

I wasn't looking for a midlife crisis, but...



The sun has come up over the mountains. It was a warm night. I didn't sleep too well. I had things on my mind. It's five a.m. and I'm outside my hotel overlooking the lake. Some faint sounds bounce across the water from the start area. Gaunt figures pass by with wetsuits slung over shoulders. We nod but say nothing. Ironman Austria is two hours away.

I begin the walk down to the start. It's time to get focused. Taking out Eimear's iPod I scroll through the play lists to one named *Ironman Zone*. Carl Orfs's *Carmina Burana* kicks off in my head. My pace quickens.

I wasn't looking for a midlife crisis, but a trip to Kilkee a few years ago to watch my younger brother Fergus do a triathlon, somehow led to both of us entering Ironman Austria last year. Now as I'm about to turn forty and should have more sense, I find myself back again. I'm not alone. Today, along with 2,500 others, including 20 Irish, I face a 3.8km swim, 180km cycle and then a marathon. It's daft of course, but

similar numbers including 20 Irish competed in Ironman Switzerland last week. It will be the same again in Germany next week and at many other races around the world.

Arriving at the bike Jim Morrison's *LA Woman* arrives in my head. "*Driving down your freeway...*" By now my pulse is racing. Violent involuntary nods of the head and a sinister whispered singing, suggest I am now fired up for this race. "*Cops in cars, the topless bars...*" No shrinking violet me. I'm not going to start the swim from the side but right slap bang in the middle of the pack. Heads are going to roll.

"*Mr. Mojo rising, Mr. Mojo rising...*"

Just as my bicycle pump is about to melt under the pressure I pull the valve from the tyre. STOP! This is madness. I'm supposed to be calm. I reach for the iPod. Now I scroll to the file *Ironman Calm*. As Springsteen gently extols the virtues of the city of brotherly love, I take one last look at the bike. It's ready. All my food and drink is stashed around the frame. It looks good. It looks fast. It is fast, probably too fast

for me. I have to be honest, I am a little worried about the bike. It's not mine. It's Fergus's. It's a hornet of a bike, cast in carbon, with handle bars modelled on the F-117 Stealth Fighter, not to mention a solid disk rear wheel borrowed from Peter the German. I dread to think of the value of what they have trusted me with. What are the chances of crashing? Quite high actually. This is not the first bike Fergus has loaned me for a race. I wrote off his last one. My metamorphosis from an overweight, ex smoking TV sports fan to a four stone lighter, endurance "athlete" has not been without pain.

I meet Eimear and hand back her iPod. By now my pulse has dropped right down. I slip into my wetsuit effortlessly. A well greased freshly shaved body facilitates this. I am still not comfortable with leg shaving. A heavily accented "three minutes to start" booms out. Eimear gives me a kiss good luck and I head for the water. Thousands of spectators line the jetties where sponsors' logos compete for a view of the carnage to come. The skies

are full with balloons and media helicopters - but no clouds. It's going to be a hot day; a long day; a very interesting and sore day; a great day.

I join the human soup and make my way gingerly over to the edge of the pack. UMPF! Someone has kicked me in the nose. I apologise to them. Where is your Mojo now eh? I pine for the iPod. The cannon goes BOOM!!

Aghhhh!!! Shit...here we go!

Instantly the water turns to foam. Head up. I can't see anything other than flailing limbs. Nothing to do but follow the feet in front. BANG! POW! I take quite a few blows, some of them accidental, others a little more directed. My head gets jammed under a torso and I miss a couple of breaths. I pop up like a hooker from a scrum. After what seems about twenty minutes we make a left turn around a



large inflatable buoy. Everyone takes the shortest possible line and things get vicious. It should improve once rounded. It doesn't. A canoeist shouts. He is pointing towards another marker away off to our right. We have all overshot. The canoes work together like dolphins chasing a shoal of startled herring and push us back on course.

Eventually we leave the lake and its crystal clear waters behind and swim the final eight hundred metres up a narrow canal. The water here is shallow and muddy from those that have gone before kicking up sediment. Pondweed floats by. Every time I turn to breathe my left ear breaks the

surface and I hear the crowds that line the banks and bridges encouraging us on.

At last I look up and there is the finish. A hand comes down and plucks me from the water. It is good to be perpendicular again. The clock flashes 1 hour 3 minutes - better than I expected. My cycle gear is hanging in one of many numbered bags on many numbered racks outside the changing tent. Mine stands out, thanks to the green ribbon Eimear has attached. Without stopping I grab it and run inside.

Wetsuit off, then goggles and cap. Shades on, grab helmet and go. Oh, and your race number belt. Don't

forget the number belt. I can't get my helmet on. What's happened to my head overnight? The helmet won't fasten. I feel around. The pointy bit is facing backward. That's right, isn't it? It's Fergus's helmet. Of course it's right. I begin to panic. I start bashing it with my fist. It goes on, but nearly slices my ears off. A little dizzy now; an easy run to the bike is called for. Slow deep breaths. Calm down. On the bike I feel I am clipping along. Without a speedometer I can't be sure, but I am passing quite a number of cyclists.

Today I will burn close to 9,000 calories and will need to replace these by eating every twenty minutes. My bill of fare is Mini Lion Bars, changing



to energy gels for the marathon, or sooner if my stomach starts to reject the chocolate. The gels, handed out by volunteers, come in handy squeezable sachets. They boast exotic fruit flavours that bear no resemblance to the revolting goo inside. I tolerate them because they put a lot of calories into the system, quickly.

