

Bantry Hardman Middle Distance 8th August 2020

Kevin McCarthy

Introduction.

My name is Kevin I am 41 years of age and very new to this whole triathlon scene. I recently completed the Hardman Bantry middle distance triathlon. On my way home from Bantry that day in the car and having completed my first triathlon I received a number of very welcome texts from family, friends and club members congratulating me. I was in the car with my wife Katie, good friend and clubmate Daire O'Sullivan who had also completed the task of swimming 1.9k, biking 86k and running a gruelling half marathon through the Coomkeen Loop along the Sheeps Head Way in the blistering heat.

We were discussing the event when one of the texts I received was from our coach and mentor Ger Vowles. He began by congratulating me and asked would I write a report on the event. To be honest I was very taken aback that he would ask for one from me, as I had nothing to compare it too, This had been my first Triathlon event. And it was just at that stage I realised, that I had achieved something that a year ago I never thought would have been possible for me to accomplish. I hope that this report might entice anyone thinking of doing an event to get off the fence and go for it. And for the seasoned campaigners you might consider to take part in this race sometime in the future.

How did you get involved in triathlon?

So let's start from the beginning, My background in sports has nearly always been team events, hurling, football, soccer, rugby and more recently CrossFit where I have competed both as an Individual and in team events. I like to compete, and I love to win. Swimming was not something I could do at all, splash around and dive bomb in the pool for a bit, then swim half a length thinking I looked like Michael Phelps was my idea of swimming. Cycling was just as alien to me, I rode a bike to school and did a bit of spinning once or twice over the years. I did own a bike that was covered in some cob webs and rust in the back of the shed. And as for running, well if I wasn't running after a ball I couldn't understand why anyone would want to run at all. *So why do a Triathlon?*

Long story short, two Crossfit buddies of mine had competed in Ironman Youghal last year and I thought it was one of the most impressive things I could imagine any person could do. That group was meant to be a Trio of them to do it that year but one got injured and was unable to take part. One late evening in Crossfit, sweating over a Barbell he turned to me and swore that he would do an Ironman this year. I couldn't imagine having to go through the training alone in order to take on such a mammoth task so I offered my services to be his training buddy, not to actually do the Ironman but to go for a run with him every now and then, go out and cycle every now and then with him and on swim days he could go to the pool and I could take notes from the sauna and steam room. I think that was around August last year. Within a week I had recruited five more including myself and we decided we were going to take on Barcelona 2020.

I met with Ger Vowles one day who was good enough to call to my home and discuss what was involved in preparing for an Ironman. I asked him was it possible to train and complete an Ironman with one year's training, he said it was. I said what if you can't swim, don't own a road bike and don't like running, he laughed as I'm sure he thought I was joking at first, his face changed when he realised I wasn't. But to his credit he said he would meet me in the pool the following Tuesday night and have a look at me.

The first night he met me I managed to do one full length, touch the wall, full of confidence I went to repeat the feat in the opposite direction and nearly died halfway back down, to save face I pretended to clear my goggles before completing the second length. In my own mind I thought this isn't for me and Mr Vowles will kindly let me know that I was wasting my time, I looked up and he said, that's not too bad, your stroke is good, you have a good pull you just need to work on your breathing, I thought was it me he was looking at or was he just taking the piss.

I'm not the kind of person that's naturally gifted at anything I do, but I tend to catch on quickly and then have to work really hard at it. Cycling and running I knew I could do at some level and grind it out to keep moving forward. Swimming, however was the one thing that I really didn't think I would ever get. There has been so many times that I was on the verge of packing it in, but I had set a goal and was going to give it my all to achieve it.

I will never forget the nerves I felt the first night I turned up at Mallow Swimming pool for my first tri swim session. I felt like an imposter turning up at a Triathlon Club Session and that I would struggle through. But it's always good to get outside of your comfort Zone. At least I wasn't turning up alone for the first time, I had Daire to hold my hand. I was greeted by Ger who introduced me to some new faces, others I had known for years and didn't know that they were in Mallow Tri Club, there was a real calming and welcoming feeling from the group that put me at ease straight away. Before I knew it, the hour was over, I had completed my first club session and hadn't drowned. It was a massive win for me.

