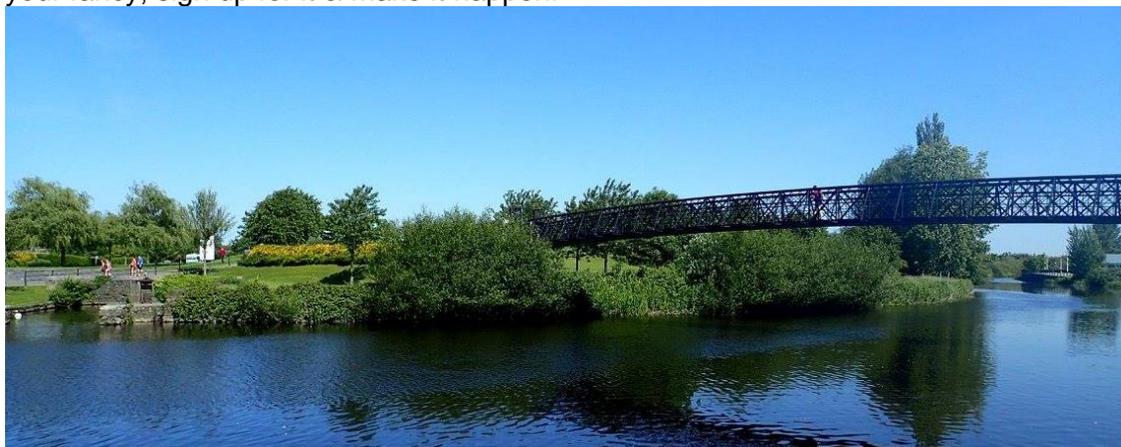




I heard about this event a few years back & received several reports from past participants on both the Barrow Valley marathon and ultra distance events. Some experiences were harrowing to say the least, but the people who take on these seemingly mad challenges are quite frankly all inspiring to me. Not because they are super human or top 1% uber athletes but because most of them are “normal” guys/gals, just like me and my friends. Normal people, busy juggling family commitments, work life/stress, community & club involvements, while also being mindful of the importance & value of down time, family time & maintaining a balanced lifestyle. What they prove is this; with a somewhat sensible approach to training, a positive mind set & a healthy portion of determination **most of what we believe is beyond us actually isn't.**

As for training for long distance races, I am very much a novice so not qualified to dish out any advice to anyone. However, I personally have found over the last few years of dabbling in “endurance events” (i.e. anything over 1hr) is consistency in training, results in measurable improvements over a reasonable time. Now, I've yet to meet an age group athlete who has stuck rigidly to any training plan for any event so consistency just means keeping on track as much as possible with whatever training approach suits you (for me it's the good old 80/20 plan) & absolutely not fretting over missed training days, unless they become missed weeks/months.

Also, just trying to be sensible but not a slave to healthy eating/drinking and picking events that I think I'll enjoy & will challenge me, in that order! For me this running business is as much a mental health tool as it is a pursuit of physical fulfilment, but whatever your reason, if you like the idea of running a half marathon, marathon or even an ultra-marathon, find one that tickles your fancy, sign up for it & make it happen.



With my Mr Motivator speech done, I'll crack on with the **actual race report**.....

Health warning: This report is long, just like the day itself was!

After some tactical musings (for weeks) with training partner Seamus Rowan, we decided to sign up for the Stonemad marathon, as a precursor for a crack at the Ultra in 2018 - with Paul McDonald jumping on board "for the craic" too. A man with a similar attitude/approach!! We'd run this at a nice leisurely pace and use it as a significant training day for future events. So that was grand!!..... However, after hearing this year's Stonemad Ultra was reduced from 62k to 57k, in the spirit of "**Stonemadness**", I upgraded my registration in the week of the event. Impetuous? Possibly. Explainable? Definitely. The reason behind the decision is simply my Donadea 50k **DNS** demon (ref pic top right!) got the better of me. I was absolutely gutted to have missed out on that event in February, I had visualised becoming an Ultra finisher in 2017. I watched my friends achieve that goal, equally with delight for them but also raging with race medal jealousy!



So at the risk of being ostracised by my marathon mates this time, I decided to go for it. Out into the great unknown, to find out what lies beyond the 42km (insert scared poo face emoji here....)

