

## QUELLE ROTH CHALLENGE 2008

The broad expanse of the trans-continental shipping canal narrows into a small dot on the rather gloomy grey horizon. The path we are shuffling along runs parallel to the canal and is still rather empty. The top female and sub nine men are coming back towards me in dribs and drabs. I am eyeing up the grassy bank leading down to the water on my right. On my left another grassy verge slopes up steeply to a wooded area. The left hand side would provide more privacy but the slope looks a little slippery. The question at this stage, seven hours into the Quelle Challenge Roth, is whether privacy is more important to me than convenience?

Normally the morning of a race, any race, the fear is guaranteed to scare the crap out of me. Today I queued as per usual many times for the portaloos but nothing was happening. I wasn't fired up for this race. The days preceding the race the weather wasn't great. Normally I would cycle the bike course but with the weather and not feeling too good I didn't. My only "training" session in the last week has been a short ten minute swim in the canal which left me breathless, queasy, coughing and with a croaky voice. The Ironman omens were not good.

I hadn't been feeling well for most of the week. My malady started at around the same as time the radar went into meltdown at Dublin Airport on Wednesday. By some miracle our flight to Munich was one of the very few to get out that day; albeit many hours late and after being flagged as cancelled on the departure lounge monitors. The knock-on effect meant we arrived at our small hotel close to Roth at three on Thursday morning. Unable to rouse the proprietor, myself, the missus Eimear and my brother Fergus (who was also racing) were forced to spend the rest of the night in the car.

Race morning was a miserable morning. It lashed as we drove the ten miles to the swim start. It lashed as we lined up for our wave to start. I think it lashed as we swam, it was certainly lashing as I ran for my bike. It lashed as I shouted to a rain soaked Eimear on the sideline that I couldn't get into the big cog (too much time tinkering with the bike and not riding it). It was lashing as the chain shot off the end of the cassette on the first big hill and as I got off and fumbled to get it back on. Not only was the rain biblical, it was freezing. The cold was too much for Macca who climbed off his bike. It's lucky I didn't meet Fergus at any point on the first lap as I think we both would have agreed to call it a day and go for a coffee – possibly even something stronger.

I was a little amused to see five thousand euro Pinarello time trial machines amongst others, ridden by bronzed Germans, (with physiques that had the look of been hewn from marble at the hand of Michelangelo) wearing baggy anoraks with hoods trailing behind. The hoods and coats were like parachutes negating all and more of the aero advantage that their money and magnificently oversized aero helmets had bought.

Although the weather didn't, my mood lightened. The enthusiasm of the rain soaked crowd was infectious. Thousands of them cheered us up the hills oblivious to the weather. They were literally in your face willing you up the hills faster than you

probably should. The first time up the Solarer Berg, despite the pain the crowd brought a large grin to my face. The second time up I remembered to wipe the snot off and make myself a little more presentable. I even managed to manhandle the chain back into the big ring outside of the hills.

I knew my swim did not go well. It hasn't been good of late and consequently I did not expect to catch Trevor Woods or Mark Riseley (the other two Irish who started in my wave on the bike). I know Mark won't mind me saying this, but when I came upon him going up the Solarer Berg on the second lap, it gave me a great boost. And then to pass Trevor a little later – well I knew for me anyway - the race was now on. The lads are both very strong runners and I knew I had very little chance of holding them off in the marathon. Still, I decided to put the hammer down in an effort to get a few minutes head start on the run –you never know. I flogged myself for the last 10k on the bike and managed to get through transition and out before anyone I knew came in off the bike.

I have been running well in training, a good deal quicker over my standard training runs than I have been in previous years. I put much of my improvement down to the fact that my only bike up to recently had become rather decrepit. I began to tire of stopping every now and again to pick up various bits that had fallen off. All moving parts are badly corroded and it just became too unpleasant to ride – so usually, when I should be cycling I would just go for a run instead.

