



October 2018

I sometimes wonder if anyone reads my race reports. I'd write them for myself regardless but I do like to think that the information included is somewhat useful to fellow club members when considering entering a race in future. I'm pretty sure at least 20 others will read this one as they all play a starring role in what will be remembered by me as the best event I've been involved in as a club member. This report is more a personal account of the week, less technical/logistical details about the event. For that info to check out my [Barca 2016 race report](#)



For 21 ATC members this event marked the culmination of the guts of a year of hard training, the conquering of some lofty personal goals & a demonstration of just how together & supportive our great club is. Each of us had our own reasons for taking on this challenge but it also served as the focus for the club's annual charity fundraising efforts (along with other associated fund raising events held during the year). The final tally is yet to be had but we will raise close to Eur 10,000 for our charities (Mental Health Ireland, Peter McVerry Trust & Athy Lions Club). I'm so very grateful to those who pitched in during the year on that side of things.

As for the event, I broadly followed the same schedule as in 2016. Flying out on the Wednesday (with Dee, King Kav, Aidan & Debbie Dineen and my personal body guard Colm Philips) and taking the few days lead time to acclimatise, relax and enjoy the buzz of an IRONMAN week. It's all managed really well, with registration, briefings & expo just as before. Simple formalities but it brought with it nerve tingling excitement too.

One nice touch arranged by Ironman Spain was to allow our team access to the finish line for a photo shoot. No other team or amateur participant got that privilege. Just another special moment over the week.

Apart from that, the preparations all felt so familiar to me after doing my first IRONMAN here in 2016. An amazing personal experience at the time but I knew this one had the potential to be even better. I was getting to share the excitement of others. As the big day approached the ATC army grew, the noise level increased at meal time; poolside; evenings in the bar/lobby. ATC had landed in force and we were ready to rock!!!



### **Skipping straight to race day:**

We were met with heavy rain soon after arriving at transition so preparations were slightly uncomfortable. No biggie, we'd soon be getting wet anyway. Final tweaks to the bike set up & a few words with club mates and it was time to find the swim start pen. I chose the 1:05 pen, with a plan to draft off stronger swimmers when I could and ideally get a 1:15 swim finish time (same as Barca 2016). I saw Caroline Howe just before I entered the water. She was, as I'd hoped, taking it all in. I've great relationships with all my club mates but a few are good friends of mine outside the club too, Caroline is one of them. It was really nice to be able to share that "stand in the sand" moment of truth with her. I knew she'd hammer the challenge and by Jazuz did she deserve a good day after the rollercoaster journey she went on (and put us all through with her daily blog!!!). Anyway, mushy sh1t out of the way it was game face time.

### **The Swim**

Hands down the most difficult swim I've ever done. The Mediterranean was angry that day. You can't train for those conditions in Athy. Plus I'm not very disciplined at swim training so I was always likely to struggle here. On site supporter Anthony Lawlor posted a short video clip of some people entering the swim, go check it out, it's a taste of what we had to face.

My good pal Pdraig 'The Bull' Kavanagh (a proper swimmer!) had told me he'd repeatedly practiced sea swim entry on the days leading up to the event. I opted to lounge on my sunbed the mornings he was off perfecting the art. How much of a flipping mistake that was I'd soon learn. At the buzzer I jogged easy to the water. As I got knee deep a wave easily 3ft over my head came crashing in and took me out, big time. My first ever back flip summersault. It knocked the wind right out of me and it took a few attempts to even stand up. I think I was in shock maybe, cause it all seemed a bit surreal at the time. All I could do was laugh & hope it wasn't caught on anyone's iPhone. Then again, I wouldn't mind seeing it. I sheepishly re-entered the water and restarted the battle.



It was choppy, very disorientating, sickening even. A real battle from start to finish but it was the same for all and while I heard afterwards that 300 participants didn't make it past the swim, I was confident our crew would not be part of that statistic. They breed 'em tough in Athy. The Bull Kavanagh even going so far as to admit that he "absolutely loved that swim", he's a force stronger than nature in the water!!! For us mere mortals, there were real problems with sighting and navigation and at times I was looking for the rescue boat rather than the next buoy, but as tough as it was there was no real chance of quitting.

The course is a simple rectangle layout. 300m out, turn right & do 1750m parallel to the beach, turn right do 200m in towards the beach and then right again for 1250m and a final left turn and 200m into the beach. My GPS was on the blink so the swim stats are off but I was all done in 1hr 17mins, only a couple of minutes off 2016's time. But not comparable given the conditions. Very very happy with that start.