Race preparation

With April's Rotterdam marathon in the "race bank" I had confidence I'd get that far at least in this one. I'd not gone over 20k since then but in the weeks running up to the event I did some focussed training in the shape of early morning runs along The Barrow to get the body and mind in tune. Plus having done the TriAthy Double Oly two weeks before, I'd gotten a taste of the upcoming terrain & the endurance test – It was fairly hot running that day too. My run training was complimented with a little core work, some swimming & the odd long bike ride to build leg strength and give the joints a break - while dialling in nutrition/hydration requirements. Worth noting, I find it very beneficial to train at the same time of the day that the target event will be held. Also using the products I'll have available on race day. It allows the body & mind to get accustomed to how it'll feel (so no surprises) come the big day. All of this was supported by plenty of rest & recovery days, vital elements these days. Plus plenty of Utube motivational running videos (hours upon hours!). While I accepted I'd not trained the running legs sufficiently for an Ultra, I figured **if you wait till you know you absolutely can do these things then what's the point in doing them?**

In terms of race plan, I didn't really have one beyond just ticking off each 5k. Start off at a nice easy pace (well below marathon pace) and be willing to adjust to suit the terrain, cheeky niggles acting up or simply if the mood or weather on the day require it. The forecast was for 26 degrees with 75-85% humidity, not something pasty skinned Paddy's are accustomed to! I figured what happens after 42k is anyone's guess so be mentally ready to run/jog/walk/crawl (maybe even jump in the barrow and swim) to the finish. I'd carry enough water to get to the 1st water station. Rest & refill at each checkpoint along the way. Carry a stash of energy bars, high caffeine drink & have my gels in my race belt bottles (something I started doing this year with great results – no messing/littering with sticky wrappers), with a plan to take on some calories every 20mins. There were no misapprehensions about how challenging this would be so I had no finishing time target. The goal was to just get to the finish line by ticking off each 5k. Slowly slowly catchy Monkey!

On the day itself, I found the race organisation to be low key but plenty sufficient and the atmosphere was relaxed at 8am registration in Carlow Town Hall.



It was great to have some friendlies on the day too, including David Harmon (Mr ULTRA!) who gave me great tips (and confidence) in the lead up this event and on the day itself.

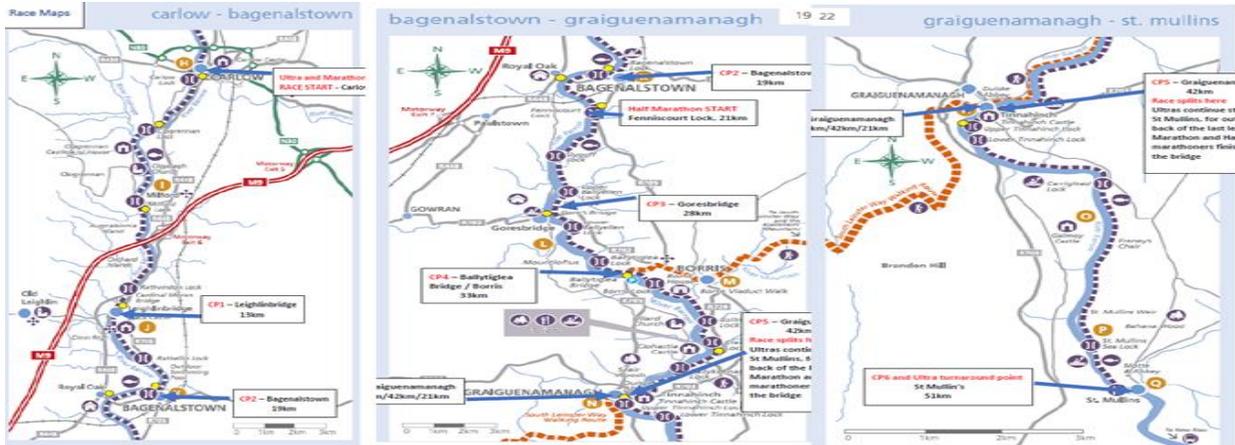
Friends Trevor and Dee Clancy, both new to running this year & already popping their marathon cherries by running early with their pal Angie Gleeson (who inexplicably was running the Ultra on Saturday AND the Kildare Marathon on Sunday – a feat putting every cocky ultra dude back in their box). Seamus & Paul were both lining up for the marathon later and a bunch of ATC pals were ticking off the half marathon distance too, including Pdraig, Diarmuid & Elaine.

As for the route, it is a beauty. You get to enjoy quiet peaceful unspoilt surroundings, free of city/town traffic & noise. A route soft under foot with a largely tarmac free riverbank course. Lush green foliage & a very calming slow flowing River Barrow, with all its twists and turns, canals, weirs & wildlife. There are stretches of this river that are worthy of a Movie (Think “A river runs through it” or “Stand by me”). The Barrow Valley Marathon route meanders slowly through a point to point course with checkpoints along the way.