Everything after that was just a case of slowly and steadily increasing the distances in the three disciplines. I had a plan I was following "Be Iron Fit" and that was going to be my play book for the coming season.

Why Bantry?

On that plan there is a roadmap set out for you, you simply pick the date of your race and work back 30 weeks to find your start date. Mine was Monday 9th March, great day to start as Monday is a rest day. Then you have dates you pick along the plan where there are milestones you will pass and races you will pick. There were no races available for the Olympic Distance due to Covid restrictions; Tri Athy was due to be my first. But Hardman Bantry middle distance was on the cards and that was pencilled into the Diary.

How did you feel?

For some reason I always looked at this race from the very beginning as the most difficult milestone. It was going to be my first ever race, first time in the sea with a large group of competitors. I had never experience being kicked, punched, elbowed

and swam over and the thought of all this made me sick to my stomach. But the closer and closer I got to the event the nerves started to go away. The Monday night open water sessions in Ballyhass really helped with this. All the training and accomplishing little milestones along the way help you grow in confidence. But it does come with a price, long days on the bike, I work shift work so a lot of my weekends are taken up with work, and on weekends when I was off, it was taken up with long bike sessions or runs. With a very active wife and four kids it can be difficult to strike the balance between family time, work and training. I must say that without the family support and big buy in from Katie and the kids it would be so much more difficult. I had to keep reminding myself of that.

The night before the race I stayed in a hotel in Bantry with my wife and Daire O' Sullivan. We had a nice meal, a bit of craic, a lovely pint of Guinness. For the first time ever in my life before an event, I was calm. I used to be on the verge of puking before any event I competed in before. But this was different, this race was me versus me, I had the work put in and I was confident I would finish.



Race morning

That feeling of calm went to shit the following morning, I was nervous at breakfast, I was trying to put on a calm face for Daire. We got down to the start line good and

early, I checked my bag 15 or 16 times to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything. The morning was glorious, the sea was calm. We couldn't have wished for a better morning. I approached the transition area with my bike and kit and was roared at, "get your helmet on before you bring your bike through, you have been at this long enough" I stopped and looked around, everyone else had their helmets on, I remembered being told to do this by our coach in the past, I had completely forgot. If I felt like I shouldn't have been there before, that feeling had just intensified a thousand times. I stopped and took a breath, gathered my thoughts, my wife gave me a smile and said go smash it. I reminded myself of the work I had put in, just take your time. Get your wetsuit on and go down to the water. Just before the race I saw Heather O' Brien, got a quick photo for the Club pre-race with Heather, Daire and I that helped with the jitters. I returned to my start position and went over the course in my head. A few weeks earlier we had swam the course and did the bike course, the night previous we drove the run. So I knew what lay ahead of me. It was showtime.

Swim

The swim was a rolling start, we began a little after 8am and entered water in groups of two, four seconds between each group. I was number 168 so near the rear of the field, the line was moving steadily, at this stage the music was blaring, the atmosphere was amazing, there was some friends family and club members there, giving a shout out which was really welcome. I was lined up beside this tall athletic looking guy, he was relaxed and calm looking, looked like this wasn't his first rodeo, I thought to myself I'm going to take him and before I knew it I was in the water.

I had given my self 48mins for the swim, It was surprisingly calm in the water, at the first turn I did feel a little bit of rough and tumble but nothing major, at turn 2 my confidence was growing and all of a sudden I was exiting the water, I looked at my watch 42mins or so. I couldn't believe it, the entourage was still there was I exited the water shouting words of encouragement, it felt unreal.

I ran to my bike at T1, had a quick look left and right of my bike, there were two bikes still there, I had beaten that guy I entered the water with, I was delighted, I'm very confident that he had not realised he had been in a swim race with me and that he had become my nemesis.

I took my time in transition, just tried to make sure that I had everything and did everything right, I didn't want to pick up any penalties. Got out of my wetsuit, slipped on my number, socks shoes. Tall Athletic guy had come and gone at this stage, Helmet on, unracked my bike and ran my bike to the start line. This reads a lot faster than what I actually did it in. I must have taken a nap as well because I was nearly 6 mins in T1

Bike

The 86k loop begins with a decent enough ascent for a few k and you more than make up for the time lost coming down the other side. The road undulates around the a lovely picturesque coastal route through Ballydehob, Schull, Durrus into Kilcrohane where you turn onto another steep climb up the goats path. This climb comes about 15k from the finish. I was so happy at this stage that I had rode this route before, I knew what was ahead of me. I pushed hard up the climb, rode by my

nemesis who had come off his bike to walk up, I smiled to myself, I was winning another little battle that he didn't even know he was a part of. The descent on the other side of the Goats path is not for the faint hearted and even more so when there are other riders around you. I said a few hail Mary's on the way down. At the end of this the road continues up and down until you come back to the airfield to T2, at this stage I caught a glimpse of Heather O' Brien starting the run leg of her journey, she gave me a big wave and looked like she was enjoying herself. I had given myself 3:25hrs for the bike, I crossed the line at 3:01hrs, so far my race was going well. I had felt comfortable throughout the bike section and fuelled regularly.

At T2 I had a change of socks that I used as I was afraid I might have some sand or pebbles in my socks from T1. I had a quick bite of a bar and was on my way. Again this went a lot faster in my head and must have had another nap because I was nearly 5mins in T2. Quick look around me for my competition, no sign of tall athletic guy, time to get going.

Run

The run was described by the race director as brutal, and he wasn't wrong. The first 5k is a constant steep climb through the Coomkeen Loop along the Sheep's Head Way and for me this was a hike/run. The heat was somewhere in the region of 22-23degrees and I felt every bit of it, as did a lot of the rest of the field. I got bad cramps at this stage in my stomach, I'm not sure was this due to the gels or lack of water but I did think how am I going to continue on. I remember looking back down the hill and the breath taking views of Bantry Bay, I was struggling to keep moving forward when I saw a head bobbing up and down passing all the other hikers along the path, I recognised the gait, it was Daire O' Sullivan, he caught up to me gave a few words of encouragement and motored on. That little moment gave me a great boost. I put the head down and kept going. The next 7k isn't much easier but more manageable, the route is beautiful, but when the heat and pain are working against you, you don't really take in the surroundings. Then you get to the decent, this has your quads screaming until you finally reach a bit of main road, and the first water stop. It is here that you can push on try and make up for lost time. When you reach this point you are 8k from home and you just keep pushing on. Eventually I re-entered the airfield where I could see the finish line and got a pep in my step. I could see my wife and friends from about 500m out so I managed to get rid of the look of pain and suffering from my face, pick up the pace and jaunt by as if it was easy work, smile for the cameras. Then you have about a 400m run to the finish line. Crossing the finish line was one of the best sporting feelings I have ever had, a huge sense of achievement and pride. I had given myself 2:20hrs for the run section I came in around 2:14hrs. It would have been nice if the medal was presented at the finish instead of the night before in your goodie bag, but Covid restrictions have imposed a lot of unfavourable conditions on events like these. My wife did come up by the finish line for the obligatory photo shoot. And we got a few with club mates Heather and Daire.

It was around that time that I saw tall athletic guy come through the finish line, I shouted well done to him. I hope he won his imaginary battle on the course that day.

I had told a friend a few days earlier that I was nervous and he said to me "*why are you nervous? All the hard work and graft is done, no matter what that's an insane*

positive, You couldn't swim 2 lengths of the Hi b when you started, your going to do a half IM, be proud of the journey, The race is a celebration".

That only made sense to me after I got the text from Ger about writing a report, and took the time to reflect on the event.

Any Mistakes?

Plenty, I took too much time at transition, lack of preparation of my transition bag which should have been ready to go at T1 and T2 , hydration and nutrition could have been a lot better on race day. I should have practised transitions.

But this will come with experience. I probably should have spoken to more seasoned triathletes for some tips and advice before hand.

I have learned a lot from this experience and will hope to improve on a number of areas.

Did you hit your goals?

Yes and no, so yes I have competed in a triathlon event this year, I completed the event in a much faster time than I anticipated. But this event was scheduled as part of a bigger picture, to complete an Ironman in 2020. Like many other people in the club this is not going to be possible and that disappoints me.

But this is only the beginning of my Triathlon Journey and I intend on improving and competing in more events in the future. Ironman will have to wait until next year at least.....

Kevin



