**Background**

I signed up for this a year ago the day after Ironman Austria 2016. At the time I was 2 years into triathlon and the interest in going long was starting to stir. Plenty of the 3D gang were long distance racers and when a certain Sorcha McCann texted me and asked if I was interested, I thought 'why not, I have a full year to train, it will be great fun'. Skip to 6 weeks later crossing the finish line of Dublin 70.3 and I was cursing myself, and Sorcha, for getting me into this! I couldn't fathom racing twice the distance I had just raced, this was going to be tough.

I started training in earnest in January a month later than planned due to a stupid accident in work in November. Training went good for the first few months, the odd missed session due to other commitments and the odd niggle but nothing I couldn't handle.

As planned I raced Athy and while I wasn't happy with my swim, the rest of the race went well. It was the week after Athy that I first had a real problem. Having completed a long bike with my so-called friend Sorcha who I had now decided was solely to blame for this hell I was living, I strained my calf on a run off the bike.

This was a setback and I couldn't run for 7-10 days. This in itself would have been manageable but during those days off running I started getting severe pains in my back (which even kept me out of work). It took several physio sessions and a lot of rest to get to the root of the problem - a twisted rib head in my spine.

Skip to the week before I race and I haven't trained consistently in 3-4 weeks - At least I won't be fatigued racing!

Even on the flight over I don't feel fully comfortable and I get a massage on the Friday to loosen out the back.

**Buildup**

All of a sudden it's Saturday and time to drop off the bike and gear bags. I take my time packing my run and cycle bags and take a photo of everything I am putting in, in case I start freaking out later tonight and can't remember if I have packed something or not. Less is more is my motto for transition and I follow it today only packing the bare essentials so I don't confuse myself during the race.

I meet a few fellow 3D racers in the hotel reception and we spin down to transition. The bike and helmet is checked, I have my sticker on the wrong place on my helmet (not centred enough!) so I get a replacement sticker issued. Still no word on whether the swim is wetsuit or not and that's what most of the chatter around is about.

I find my bike spot and it's a beauty, Thank you transition Gods! It's at the end of a row beside a big lamppost with a permanent sign on it. I take a photo anyway in case I want to look at it tonight and I do walkthrough, swim to bike and out, bike in to transition and run out. I will remember this bike spot until the day I die!

After that, it's a short bus ride back to hotel in city center, an early dinner and an early night. I am just drifting off when Peter McGoey, out to support, rings me to wish me luck, cheers for that!

I sleep quite well, considering, everybody was telling me I won't sleep a wink the night before but I get a broken 7hours.

**Raceday**

4am, the alarm goes off and it's raceday. The hotel (which was superb, I fully recommend it, Palais Porcia) have put on breakfast at 4am for us. There is about 12-15 racing and staying in the hotel of which 6 are fellow 3D’ers. There is a nervous energy about the place. I finish breakfast, scuttle back to my room, pick up my streetwear bag (which has my wetsuit in it) and head back down to reception for our 4:50am taxi. I notice it's quite cool and overcast, I hope it stays this way all day.

We get to transition and are just in the queue in time to hear the official announcement - Wetsuits are allowed! Everyone cheers like Ray Houghton just put the ball in the English net all over again.

Into transition and I swear I could walk blindfolded to my bike. I pump up the tyres (105 on the front, 110 on the back), pack my nutrition and fill my water bottles. I walk through the change tent, drop my runners and nutrition into my runbag and walk down to the start line. Here I meet the 3D crew again and we lube up and get into the wetsuits (to waist height only, to avoid overheating too soon). We stroll down to the start line together and take in the sights. Time seems to fly by and all of a sudden my biggest rival off the day 'Frodo' is getting introduced to the crowd. I take my place at the very back of the 1hr 10min swim pen with the aim to get a draft off faster swimmers. I am not the only one with this plan!

Canons boom, shouts go up and the race is on.

