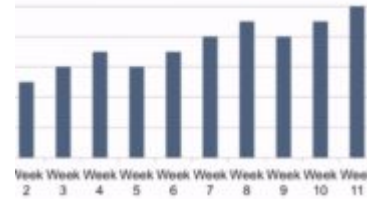




Considering my dislike of hills this wasn't an obvious event choice for me, seeing as it included 1,500m of elevation cycling **The Ring of Kerry** & 275m on the marathon. I've only ever been to The Kingdom once though, on a brief stay a few years ago. To have the opportunity to do something as meaningful as a full distance triathlon there, at a fraction of the expense (€190) compared to the big brand shows (Ironman is €550), made this event a must do, or at the very least a "why the hell not event" – A question I got the answer to a number of times during the day itself.

Prerace training:

It asks a lot of your family to put up with an "age grouper in Ironman training" and unwilling to ask that of my crew again this year, preparation & training for this event were much more subdued than 2016. I (**very loosely**) followed a 14 week 80/20 periodization plan. A hybrid of plans I found online and tweaked along the way to suit my own schedule. ATC pals have heard me harp on about the 80/20 stuff before. It takes the minimal amount out of you physically, building from 8hrs in week 1 to a max of about 16hrs over your peak 2 weeks before tapering for 2-3 weeks. It also (essentially) had several "low volume weeks" where rest & recovery are the focus and lots of brick sessions (where I find I get the most bang for my buck). With a few fitness gauging endurance events done along the way, I figured this would be a tough ask (particularly the run) but weather permitting, I'd be able to get around the course within the allotted cut offs and that'd do just fine.



Pre-race

I drove to Killarney on the Friday (horrendous weather enroute – scary in fact) & stayed in Airbnb accommodation about 5mins from the event HQ. Registration Friday evening (@Fossa GAA club) was relaxed & informative. Once done I headed back to the digs for an early night & some RnR. Surprisingly enough, I slept like a baby the night before the event. That was a first for me. I'm usually up tossing and turning all night before a race. Maybe dropping the "race" emphasis is the key!

Obligatory early breakfast (4:45am), then a short jaunt to the race start at Castlerosse Golf club. Transition opened at 5:30am, soon after, I met up with fellow ATC heads, Paul McDonald & Rob O'Brien, both looking a little nervous (understandable considering they were going head to head in their 1st full distance event) & Mark "The Course Destroyer" Doyle – who was hunting down NC glory was as cool as a cucumber of course! Relaxed banter filled the next hour or so while we prepped in T1. These sporty events are always much more enjoyable with club mates & good company – box ticked there with the ATC lads & support crews. After the obligatory pre-race worries (fretting over missing gear, insufficient training, excess belly fat....) it was time for last minute prayers before slinking in to the lake. Participant numbers are relatively low for this event, 80(ish) individuals (plus 20 others in teams), and without all



the big brand razzmatazz it didn't have that "EPIC IRONMAN EXPERIENCE" feel to it – more a comrade in arms vibe. That said, with the weather Gods being kind to us, the promise of a stunning course ahead and with many a previous Hardman race report in mind, this was set to be a memorable day, albeit a challenging and VERY LONG one!

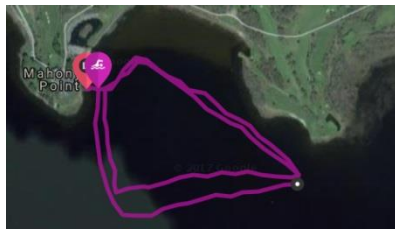
The Swim

Without doubt this is my least favourite discipline. I get through it, that's it. I had laughable (secret!!) pre-race aspirations of sticking on the fins of one of the ATC sailfish for a while to get a good start but the 3 aquatic amigos were away like the clappers so that plan sank, almost as quickly as my legs (and heart!) as we took off.



The swim course was a 2 lap (triangular-ish) circuit in Lough Leane. No salt water buoyancy but with the low participant numbers, the aid of a wetsuit and with only a little chop in parts to battle this wasn't the toughest of swims. The lake is in peat bog territory so the water is dark brown and visibility is zero, but without the reed filled manky murkiness or ankles clanking off discarded shopping trollies & concrete blocks that can be found in rivers, this swim was almost a pleasant way to start the day!

From the off, the main benefit of the small group in the big pond was evident. There was little or no water skirmish to survive. I found a nice line, away from and well behind the main pack and just got to it. Straight in to a slow n steady stroke, breathing only to the left on every 4th stroke and spotting ahead of me every 12 strokes or so. A tried and tested (albeit slow) military march style swim technique. By the 1k marker I was very aware of my position, off course as usual and well behind the (National Championships) field, but that didn't surprise or concern me in the slightest, I just plodded along. While I was feeling the effort, the 1st 1.9k lap was done in a relatively decent time (44mins is good for me). I



cracked on, passing the 3k marker just after hour. For the last 500m or so, I tried to up my leg kick rate (from zero to the odd flutter – I do not use my legs at all when swimming), in an effort to get the blood flowing down there before T1 & bike section. Out of the water (after swimming 4.1k FFS!) in a time of 1hr 32mins. I felt fresh enough, happy to be on terra firma and looking forward to a bit of a picnic and some sightseeing on the bike!