Starting in Carlow town – Leighlinbridge (13k) – Bagenalstown (19k) where the half marathon starts – Goresbridge (28k) – Borris (33km) – with the Marathon finishing at Graiguenamanagh (42k). The Ultra dudes doing an additional out and back to St. Mullins to hit the 57k! It doesn't sound so bad when you break it down like that!!!





The 1st 10k was as expected. These days I find that no matter how much or little I warm up, my brain still tries to fight my body's desire to move by firing little twinges of pain around certain joints & muscles in the early stages. It usually takes about 30-45mins for all of these to settle down and how I come out of that spell dictates the performance thereafter. I love the simplicity



of running and wish I could do more but I really do need to be more sensible managing running injuries and general wear and tear, the miles take their toll. Anyway, less is more these days, so the first 10k was definitely a less effort, more care phase of the race. I tucked in behind Dave Harmon, and his running pals Paddy Harmon & Declan Core, who had a similar approach. Really good company & as we jogged in a conga line the time zipped by. Two 5k sections done, only 9 more to go!

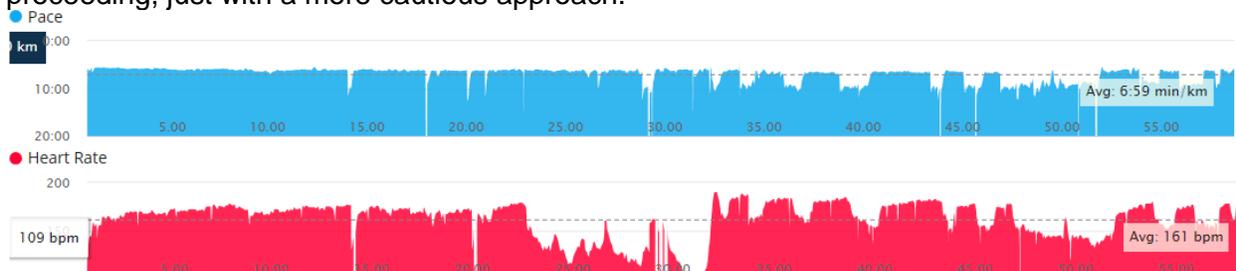
10k to 20k Bar a short pit stop at Leighlinbridge to regroup & another to take a photo before Bagenalstown we kept a nice pace through to 20k. The surface throughout is mostly short grass with patches of gravel. You are required to keep your wits about you to avoid divots and dips but this is a well-trodden route so the surface was largely fine under foot. There definitely isn't the spring/bounce you'd find road running and the softer ground makes for heavy legs, but it is a little more forgiving on the joints so there are equal pros/cons. Most importantly, bar the odd bridge, there are no hills! I could feel some blisters forming (par for the course with me unfortunately) but already it was clear; the stand out factor of the day was to be the heat. It was about 11.30 by now and the temperature & humidity were already very high and threatening to be a major issue. I had Dioralyte sachets with me & was popping salt tabs with water regularly too. At about 15k I mentioned to the lads that we were doing well & we only had a Marathon to go. My attempted humour went down like a lead balloon. It was shortly after this I found myself running alone! Perhaps the two incidents aren't related!!! Anyway, 2hrs in, two more 5k's in the bag.



20k-30k By now the muscles were feeling a little heavy but honestly, nothing too worrying. The heat & humidity was intense but I was relatively happy enough with my hydration & nutrition. The blisters were building but not enough to concern me. It was around this stage that I had my first very memorable/pleasing thought of the day, “Jazuz McEntee, look at you, a crooked middle age, chocaholic pot-bellied, beer swigging pringles junky mulling over Ultra Marathon tactics at 20k”. Kind of funny & surreal, but the harsh reality of the long hot day was just around the Barrow bend and ready to wipe that smile off my face...

At about 22k I noticed something strange on my Garmin. My HR dropped a couple of zones and while I felt ok I couldn't rationalise it. This kept me preoccupied for a good 6-8km as the HR bounced up and down between 115-160bpm, (I'd normally run this pace and distance comfortably with an Av HR of 145ish). Then as 30k approached my HR quite suddenly dropped to 85bpm (the kind of rate I'd maintain sitting on the sofa watching a match!). I felt very weak and unable to focus or concentrate. It was like someone had pulled the plug on the Hoover (I do that sometimes to annoy the missus!!). I was running alone at this stage & I don't mind admitting I almost sh@t my shorts. After a minute or so it shot way up to 190bpm (the kind of rate I'd maintain for a 5k sprint or HIIT). I started having visions of “worst case scenario” stuff. As Billy Connolly would say “F%\$k that for a game of soldiers”, I decided to stop running and started walking.