As I ran up the beach to transition I could hear my name being called out. The support crew were in action - I spotted Gemma Martin & Niamh Mulhall, I heard loads of others screaming. It was a sign of things to come from the ATC army. I can't say I felt too great exiting the water, but getting a boost from our supporters erased all the ill feeling. I powered on, fuelled with ATC determination. I met John O'Toole in the transition tent and we had a quick chat about how poxy the swim was but there wasn't any faffing about either. T1 took me 6mins.

## **Bike**

Ok ok, it's not exactly all flat (750m elevation over 180k) but it's easily the fastest course any of us have done. The few hills in/out of Calella & the few KMs drag on each lap I found to actually be a welcome break from the aero bars and so scenic. You have to take in the scenery on these things. It's not all about times and performance and all that competitive rubbish. That said; I had expected to shave time off here as I really have focussed on my bike endurance training this year, plus I planned to push a little harder. 2016 was about finishing, 2018 was about finding out how far I could push myself.

To achieve that I stuck to the tried and tested nutrition and hydration plan but fuelled for an aggressive but controlled effort. Eating small amounts every 15mins or so and taking on 750ml of fluids per hour, there would be no scheduled stops (pee breaks were literally me peeing on the bike brakes!!) and I'd ride on (threshold Z3-4) heart rate. I can hear Chris Simpson cursing me for abandoning zone 2 but I wanted to push it so I was happy to take the calculated risk.

This is where the summer big training days really paid dividends. Our Club Ironman Athy days, my own long Tri day with Deca Ger Prendergast. The clubs Celtic Warrior weekend. I knew what effort I could sustain and still have strength for the run. This Ironman gig is all about proper training, fuelling and mental attitude. With my team mates and friends this year we did the required training, we had tested our fuelling and mentally today I was good. It was just about executing the plan. I felt confident and strong at 30k flying, 50k hills done no hassle, 60k feck you Mr. full disk fancy bike - eat my dust, 80k no head winds or knee pain, woop woop!

It was all going to plan up to 90-100k. Then as I completed the 1st of 2 laps, I did experience a little dip in positivity, not sure why but it is all very normal & it didn't last long. I got a massive boost from the ATC army at the turnaround. I spotted a load of our crew, with the flags and their screams it wasn't hard, they were going mental! Deadly stuff. Unless you experience it you can't really describe it but it's like getting a jolt of energy. You are just lifted to a higher level by the support. A lot of them had a busy day too, with our Pink Ladies taking part in the IronGirls run. Everyone that travelled with us was on the course. Course support is magical. I had it in 2016 when my wife Ruth supported me through my 1<sup>st</sup> Ironman, emotionally that day can't be topped, but today I had that buzz times 30. Power wise I was super charged by them and so very very grateful to have the with me.



I checked the watch and was averaging 34.5kph. Very good for me. Shortly after that though things took a turn for the worst. At a roundabout just after going through 100k an Italian guy (named MARCO 😊 who had been happily drafting behind me for ages before I shifted out to force him to pass) took a slick surfaced roundabout too fast and went down very very hard. He

skidded along the road as did his bike, blocking the way so I had to hit my breaks quickly, too quickly and I followed him to the ground. This was my first real fall off the bike. I did cycle into the back of a car last year on a Dublin commuter bike & I've done the upside down turtle thing a few times (falling while stopped and clipped in) on my own TT bike training but never had a proper race crash so to speak.

Truth be told, it scared the bejazz out of me. It hurt too but my immediate thought was "is the bike ok?" A marshal suggested it was but he couldn't touch it or it'd mean a disqualification. So I picked it up, put on the slipped chain & spun the wheels. It seemed ok. I composed myself and set off again. Marco wasn't so lucky, his race was over (I checked the tracker that night to confirm - there were actually quite a few fallers at that spot and other places. I saw at least 2 very bad crashes, with people on ambulance stretchers). Fast wet courses will always play havoc on speed chasing IRONMAN wannabees.

I was lucky enough to be able to continue so I did. I found it very hard to keep my grazed elbow/arm on the bars and my hip which took the brunt of the hit was a real problem but there was nothing that I'd consider a show stopper. I took it a little handier for the final 80k though, especially at the roundabouts but I still finished the bike course within my targeted sub 5hrs 30mins, a good 45min improvement on 2016. I'd even go so far as to say the crash helped me on the day, it forced me to reign in my effort a bit and made me more determined to finish. Sounds weird but it did. I found myself laughing at it all for the remainder of the cycle. Humming Chumba Wumbas "I get knocked down, but I get up again". That could be my anthem this year, really it could!!! The rest of the cycle went grand, a few wobbles but no more falls. I also got to meet Pdraig and Arnold on the bike course and had a little moan about the crash to them too which helped. Those two lads were well in control of their day. Smashing out their plan and looking very strong. Peadar flew past me at one point also, on his way to an immensely impressive 10hr 0mins & 35 seconds finish. He's blaming his wife Maggie's passionate hugging & kissing after the swim and again on the red carpet for denying him the official sub 10hr. I'd have ignored here and ran right past her!!!!



I spotted a few other ATC kits on the bike but not everyone. It did have me wondering a little if we'd had any casualties in the swim so confirmation of a full crew in action was one of my first questions to our supporters as soon as I met them on the run course.

Upon arrival at the transition tent I surveyed the damage to bike and body. Both would need repair but for now it was a quick dust down and on with the show. And for me, the most challenging but also the most enjoyable part of the day.....



### **Dahn dahn daaaaahn THE IRON MARATHON.**

The course was the same as 2016, everything was the same except for one key factor. The support. Holy Hell !!! I obviously knew I could expect support, even as a solo ATC representative in 2016 I was well supported by other Irish clubs but this time was different. It felt like a home town event. I thought the bike support was great but this was unreal. Everyone was cheering for us. We were the

most represented club at the event; in terms of participants but also supporters. We had our own army of supporters dotted round the run course, friendly hands out high fiving you every 500 meters, others seemed to just adopt us too. Everyone was with us. Pushing us on. I had to give up raising my arms in acknowledgement of the support because they started to hurt with it all !!!! I can't list all our ATC ARMY (maybe 40 strong) as I'd be hear all night but I need to mention a couple specifically:

Karen Kavanagh at the Santa Suzanna turnaround point on the run. Karen had heard that end of the course is mentally tough, long lonely and quiet, so far away from the action, that stretch of road out of the town can suck the life out of you. So Karen took it upon herself to get out there and cheer us on. The woman is fantastic. I heard her before I saw her and long after I passed her. Karen never stops bigging up her club mates, but she is phenomenal. Her energy, her positivity, her commitment to ATC and club mates. Instead of wilting, I found myself attacking that end of the course because of her. So thank you Karen.

Also Baco, or Lady Gaga as he's now being called (after his initiation into the Pink Ladies gang!!!). Me mad auld fella screaming his head off at every sighting of me. I could see he was enjoying the day, the whole week in fact. It was great to have dad there with me. Who knows? maybe one day I'll be cheering him on through his own Ironman day! There were 4 lads in his age category (I like them Kona odds!!). Baco is quickly becoming an ATC celeb, a Pink Ladies Mascot & his cheers of "go wan ya good thing" and big wide smiles on the run made me feel so lucky to have him there. So thanks Baco.

I also met/saw plenty of our athletes on the run course. John Sourke, Jeff, Daithi, Arno & Arnold all running great on the 1st lap. Ciaran & Pdraig, Aidan and Caroline later on. Sourkey of course zipped past me, smashing out a super fast marathon and a 10hr 43mins finish. That's despite a gap in his training this year after a bad bike crash of his own earlier in the year. I think John understood the impact of the crash on my day as a result, and his wincing at the damage to my leg after the race was kinda cool! We are road rash buddies now!!!

Arno had a good day too, finishing in 11:05. Arno is one of my early Tri Club man crushes, someone I looked to for inspiration and advice early on in my triathlon endeavours. He's an accomplished Ironman, but also an absolute gent & very generous with his knowledge and support. I think a lot of our Ironman first timers benefited from his wisdoms this year.

I was really glad to meet Ciaran on the course. He's been someone I've gotten to know better this year. For a big hardy hairy Kildare kid he really is a big softie. I know this year was a big deal for him, and with his PKU or PMS diet (or whatever the hell it is) he had a little extra fuelling considerations to manage too. He's never without a smile or a laugh though, he doesn't get too caught up in all the competitiveness, just enjoys it. When I met him on course he was beaming out a smile and looking strong, I was absolutely delighted for him.

Pre race predictions of my own performance were publically a sub 12hr, privately I wanted sub 11hr. I'd expected to shave 30mins off my 2016 marathon time, but that was before I tore my calf 2 weeks previous doing the Gaelforce event in Donegal (Didn't care, it was worth it, I had a deadly day up there) so the target on race day changed even before the off. The strategy remained the same though. I'd run on heart rate alone and not even look at the pace or time till the 2nd half. My calf was sore, like a sharp stabbing on each stomp on the ground but I had already reconciled with the fact that there would be pain. I don't mind sports related pain, I actually welcome it. It makes me feel alive. Suffice to say with the damage done to the hip from the bike crash I was feeling very alive!! I actually think the hip issue distracted me from the calf problem.

The only real hassle with the hip was my run shorts kept rubbing off it so I was constantly turning them up and tucking them into the under lining (is that what the knickers bit is called???) Anyway, I ran with one cheek of me arse out for the whole thing. A little something for the ladies like!! I actually had to explain to my missus why I was doing it when I got home as she did question a few dodgy pictures of me with me arse hanging out!!!

As for my pace, I set off at a pace which allowed me to be at or under 150bpm. That's about where I feel comfortable in an Ironman marathon. On the day it translated to approx 5min 30sec per kilometer so I knew from the start of the 2nd half that 1) I'd finish and 2) A sub 4 hour marathon and sub 11hr finishing time was on if I stuck to the plan.

I got a bit giddy with excitement at the time when I realized the sub 11hr was possible so I had to reign myself in a bit and just focus on the task at hand. But being very honest I was confident the whole way through the marathon. Not finishing never crossed my mind & with the amazing support I was getting from the ATC Army both on and off the course it was like another IRONMAN ATHY day not Barcelona!

I absolutely love the IRONMAN marathon. It's very different to a stand alone marathon or Ultra marathon for that matter. You start it off tired and energy depleted. Add to that your legs are like concrete and feel like they are bolted to the ground. Physically it's tough to even get going, but here's the up side. You are already warmed up, with every stride of the first 5k you loosen up. Plus you set off knowing that nothing can stop you from achieving your goal. There's no sea monsters, no massive waves, no a55hole cyclist cutting you up, no traffic cones or curbs to mount, no punctures or malfunctioning derailleurs. It's just you and the road. Yes, it requires grit, determination and mental focus. Your body (even a battered, bleeding and bruised one) will always carry you further than you expect though. It's your head that dictates your success or failure. Get that right and you are unstoppable. And you can always, always change how you feel about any given moment.



On the day my heart was in this and more importantly my head was right - that's not always been the case this year so it wasn't a guarantee in Barca. My friends know it's been a tough year for me, but Ironman Barca 2018 proved that things can always turn around, get better and you can bounce back from bad events, even excel under pressure/stress.

Anyway, after 3hrs 54 mins of running I hit the red carpet for a 10hr 51min finishing time. Completing this event didn't bring with it the emotions of 2016 or the feeling of achievement, but it was still damn nice, especially spotting & acknowledging my pal Colm & my dad in the stands.

The pride beaming from Baco's face was obvious and very heart warming. I spotted him and pointed to him, acknowledging all the support he's given me this and every year. A great moment & memory for sure. I didn't hear the announcer call my name this time nor did I see my name on the clock but that's ok, I stepped over the line, accepted my medal, job done. Ironman number 4. As soon as I was done I had two things in mind. The first was get my wounds seen to, which I did in the medics tent by two lovely lady medics. Quick shout out too to Aidan Dineen who's leg & arm shaving strategy (which was adopted by most of the lads) was probably the reason I don't need skin grafts. The wounds were cleaned up nicely and I was allowed go, off to sort out the 2<sup>nd</sup> of my priorities. Finding out how the rest of the team were doing.



In the interest of full disclosure, I suppose I better reference the Bloopers reel too. I somehow managed to send my passport home via SHIPMYTRIBIKE bag and only realized on Monday night. Que panic stations and hassle!!!

I even more stupidly slipped & fell on Monday nights most excellent team celebration night out. More cuts and grazes, this time to the face. If anyone outside the club asks though the face scratches are from the bike crash!!!! Thankfully I had my good friend & personal body guard Colm Philips with me who kindly chaperoned me back to my hotel after my now famous "flowerbed fall". The following 2 days were busy nursing wounds, some suspected concussion, a trip to the police station to obtain required forms etc. before several calls and emails & a trip to the Irish Consulate in Barcelona City for an emergency passport. Turns out Emergency Passports are not that big a deal - Although I was blessed on Wednesday morning with available trains & The Irish Consulate staff were superb. I managed to get back to the hotel 30mins before the scheduled pick up for the flight home. So major drama avoided.

Now that the dust has settled & I've taken stock of this adventure I have to stress again what our club has achieved this year is nothing short of phenomenal. There was a reported 800 or so DNF's this year at Ironman Barcelona, so for all 21 of ATC's crew to avoid those dreaded 3 letters is really something special. Legends one & all. How Helsinki tipped us for 1<sup>st</sup> place in the Ironman TriClub Podium - Division V I'll never know. Personally I think we owned Calella this year.

I have no doubt the achievements of all 21 will inspire others to set and smash some triathlon goals, or any goals they so wish. With the right mindset, determination and self-belief ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE especially from this great group of people, club mates and friends...



Some more favourite photos, more can be found on the club website and facebook pages:





