**Liffey Swim 2017**

It’sa cool September day and I’m on a makeshift start line just beside Watling Street Bridge in Dublin…. in my swimming togs!!!….how the hell this did happen??!! Flashback to a few months back when I spotted Bernie Dillon Byrne swimming in skins at the club swim. What is Bernie up to now I thought??!! Bernie announced that a goal for this year was to qualify for the Liffey swim….I proudly stated that I had indeed done the Liffey swim in 1995…. And I swore I would never do it again….it was a once off!! And you get a t-shirt, swimming cap and a medal Bernie said….ping….sudden interest…..oh really…..I have nothing to show for my 1995 effort….ok … I’m in too!!

The only obstacle was a few Leinster Open Sea races to complete….6 in total. I did skirt with the idea of the Leinster sea swims last year…on enquiring if you can use a wetsuit, the guy at the end of the line not believing he was asked such a stupid question stated “absolutely no wetsuits…..sure that’s like being in a boat!”. Fair enough…point taken!! I will never forget my first qualifier…it was on a beautifully sunny Sunday in June…..rocked up to Seapoint…..paid my 10 euro entry fee…given my handicap….5 mins ….like hold on a sec… I don’t start until 5 mins after the first swimmers…oh dear…this is not going to be good.!

I met a former swim team mate who had not seen for 20 years…..She had kept up the swimming over this time and I hadn’t swam for 20 yrs until I got into Triathlons a few years back!!! Trying to explain I was not the swimmer I once was met with a degree of suspicion….she certainly knew I was telling the truth after this race!!!!

Whilst sunny, the water was baltic….I pretty much lost the feeling in my whole body in this swim….My goggles fogged up, couldn’t see a thing…went off course…..and there I was the last swimmer….well feck it anyway…..this is a stupid idea …what was I thinking?? But hold on …..I can see some swimmers in the distance….back on track…so I’m coming near the finish and I pass a few swimmers…yes….a result…I’m not last!!!! So I clamber out of the water and collect my ticket which gives you your place number…I grab it like it’s mana from heaven! I shiver uncontrollably after this race and drive back to Carlow with heat up on full and it splitting the stones!!

So completed 5 other swims, my handicap came down…..the Lee Swim was a qualifier which is another great event…although a tad dirtier than the Liffey!!! In fairness things got better….I gradually started to acclimatise to the cold water and the freedom of swimming without a wetsuit is amazing!!! I managed to squeeze in my 6th swim on the day of the closing date for the Liffey….a beautiful swim from Blackrock to Windsurfers Peer!! And I finished mid pack which was nice!!!

So back to the Liffey Swim …I arrive on time which is a bonus (despite missing the bus from Carlow!....we won’t go there!!) ) ….Bernie of course is already there and has collected her chip. She is like a child at Christmas, her nervous energy becoming infectious and I too start to get the jitters!! She has a spanking new pair of togs and has applied false tan for the occasion!! I feel like the poor relation but sure who wants to wear a brand new pair of togs in the Liffey??!!

The time has come…we’re beckoned down to the start…having a 45 second handicap, I will be one of the first batch of swimmers to start! I’m now waving my hands in the air in unison with all the other swimmers…. and our rendition of Molly Malone is reverberating on the Liffey…we are nearly ready to go! I want to bottle this moment….the atmosphere is truly amazing……swimmers of all ages….with a passion for the water ….the excitement in the air is palpable!

 I try to get my head right…this will be fine…..I decide not to dive in as I am afraid my goggles will come off so I have a pathetic jump in and I clamber back to the surface gasping with the coldness of the water (hopefully there is no video evidence of this!!!) But after a few minutes, I’m fine….this is cool (excuse the pun!) ….swimming through all the bridges……oh look there’s halfpenny Bridge…..remember this moment Joanne…..I am thankful to the universe for this amazing opportunity….to be fit and heathy enough to do this…..how lucky am I?!!

People waving from the bridges and the street supporting all the swimmers….some shouting out names of loved ones….this really is an iconic event…in its 98th year…like wow…I think of the people who swam this race as early as the 1920s…..was it the same feeling for them…has anything much changed over time? Water and nature remains the same….it defies the changing generations and modern technology… this is a really brilliant thing to do! The Liffey swim was my best swim of the year…..I felt surprisingly good after being a bit sick in the days leading up to it….the tide turned in our favour and it is a joy to swim in!

Now, you have the usual bombardment of the stronger swimmers hunting you down in packs and gliding by you with ease….but that’s ok ….I’m happy with how I’m tipping along. After O’Connell Bridge, it’s a mad sprint down to Custom House to the finish….I see the yellow blow up finish line….wow….I’m nearly there….there is a mass of yellow caps everywhere…swim for your life Joanne!! Yay…I’m over the line….still lots of swimmers behind me….happy days!!!

All the swimmers are in the water congratulating each other…the swimming community are one of the best …they are so friendly and welcoming to newcomers like me….swimmers take a while to get out of the liffey…they lie back and bask in the water as if it was a hot bath savouring the moment !! This race really is special! I find a beaming Bernie Dillon who is over the moon….we did it Bernie…..and with a twinkle in her eye she says “ I’m in again next year….are you?!!”…..oh..oh...here we go again!!!