About 10 minutes later, after the pro's and the AGer's fast wave start (which included Kevin and Sean) and I am lining up to go. 8 athletes every 5 seconds go in Germanic efficiency into the water. Sorcha and I start 5 seconds apart and it’s the last I see of her on the swim (despite emerging 13 seconds apart 3.8km later!). It's about 1.25km out to the first turn and I focus on a smooth stroke, straight line and see if I can pick up a pair of feet worth following. I get a draft here and there but for never more than 75-100m. I'm swimming dead straight though which gives me great confidence.

We get to the first turn and it get's a little congested, but I have dealt with worse. I turn and head across the lake for circa 500m and I'm still swimming as straight as a line connecting two dots. I draft off a few feet again but nothing sticks. I'm not worried, I can feel I am swimming fast (for me!) and I may be on for a sub 1hr 15 if this continues.

Around the second turn we go and I'm considering a career as a pro open water swimmer (do they even exist, I wonder). It's a little more difficult to sight a straight line here as we have turned into the rising sun but it's pretty overcast so it ain't too bad (for us pro's anyway). After about 1.15km back towards shore I spot the canal entrance right where it's supposed to be - straight in front of me. It's here my right arm starts to weaken, I think as a result of my back problems (which were on the right upper side of my back). I continue on but I have slowed noticeably in the last 100m into the canal.

We enter the canal and it's a washing machine. Everything backs up and its a case of do what you can to get to the swim exit. People try and swim over me, but I'm kicking like a mule on cocaine (Mark Waters would be proud!) and people quickly get the hint to stay away from this lunatic. My right arm has given up though, I can't get it through the water with an open palm so I close it into a fist and plod along as best I can.

It feels like an age but the exit finally appears and I'm out of the water.

Swim time - 1hr 17min 51seconds

All the kicking in the canal has helped eliminate any potential jelly legs. I pass Peter McGoey in the crowd who gets a high five for his trouble and I'm into transition. I grab bike bag, manage an average change and head out towards the bike.

Except now I'm upright I suddenly realise I need a number 1! A not so quick stop to the portaloo and I'm out of transition in an embarrassing 9mins 56seconds

Onto the bike and get the garmin going as quick as I can so I can settle into a nice heart rate. After about 2 mins it picks up my heart rate, perfect! It's quite congested the first few km's but I assure myself this will change as I am exiting the water with the masses and my stronger bike will pull me clear quickly enough. I fly along the first hour or so, executing my nutrition and pacing strategy like my life depended on it. Still no clear tarmac after 35km though and I am getting frustrated with the volume of people who appear to have purchased their tt bike the day before and are now learning how to cycle it. One Aussie guy can't figure out his gears going up an incline and weaves into the middle of the road as he is looking down to see what's wrong. I take evasive action as best I can and have to go up his inside. I get a barrage of abuse for my troubles. Thanks Crocadile Dundee.

Before I know it we are on 'the big climb' for the first time. I prepare for hell, but am met with heaven. The bloody Khyber in the phoenix park is harder than this. I pace myself up it staying in my heart rate zone and am passed by a plethora of cyclists who sound like they are going up Alpe D'huez. Needless to say I soon pass them on the descent and its the last I see of them. This pattern continues on all the inclines, but I am determined to stay in the right heart rate zone despite what my male macho ego is telling me.

The last 20-30km back to town are all downhill and I average 40kph. My first lap is over and I have averaged 32.5kph excluding the first few mins when my garmin was getting going. I'm a little faster than expected but I tell myself that's ok as I might slow a little on the second lap.

The second lap is a carbon copy of the first except the crowds are thinning out a little now. I spot Peter that's out supporting about 10k out but he is talking the hind arse off a donkey with someone and misses me completely.

With that I'm heading back towards transition. A quick calculation in my head and I reckon I could be off the bike in under 7 hours (I am unaware of the age I spent in T1 at this point). A 4 hour marathon would see me hit my goal but deep down I know that's not possible given my lack of running. I resign myself to sticking to the plan for the run - heart rate all the way until 8k to go and then give it all I got.

All of a sudden I'm at the dismount line.

Bike 5hr 36minutes 31 Seconds.