T1 was relatively straight forward. There's a short run up from the lake to the bag pick up and the bike racks are well numbered. Not that it mattered as T1 was well cleared out by the time I waddled in. A sight which reaffirmed my believe that I was well out of my league here, but on a positive note I'd plenty of room to sit and dry myself off, dress & have a snack etc. Again, I'd no worries about time so just took it handy. Katriona McD & Aoife McEvoy were of course there to capture some horrendous swim exit photos (which will not be published!!!) and provide support & encouragement too which was great.

I checked and double checked all my bike gear, doubled up on the lube application, took on some water and exited really excited about the next few hours of sightseeing that lay ahead. This is really why I signed up for this event.....



The Bike

Even now after 5 years of triathlons, I carry the fear of having a bike malfunction, accident or puncture that would end my day. I only ever feel comfortable on a bike when Pdraig Kavanagh or Seamus Rowan is with me but I was really excited and looking forward to this cycle. This promised to be the wow factor of the day.

The Hardman bike course is **The Ring of Kerry** in reverse (i.e. clockwise). That meant the 1st 20k from Killarney was handy enough but then you are into the 1st climb of the day, Molls Gap.

I'd heard of Moll, past participants had said she's a toughie. Turns out she's a b1tch who slowly grinds down, chews up & spits out unfit middle aged pretend triathletes! It's an up and over that lasts about 20k/50mins. While she kicked my @ss for the duration, we left on good terms. Due in no small part to **Trilogy's Martina Cahill** who supplied me with arm sleeves at the top of the climb, after she heard me complaining about the cold. I stupidly decided to go short sleeved for the day! I'm so so grateful to her. That seemingly small kindness made a huge difference to my day.



Next up, you turn off at Kenmare and head for Sneem, if you don't miss the turn that is! There's one dodgy right hand turn on the whole course and I managed to miss it despite the clear instructions at the briefing!! Again, I've Martina & her hubby Steve to thank for confirming my error and setting me off on the right direction without too much delay.

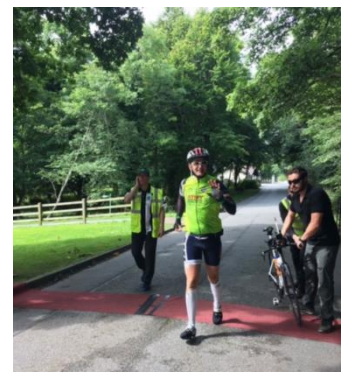


As a kind of reward for Moll's meanness, you get a relatively nice stretch for a while. There's a few cheeky inclines at 47km, 60km & 70km but the next real test and the biggest climb of the day arrives at 85km at Coomakista. It's not particularly steep; it's actually only about 200m of climbing over 8k, it just seems to go on for ever and the legs are tired at that stage.

The elevation of this course does come with its rewards. Passing through Caherdaniel, Waterville, Cahersiveen and Glenbeigh is where you experience the awesomeness of this course. A coastal route that would rival any in the world for its beauty. The Kerry coastline is unspoilt and spectacular. Most folk on the route (bar the extremely nice farmer lads working the aid stations) hadn't a clue there was an "Ironman" distance tri going on. Even that fact adds to it all. You're doing something big, in epic surroundings but on the down low. It's the low key feel to this event that I think really makes it special.

Once over the 130k marker the rest is easy riding. The wind, which was testing along the coast, is in your favour **FINALLY!** While the last hour from Killorgan was extremely unnerving (bumpy road sections heightening the fear of a puncture) with the HR plan (Av mid 130's) adhered to, physically I felt good & the mind was focusing on the big challenge of the day which was fast approaching.

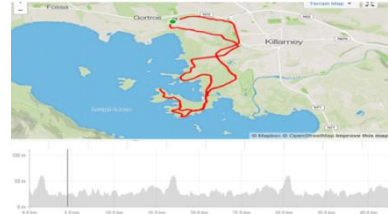
Reaching T2 after 6hrs 57mins of largely incident free cycling (delighted to have broken 7 hrs) was very pleasing. I met Rob O'Brien in the T2 changing tent. Great meeting a fellow ATC mate at this stage; it can be a lonely old road on **The Ring**. Between us we managed to drag out the start of the run for a good 7mins! Can't say I was looking forward to this part.....



THE RUN

Once I'm off the bike (in any tri event) I always think to myself "OK, it's totally up to me now to finish this. Nothing can physically stop me; it's just a matter of time and effort to get to the finish line". Yes, you're tired & sore but once you accept that as part of the experience and assuming you've fuelled & paced correctly, it's really just a matter of (repeatedly) telling yourself to just keep moving. **THE MIND COMMANDS THE BODY AND IT OBEYS.**

Sprint, run, jog, shuffle, walk, hobble, crawl, whatever it takes and never ever doubt you'll finish. When the demons in your head start shouting at you – and they will, just shout louder in defiance. **SIMPLES!**



The Hardman run course is a 14k loop X 3 through Killarney National Park. The course meanders and weaves its way through the parks forestry, deer filled greens & beautiful lakeside vistas. Along mostly tarmac & gravel tracks, along some tourist filled "Jarvey" routes (horse n carts), past streams, ruins & sights of eye catching beauty. There are no timing mats (bar in transition) on this squiggly route and turn around points are marked by a cone. This is an honest man's course, I love that. It's hilly and hard work but well serviced by the amazingly supportive marshals – It's just a matter of getting on with it.

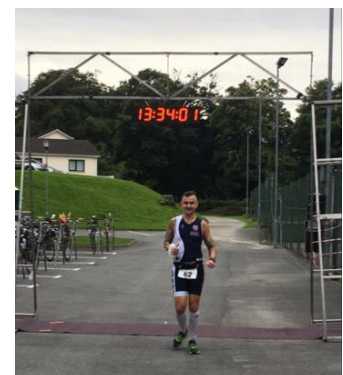


I normally wouldn't check my time on a long run but I was very conscious of it on this day given my desire not to run too long in the dark (yes, as well as heights, downhill cycles and deep water monsters, I am also a little afraid of the dark). Once I knew I'd avoid the head torch lap I settled in to the pace my HR plan (Av 135bpm) would allow for. **1st lap**, 93 mins – Jazuz!!! I knew I was carry the effects of my last long run a couple of weeks back, I knew I'd be slow today, but that was the best I could do!! Despite getting my pacing spot on to this point, the 1st lap was disappointing and it set the tone for the next 3 hours or so.

2nd lap - 28km/3hrs 15mins. This lap really was the meat n bones of the beast & for me was the real test of the day. No matter how well I paced to that point the fatigue had set in. Muscles & joints ached (my "kankles" were swollen and really painful on every step). The brain had naturally switched on to self-preservation mode and the demons were shouting. This is where the mental resolve was tested – truth be told I feckin' loved this bit.

The 3rd lap The physical and mental battles you know will soon be won – Not like you're gonna quit this close to the end. I thanked volunteers as I passed for the last time, they were all so great. I met Paul McD on the last lap, 1st time I'd seen him since he hugged me prerace in T1 – For a big tough Laois man he doesn't half like a hug! He was bouncing along like Bambi of course but did the decent thing and said he was struggling and egged me on to bring it home. Aoife met & joined me on her bike for the last mile or so (maybe she thought I'd not make it). We chatted but the last 200 yards were reserved as always for personal gratitude and thanks. To my munchkins for inspiring me, my missus for supporting/allowing me, my family and friends who seem to get a great kick out of watching this aging eejit break his body up bit by bit. 12k,8k,5k,3k.....42km done in 4hrs 51mins. Slow but I couldn't give toss!

The next time someone down the pub or outside the chipper asks me "Do ya think yer a Hardman?" The answer will officially be **"YES PAL, YES I AM"**



The Aftermath:

After some post-race back slapping (more hugs from Paul!!), a few sambos and tea, we collected the gear & retired for the evening. The ATC crew (& families) meeting up the next day for the post-race brunch & awards ceremony, with a few of us also rounding things out with Sunday scoops to work through the obligatory swapping of war stories and event review!



While Team McEntee couldn't travel to this event, ATC is like extended family now and as expected the lads and their support crews made it a great weekend, not just a special race. Trilogy's Aoife McEvoy in particular was an ever present throughout race day – She's been part of both my full distance events now that I think of it – she's turning into a lucky charm!!! I'm very grateful for her support, although I think Aoife got a bigger buzz from the day than I did & will defo be on the start line next year. Special supporter's mentions also to Paul's family (Catriona & kids), Rob O'Brien wife Nicola & Kim Doyle who all played their part in getting me and the lads across the line. **TEAM ATC on show for all to see.**

Event Director Alan Ryan and his team do a great job with this low key race. Every one of his crew bringing all participants across the line as if they'd just won it!! I can't fault them or it. The course and their management of it are worthy of the National Championships status. As for the location? Well the landscape holds beauty my vocabulary could never do justice to, photos also fall short. The only way to really capture and appreciate it is to experience it for yourself. The Hardman Triathlon is tough, mega huge kudos to the lads who chose (AND HAMMERED) it for their first Full Distance Triathlon, but it's so worth it to visit this beautiful corner of Eire.

Personally, I'm delighted to have bagged a 2nd Full Distance Triathlon. Largely because it proves last year was no fluke. **It also proves you don't have to be obsessed with training & healthy living 24/7, 365 days a year to complete a "BIG ONE"**. In the last 12 months I've also questioned my desire to continue with Triathlons. This weekend has shown I've got another "biggie" in me yet! Maybe see if I can break into that TI Long Distance National Championships top 10 age grouper slot - OK, ok, so there were shag all participants but the fact is I'm listed 12th in the 40-44 category this year, Rob was 11th. Paul was 9th in the juniors section (35-39), and the kid Doyler only went and topped the triathlon toddlers category (30-34) with a WTF, OMG 3rd OVERALL with his 10hrs 34mins finish, bleedin' show off!!! **Go TEAM ATC**



A selection of (especially nice) race photos from official TI media photographers. More can be found on Hardman & TI Facebook pages.....