Up ahead, a group are working as a team. They share the load of cycling at the front into the wind. Considerable energy savings are to be had cycling this way. But it's not allowed. Ironman is not merely a race. It is meant to be an individual test of endurance and spirit. I get angry. That's not good. It's a waste of energy; energy better spent spinning the pedals. With a press of the thumb, CLANK! the chain jumps into the smallest cog. The sound is amplified by the disk wheel and brings out the boy-racer I did not know was in me. Another Lion Bar, a sip of water and a couple of deep breaths. I begin to reel them in. Momentum is mine as I whip out to the left and overtake. I try not to let the effort show on my face. As I go by, I turn my head and roar... "You Cheating Cheating Bastards!" I feel better. A few try to come with me, but I have the jump and get clear.

The bike course is two laps. The hills are steep but not too long. The crowds on the roadside give great encouragement and I get over the tops in good shape. The strong headwinds make the descents slower than they

could be. I'm not complaining. After about two and a half hours I head back into Klagenfurt town finishing the first lap. I feel good and the chocolate is still going down.

Crossing one of many timing mats around the course, a chip strapped to my ankle sets off a beep. My progress is recorded and uploaded instantly to the internet. I have no idea of my position but family back in Skerries, should be fully aware of how things are progressing. I hope they text the news to Eimear. You can wait for hours for someone you know to pass- blink and miss them. I steel myself for another lap.

It's a wonderful feeling, after six hours of racing to turn off the bike course. Hitting the brakes, I swing my right leg deftly over the saddle and the bike is taken from me. I'm running barefoot towards the changing tent. It seems I have grown two extra pairs of knees. They don't all bend in the same plane. My progress is slow, but it gives me time to notice the bike park is still quite empty. Not too many in ahead of me. Encouraging indeed, but it does little to resolve the multiple knee problem.

Helmet off. Hat, runners on and I'm running again. It's mid afternoon now and thirty degrees. The banner heralding the start of the marathon kindly reminds me of the 42km ahead. The legs are heavy but my normal running action is returning. I settle into

a routine of grabbing a gel as I run through each drinks station, biting the top off and squirting the vile contents straight down my throat, trying not to taste any as it passes through. This is followed by any water that does not spill down my front from the paper cups. Then comes the wet sponge inside the hat and on the back of my neck.

I am running with a group of serious looking athletes, at what seems a nice pace. One enquires as to my age. We are both in the 35 to 39 category. He seems concerned that I may be competition for a Hawaii slot. Hawaii is home to the world championships. Entry is reserved for the top aged group athletes in qualifying races. We watch each other's every move. I think his breathing sounds rough. He starts to wheeze. He is feeling the pace and beginning to struggle. I have broken him. Coughing and spluttering, he pulls away as I go backwards. I'm in trouble. I feel dizzy, light headed. I'm overheating, nauseous and my stomach is cramping. I need to stop. I refuse to. My run is now a shuffle. I have 32km ahead and that scares me. Then it occurs to me, I have not been to the toilet for seven hours and I have drunk a lot of fluid. I desperately need to go. I can't see anywhere discreet to stop. But if I do stop, will I be able to start again? I won't stop. It is after all a race. My decision is made.

Luckily there are no runners or



spectators near me. It's not an easy thing. It requires concentration and for thousands of years of evolution to be psychologically stripped away, but once started there is no stopping. I am struck by how hot the flow is - well above normal body temperature. I realise now that since I have had this large reservoir of hot fluid inside me, all efforts to cool down have been pointless. The torrent dwindles. The effect is instant. My core temperature is dropping. The other ailments have subsided, I am now a little lighter and may even have cured my athlete's foot problem. My pace picks up again and now I know I will finish.

I see Eimear who brings me news from Skerries. I am the leading Irishman. Coming out of the water 515th and after a 4 hours 57min bike I started the marathon 128th overall. Realising that I am the first Irish person ever to break five hours for the bike, I attempt a little skip and continue on.

A green singlet has just passed at speed. There's a lot of green here today, 200 Mexicans are taking part. A presidential salute and parade down main street Mexico City saw the team off. I like their style, but this was a different shade of green. I suspect I'm now the second Irishman on the road.

The excitement of finishing dulls all pain. From a few kilometres out the roar of the crowd at the finish can be heard. Turning into the home straight that roar is now for me. Cheerleaders salute, balloons, TV cameras and I catch my beaming face on a giant screen. My name is announced. I float along and raise my cap to thank the supporters who have been there all day, who will be there at midnight to see the last athlete home. It is to thank Eimear, Fergus and Peter the German who got me here. It was to thank everyone in Skerries. This is why I do this and I am grateful that I can. This is very special. I cross the line and the clock shows 9hrs 32mins 12secs, 79th finisher. Just six minutes outside the Irish record. I don't believe it. Not bad for an aulfella. Next year I must take this seriously.

Inside in the warm-down area I shower and think it best to keep my gear, including runners on. It's while I'm having a few sandwiches that the owner of the green top introduces himself. Eunan Quinn a Donegal man, he has just set a new Irish record of 9hrs 25mins.

Two weeks after Ironman Austria, registration for next year's race had closed. 100 Irish have entered. Alan plans to be there again.

The Irish record was broken the following weekend at Ironman Germany and now stands at 9 hours 19 minutes.

Chaos Media & Print are currently putting the finishing touches to a documentary following four Ironman novices, including Alan and his brother Fergus as they prepared for their first Ironman last year.