I felt good at the start of the marathon. My chest was still not right but my legs felt fresh. I decided to throw caution to the wind and just go for it. My aim was to get to the next timing mat where it would be electronically recorded for posterity (well in my mind anyway) that I led Trevor Woods and Mark Riseley at the five kilometre mark in the marathon. Then when there was no sign of them or anyone else overtaking I would put the head down and go for the next mat. What ever happened I would be able to say I held them off for ten kilometres. And so it went on, I was pushing harder than ever in the marathon, I was enjoying the gravelly surface under foot, it was easy on the joints, the rain had even stopped, it was cool but I was definitely loving it. Of course it still hurt. As we went on part of me was wishing for the inevitable and that the lads would catch me. Then I could relax, but then another smaller part of my subconscious began to think - maybe! I caught up with a very large and entertaining German who approved of my pace and fell in behind. He seemed to know everyone on the course who gave him great encouragement and he passed some of it on to me. He was good company. Then the grumblings down below began.

My quandary now is whether to put up with the discomfort for as long as possible and maybe even make it to the finish before it gets too severe. Thankfully, at the first turnaround and before I have to make an undignified dash for one of the canal banks, we reach an aid station. I spy two strategically placed portaloos and peel off the course. The first is engaged, the second, occupied by an elderly spectator who foolishly forgot to lock the door and after practically reefing him out of it and struggling out and in of my tri-suit the matter is resolved. Back in the race I begin to pick off some people I had already passed and eventually catch up with and go past my German friend. His girlfriend who had been cycling ahead a couple of kilometres

is alarmed to see me on my own but seems reassured when I mime that he was still looking good and not too far behind.

The first person I recognise coming the other direction is Fergus. He's running well and I surmise that because he started in a later wave, Mark and Trevor must be somewhere in between. I must have missed the others passing in the opposite direction when I was in the loo or at a short section where the out and back sections separate momentarily. Wherever they are exactly they can't be far.

I get my first sight of Mark at the second turnaround point with just 10k to go. Dam he is running well and going up hill! No sign of Trevor though. It's hard to judge distance at this stage in a race but I am sure Mark is only a few 100 meters behind now. To be honest my heart sinks. I have held them off for over thirty kilometres, nobody has passed me all day since the swim finish and now it looks like the one person to do it will be a fellow countryman. But there is only ten kilometres to go – surely I can pick it up for one more final effort. I dig deep and daren't look back.

Two kilometres to go and I hear footsteps closing in. About bloody time too, what kept you Mark? I curse him for giving me false hope, he has been toying with me all day but now at least I can relax and enjoy the final few kilometres in peace. There is no pat on the shoulder, no "well done", no "great race Alan", none of the sportsmanship I have known from Mark in the past. I look over my shoulder and this dark figure, one of the Kenyan relay team runners streaks past. Wow! What poetry. He makes me feel clumsy and awkward. I watch with some relief as he quickly disappears out of sight. It's quiet again and now I begin to realise I just might make it to the line as the first Irishman and with a couple of notable scalps to boot!

I can barely raise a hand to high five the kids as I run up the finishing chute. The clock says 9:57. I didn't wear a watch so it's the first time I have seen all day. I am very pleased to have broken ten hours, that makes five out of five sub 10 hour Ironmans. Then I remember having started in the third wave - there may be some time to knock off that. Mark's girlfriend Una is the only face I recognise at the finish line. She tells me I can take forty minutes off that time. She does the sums for me as my head isn't working properly. 9:17 that would make it a PB. I am not sure, but possibly a new Irish Ironman record too!

As another monsoon sets in out on the course, I catch up with Trevor in the warm down area. He had to drop out after twenty kilometres of the marathon with a knee problem. Trevor confirms I have broken his record by a minute. I can't believe it – my official splits show a relatively slow swim of 1 hour 5 minutes, a 5 hour bike - slower than I would have been aiming for on a fine day. But it was the run split of 3 hours 6 minutes that got me the record, eighteen minutes better than anything I have run before.

I must thank everyone who cheered us all on in the rain in Roth, particularly Eimear Aoife, Tony, Una, Angie, Paul and Brian. If I wasn't being pushed all the way by the lads behind, particularly Mark Riseley, who recorded a big PB himself, I doubt I would have got anywhere near Trevor's record.