30-40k I know some people can run on perceived effort and some even scoff at using devices but I can honestly say that being able to track my HR on this peculiar day and having the sense to heed the warning signs might just have saved me from allowing my stubbornness to literally run me into sever ill health. For the next 10km I adopted a walk, run, walk strategy. I also needed a distraction from my racing mind, so I stuck the earphones in. Switching from my normal high cadence running playlist (Eminem, Public Enemy, and Metallica) for more dulcet tones (Emeli Sande, Adele, Pink - Judge me if you must, I'm still well hard with loads of tattoos!) As it happened my HR wouldn't come back down to “normal” running levels for another 2 hours. Every time I ran it shot up but my mental faculties returned 100% and determined to finish I was proceeding, just with a more cautious approach.



By the time I reached the checkpoint at Graiguenamanagh and the finish line for the marathon distance (which by the way was 43k NOT 42k!!) I'd been on the course for 5 hours or so. I felt somewhat deflated and quite honestly robbed of a good performance by the weather. It's what I'm putting the HR events down to anyway. None the less, not for one second did I seriously consider cutting my day short. I was more than capable of walking the final 15k if necessary. I'd likely curse my way through it but this was my Ultra debut and I was not having a debut DNF to go with my Donadea DNS on my 2017 report card.

40-50k – After taking a few minutes out at the 43k checkpoint to rest & stretch, I kicked on (aka shuffled slowly) in the direction the marshals pointed me. I've not mentioned them as yet but they were all super supportive at every checkpoint. Absolutely nothing but positive responses to requests & questions. Even overly apologetic about the warm liquids and melted snacks on offer. The remaining 14k on the route was a 7km out and back stretch to St. Mullins.

At about 46km my HR was back to normal but I was absolutely drained. It seemed like once I passed that point my brain was like "You're some gobshite McEntee, you've been rightly found out here lad, time to jump in the river there". I wilted quite a bit at this point, and spent a while feeling sorry for myself as I zombie walked & people passed me. I think I walked for about 30mins/3km to the 50km turnaround point. In that time going through a little internal battle between the better & worse me!!! We all have them both in us; it's a psychological (scientifically proven) fact. I just had to let it play out.

50-57k Then, at the 50k turn around point, refuelled on kind words from marshals, refreshing cold coke, a half-pound of fizzy cola bottles, 3 caffeine gels and an ibuprofen it happened. "I had what alcoholics refer to as a moment of clarity" (A line borrowed from Jules in Pulp Fiction – This isn't a confession of being too fond of the soup!). As I set off for the final 7km home, in the midst of a new level of physical pain, in the haze of doubt and deflation, the better me simply started saying "I am here because I chose to be, because I want to be, because I alone dictate my destiny, my limitations. Who is stopping me from reaching my goal? No one, absolutely no one, just 7k to go, get moving".

I'm sure this mini spiritual awakening was derived from a compilation or adaptation of the countless number of utube motivational videos I watched late at night recently. The words sound silly (even cringe worthy) sharing them now but in the moment it was powerful stuff, and it worked. From that moment my mood and resolve changed. There was absolutely no way I was not finishing this thing. In fact the sooner it was over the better. Up rose the drooping head, back went the slouching shoulders and forward went the hips (a few running tips stolen from Catherina McKiernan ATC running students).



To further pump my pistons, I decided to dedicate the final 7km to people that drive me on & inspire me. My missus, for continuously allowing me chase my stupid bucket list boxes. My ATC club mates & friends, who constantly support, encourage & celebrate each other's achievements. But mostly, the last few km's were for my McMunckins. I absolutely love telling my kids I do this stuff to prove to them that **LIFE IS LIMITLESS & ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE**. It's taken me over 40 years to embrace that belief and it's my absolute purpose in life now to ensure I instil it in them. In a vain attempt to do that (and maybe get some kudos from the Casa del Mac dwellers) I told my young lad that my finishing time (7hrs 10mins) was about the same time as he'd spend in class on a school day. His response? A shrug of the shoulders and a "meeeah, I'd prefer to do the run to be honest". He's grounded for a month now, cheeky mite!!

So, while I await my Superdad cloak presentation ceremony, the Stonemad medal will hang proudly on the bar wall. I'll continue ticking boxes, I have a couple to get to yet, but this one is Ultra special. Stay humble(ish), dare to dream etc. etc.....

Speaking of humility, while anyone who took on the heat in any of the 3 distances on offer is a "Ledge" in my book, the race results published on Sunday showed up two outstanding performances from ATC club mates.

Major Kudos to Elaine Connolly, 1st female home in the half marathon & Paul McDonald joint 8th overall in the Marathon. Another great day for ATC.



A few other fav snaps of the day:

