

Art O'Neill Challenge – Race Report

“You’ll be grand”, he said, when I expressed major concerns about completing the Art O'Neill Challenge to Paul Tierney. That was the 20th October last year. I was in final prep for the last adventure race of the season, and Paul himself had gone into ‘retirement’ after a remarkable performance at Gaelforce. The rest of the year was looking very civilised indeed for me, with plans for MNM, running speed sessions, perhaps a half marathon in early December, Strength and Conditioning, and handy Sunday cycle spins to build up for the following year. What’s the word I’m looking for? Oh yea, recovery! Alas, it was not to be.

Obviously, with such a short preparation time, and coming from a low mileage base, there were lots of tough and painful training sessions, but I want to say at the outset, that I enjoyed every minute of every session with the team. Those that trained with us for the Killarney Adventure Race will remember the craic we had up the mountains over the summer, and we had as much if not more fun preparing for AON – just over longer distances!

For communication between us, we had a Facebook forum made up of myself, Paul, Kieran, Dean, Stephen, Martin and Brendan, later joined by coach STL and later again by Peter. To say it was a no holds barred, robust and full and frank medium is the understatement of the century. We picked each other up when we were down, discussed everything from shoes and socks, to navigation, pace, nutrition and transition strategy, and shared gear and equipment, concerns, good days and bad days, and everything in-between. It brought us together, and got us through it.

For the challenge itself, it helps to think of it as two separate races, a 30k road run, followed by a 23k mountain hike / run, and that’s how we trained for it. From my perspective, I quickly built up to 28k on the road, and we paired that with team sessions up Keeper Hill or out in Ballycuggeran, sometimes by day, and sometimes at night. My biggest training day came un-expectantly, on the 20th December. We (Paul, Martin, Stephen, and myself) started off with a fairly hilly 16k road run from the ULAC over to the other side of the river and back to the cars, and were having a quick bite to eat when Paul announced that we were not coming back to the cars until we had a full marathon distance completed – another 26k – up the mountains. The three lads, all way fitter than me, really dragged me around that day. When we got back to near where the cars were parked, we had only done a little over 40k, so Paul led us on a couple of laps of the park to notch up the 42.2k, completing my first ever marathon distance, finishing by the bottle banks just down from the ULAC. I bought myself a bar of chocolate on the way home. If I had known in advance, I wouldn’t have turned up that day, but in hindsight, it was an important stepping stone and confidence builder. It probably gives a sense of the scale of the AON event, when you need to cover marathon distance to train for it!

As part of the preparation, we did a recce of the second part of the course twice over the Christmas period. The first time, we had just started, it was very cold, and we were already weary from the drive to get to the start point. We passed a few walkers coming our way, and they casually asked where we were heading to. “Glenmalure”, Paul shouted over his shoulder back to them, referring to the end point, 25k away. “What!” exclaimed a shocked walker. My heart sank – what had I let myself in for? The two trips were very helpful, in learning how to navigate, how to break down the stages and most importantly for me, identify the point at which you know you have beaten the course. There is a point in every race where you just know you will make it home when you get to that place, and you can then burn whatever energy you have left in getting to the finish. For me in this event, it was hitting the fire road after the forest, with a couple of kilometres to go. There is still a bit of work to do, but psychologically the feeling of success starts to creep in ever so slightly, however, when we

hit there on the Saturday morning of the challenge itself, things turned out to be not quite so straightforward.

One of the things we needed to finalise was who would work together, and it ended up that Brendan, Kieran, Dean, Peter and myself formed a sub-group. We sought each other out just after the race started, formed a small team, and stuck together for the rest of the race. There were times when each of us was suffering or struggling, and each time we re-grouped. We were never more than a few feet from each other for the entire race. That brought its own pressures, as we each had a responsibility to the team to keep moving forward, but this was just part of the challenge. The race is broken into three sections, with walkers, hybrid walk / runners and ultra-runners, and each group started an hour apart. It took us some time before we caught up to the earlier groups, and there was a great camaraderie with the other participants as we passed them, us with a word of encouragement for them, and them for us. The event really is run in a very positive spirit among all the people involved, and it makes it such a great one to be part of.

When the start gun went, it was great to belt out of Dublin Castle at 2am with the lads. We held a solid pace, as instructed☺, and bowled into checkpoint 1, after 30k, one minute ahead of schedule, after 3 hours 14 minutes. We were on the clock to change shoes, pick up food and get going, and we did this in around 11 minutes – a bit longer than we planned. We motored on again, running to the point where the mountain begins in earnest, and continued our ascent. I had my chicken wrap with me to eat, but I just wasn't hungry – I don't know why, but I just couldn't eat it, and I ended up dumping most of it in the bin at checkpoint 2. After checkpoint 1, you are on your own to navigate over the open mountain to the next point, 10k away, in complete darkness. We did well here, and made it in about 2 hours, having a well-earned porridge on arrival – oh the little things. There was red bull available, but I was afraid to go near it! I commented to the person serving the porridge that it was the nicest I had ever tasted – he said that he reckoned it had a lot to do with making us travel 40k for it. Fair point I thought!

We only hung around for about 9 minutes at the second and final checkpoint, and we continued yet another ascent, heading in the direction of Art's Cross. It was a brand new day, and the team were feeling good. By this stage, most of us had various niggles, but the aid station renewed us, and we collectively decided to crack on, and get home. After a short cut across a felled forest track, we arrived out on to a fire road, and we picked up the pace. It felt like a sprint, but I hope no video of it ever surfaces. We passed a couple of lads, wishing them well of course, and although unsaid, I think that gave us all a boost that we were still passing people after more than six hours out on course.

For me, I thought the toughest part of the entire event was going to be the summit to Art's Cross – it is a steep climb, but mercifully short, so we made good progress, and we decided as a team to navigate to bypass it (it's a touchy subject, and if you want to get Paul going, ask him about it!), while using it as a marker to make sure we didn't get lost! It was great to pass the cross, and start the journey across the mountain top, towards the finish. At this stage, tiredness was kicking in, and we got a little waylaid with our navigation, but there were no major issues, and we got back on track, eventually arriving out on to the final fire road after a little over eight hours.

At that point, we got together and made three decisions. The first was that we would try to get home in less than eight and a half hours; the second was that we would not let anyone pass us, and the third was that we were going to finish together. For the five of us, the Art O'Neill challenge finished, and the Art O'Neill race began. We all train for it every week. We learn to push through the pain barrier, to keep going when the legs are burning and the brain is switching things off one by one. To say we were struggling at this stage is a fairly major understatement – but the adrenalin kicked in, and we again picked up the pace. Each took turns at the front, keeping us on track, we

constantly monitored the clock, ensuring that our target was maintained, and kept an eye over our shoulders to check that there was no one behind us! We passed over stones and small streams, down forest tracks and across bridges, ran, limped, fast walked, hobbled and mentally carried each other, motivating ourselves that we were almost home, covering the last click of the 53k in less than six minutes. We lined up beside each other, turned left at the final bend, and ran together across the river to the finish line, 8 hours 27 minutes, and a lifetime, after leaving Dublin Castle.

We were greeted at the finish line by all the other GoTri team members that had ploughed the way for us. Stephen and Martin had stuck together, and along with the Meskell brothers had posted excellent times, with Brian finishing an amazing 4th place overall. Unfortunately Paul was injured on the course, and had to withdraw after 40k. Indeed, of the 200 starters, more than 20 had to withdraw. We were all glad that Paul was not seriously injured, and is OK again – he will be back next year to compete for the title, no doubt.

There are so many stories that I could have told, of things that happened, things people said, experiences, and so on, and if you have been talking to any of us, you will likely have heard some already. The bus trip on the second recce, the taxi to the start line, Keeper Hill, the ups and downs of the race itself and the banter, but those are best delivered in person – I'll say no more!

I want to finish with two things. Firstly, thank you to Paul Tierney especially, and to all the lads – Kieran, Dean, Brendan, Peter, Martin, Stephen, Brian and John – it was a pleasure to train and run with you all, and to Stephan Teeling-Lynch for all the advice and guidance too.

Secondly, I want to wish Martin Carey all the very best in "The Race", in March. We had great fun with Martin during the training for AON, and many times he was the recipient of our jibes, all of us jealous of his youth, and abilities. He is a phenomenal athlete, a great character and will do great in Donegal, I have no doubt. Good luck buddy.

If you are looking for a challenge, I could not recommend the Art O'Neill Challenge highly enough. As for the answer to the question, would I ever do it again?