Off the bike and shockingly I find my spot no problem. Again, once I'm upright and running I realise a stop for a number 1 is needed. Once that's done, I find my run bag swap my bike gear for my run gear and I'm off.

Another embarrassing time - 6min 57sec

I tentatively start the run - this is the first time in weeks I have ran. I'm constantly checking my watch to make sure I am pacing it correctly. My heart rate is fine and the pace isn't even that bad. The first few km's are around 5:40. I know from my long runs that my pace slows naturally though so I don't get excited. About an hour passes and everything is trundling along. I see Sean coming the opposite direction and he is bossing it (he ends up running a 3hr 2min marathon).

Soon after, I pop my second gel of the run and all hell breaks loose. As soon as it hits my stomach it's coming back up and I empty my stomach into one of the rubbish bins at an aid station. This was not part of the plan. My stomach is sore now but I can still trundle along at roughly 7min per km pace. At the next aid station I try some water but that comes straight back up too. I get the same result when I try ISO, Cola, an orange slice, nothing is staying down and my stomach is getting worse. Somewhere around km 15-25 (I'm disoriented as this stage) I have to walk. Just the movement of running is causing my stomach to wretch and there is nothing in there to come up.

After about 30mins of strolling through downtown Klagenfurt my stomach has calmed down a bit and I try jogging. I can jog but I know I won't hold anything down so I resign myself to the fact that I am going to have to finish this without food or water. The last roughly 15km are hell. I push myself by repeating the line 'It's just one foot in front of the other'. Time is irrelevant now, just get to the finish.

I know I pass Maire and Peter in the crowd cheering me on but I don't know at what point in the race this is. At last I see a sign for 40km and that brings me around a bit. I see the gang again including Kona qualifier Kevin and this time I acknowledge them. About 250m from the line Peter hands me the Irish flag. I am going to enjoy this. I briefly try figure out which way I need to carry it over my head so that it's the right way around, but that's like trying to figure out quantum mechanics and I give up. (it ends up the wrong way around). I do an airplane down the finishing shoot and cross the line.

Run 5hr 7min and 17seconds

Total 12hr 18min 32 seconds

**Apre Ironman**

As soon as I cross the line I am staggering and a volunteer pretends to be my friend for 5 mins in case I collapse. I make my way to the athlete’s tent and bump into the McCanns. They have both smashed it. They look after me for about 20mins and I manage to eat some pizza and get my senses back. I can't figure out if I am happy that I completed an ironman or distraught that it all fell apart on the run. Typing this now, I still can't figure it out. I shouldn't really be so hard on myself. Maire pointed out to me that when I joined the 3D 2.5years ago, I couldn't swim, I had never ran further than 10k and never cycled further than 60k. I suppose that's the triathlete's curse though, we are forever disappointed with our races.

There is one way to get over this disappointment though, do another ironman and redeem oneself............

Review

The ironman journey is one a lot of triathletes take. It's almost a right of passage, a badge of pride to be worn. Some dive straight in in their first year, others take decades to build up to it.

Having completed it, it is definitely a journey worth doing and one I will recommend to others to do.

I learnt a lot about training, nutrition and myself, more than I have learnt in years.

What would I change about my journey if I was doing it again? Quite a lot actually, but here is the 5 biggest changes I would make:

1: I would have taken natural foods only on the bike and saved the jellies/mars bars for the run

2: I would have completed a marathon before signing up for an ironman. Psychologically this played on my mind quite a lot in the months leading up to the race.

3: I would have ran more when I was tired. This is a tough one as I was trying to protect myself from injury and managing niggles at the time but I would have liked a lot more running.

4: I would have started swim training 9 months before and spent the first 3 months solely working on technique. I made a lot of gains in the pool this year some through technique, some through general fitness, but being such a weak swimmer I feel there is a lot of speed to come from technique improvements yet.

5: I would have used a coach. Again this is largely psychological, I don't think training would have been wildly different but it would have given me some comfort.

With that, that's me signing off, for the moment...............