglers was a thing.)

Anyway, I digress. The morning of the race I usually pedalled in from Kilrush, transition bag on my back like a roof box on a penny farthing. Transition has always been well hemmed off with barriers, with a one way in, one way out chute. Usually six or seven marshalls, who were both helpful but strict. After the briefings, you were counted onto the beach in your waves. Usually plenty bants and lols goin on here, bit of nerves, bit of excitement, shur ye know the craic. You then head a across the beach to your starting position. Most people including yours truly, take this opportunity to acclimatise in what is, let's face it, the floggin Atlantic Ocean.

Kilkee is relatively sheltered, but queuing up in your wave it quickly became apparent as to why its called the 'Hell of the West'. I remember on one occasion standing in the water waiting for the starting horn to go off and ending up on my arse in the water, due to a wave crashing in on top of us. Flopping around in salty water like a colony of sea lions trying to get back on our feet. Once the horn goes off, it's the usual kettle bell swingathon, trying to locate a gap in traffic like your trying to change lanes on the magic roundabout at rush hour. I learned to stay right and aim for the pier. This is handy for sighting and it gives you a reprieve from the heavy traffic. Once around the pier, it becomes Very apparent, that you have now entered, yes you guessed it, 'the floggin Atlantic Ocean'. The swells are higher and the currents are stronger. Drafting and staying in the group is your friend here. First year I did this race, I breaststroked right across this section. Hard work but it helped me sight and having not yet mastered breathing bilaterally (and to be honest, I was a crap swimmer, crappier!) . The third year I did this race, I blew both calves trying to get out against the current. The screams out of me under water scared every whale, dolphin and porpoise for miles. Falling onto the beach like an extra from Saving Private Ryan, trying to open my wetsuit, wasn't my finest triathlon moment. Anyway, once you turn for the beach, the current is with you. It's a dog leg from the Diamond Rocks in, so sighting is important.

The run up from the water to transition is short. A bottle at your bike to wash the sand off your feet is handy. I'm conscious of the fact that the bike course has changed in 2018 but there are a few lessons I learned which I consider important regardless of the course. Once you were out on your bike, it's 1 km winding through Kilkee and out the road towards Doonbeg, Trumpafornia. This is where alot of people get caught on the bike. It's around 4km uphill, passing Kilkee Golf Club. It's very important to be in a low enough gear here and use a good cadence to get you up the hill. The amount of people (including yours truly) who have had a mechanical failure by not being in the right gear here is amazing, serious triathletes have screwed up their race this early on by not having their gearing right.

The road rolls downhill practically into and out passed Doonbeg and loops back. There was usually a south west wind at your back and the fact that its downhill, this is your opportunity to get some 'free speed'. Descending properly and safely is an important bike skill, its where you cash in after digging in on the hills. Bearing in mind, that 4-5km climb is gonna be in front of you while you pedal into that headwind on the way back, you really need to squeeze something out of it. These days due to a review of safety, the course goes down around Loop Head and is shorter by a few km. But given the fact that you are still climbing out of Kilkee, the same rules re gearing apply.

After parking up your bike and exiting transition you run about 400m to the bottom of the Dunlicky road. Even after doing countless brick sessions, running out of transition is like herding two drunks up the road, each leg has a mind of its own and neither want to go the same way. So you could do with about a kilometre to get them rolling someway normally. But here you get the pleasure of turning up the Dunlicky Rd after a few hundred metres. Everyone who does the HOTW will tell you about the Dunlicky road, its cruelly uphill for the first 2km, eases a bit and then there's a pinch to the turnaround at 5km. A few things to point out here, the views are spectacular over the cliffs into the sea, there's a local woman who dresses up as some cartoon character and shouts you on at around 2.5km. (She was dressed up in a minnie mouse outfit made out of balloons the last HOTW I completed.) Also, St. Senans holy well is on the route and I can confirm that many a triathlete has pledged a decade of the rosary to get them up that feckin hill. That aside, the turnaround cannot come quick enough and the return is obviously not as severe but it still requires 5 of your finest. The last 2km down the Dunlicky are like Manna from Heaven and crowds when you turn towards the finish are inspiring. The locals really buy into this race, its a credit to Limerick Tri on the tradition and festival atmosphere that has been created around it. You cross the line, (sprint of course) they take your chip and they put a well deserved medal around your neck. Once you get into transition you get handed a tray, go into the tent and load up on every sort of carbohydrate, predominantly pastries from 'The Pantry', who sponsor the event. Once I calculated that I had well over 3000 calories on that tray, which I devoured leaning against the back of the tent, staring blankly at the sea, daydreaming of being

back there again next year. Madness has no bounds.





Freewheeling down the Dunlicky.



Myself and Steve high on Sugar!