



Athenry AC Newsletter

Winter 2019

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Close Run Fields 10k

Hugh Armstrong of Ballina A.C beat perennial winner Mick Clohisey (Raheny) in the 2019 Fields of Athenry.

Only four seconds separated the two with times of 29:32 and 29:36 respectively. Con Doherty took bronze with 30:47.

City of Derry runner Breege Connolly was first woman home on 34:41, beating out Aoife Kilgallon, 36:24, and Eavan McLoughlin, 37:38, (both of Sligo AC).

Over 1500 entered the race. Details at redtagtiming.com.



Start of Fields of Athenry 10k with Hugh Armstrong (1388), Mick Clohisey (1), Con Doherty (1570). Breege Connolly (24) won the Women's race.

In This Issue:

Bernie Rogers and Sinéad Walsh did brilliant fundraising for three very deserving brothers by running their way through October. See their story [here](#).

Athenry stalwart Majella Cummins has agreed to bare

her soul with answers to the [20 questions](#).

Iain Shaw gives the lowdown on what happened in the juvenile section of the club with this [article](#).

Along with Kenneth's tale below, you can see photos on

the [Dublin Marathon](#), a 10-year anniversary training run we did in 2012, and a mention of our contribution to the [Athenry Christmas lights](#) along with Athenry AC [contact details](#).

Kenneth in the Highlands

Kenneth O'Hara has always had a grá for the adventurous races.

This year he went for one of the toughest, Braemar in the Scottish Highlands: an orienteering run that had 30 hours as the cut-off.

Unfortunately it was in August of 2019 and most of you will remember that month as

being exceptionally cold and rainy. Many flowers stopped growing it was so cold. And Scotland wasn't any better.

His report is definitely the longest we've ever seen in Athenry AC, even including the 24-hour and 100-mile runs done by a few. A fun read for those not participating! See [articles and photos](#).

Bernie & Sinéad Run 50 miles For “Join Our Boys”

3 races, 3 distances
 50 miles covered October 2019
 – Galway Bay half marathon
 – Cooney island, Sligo 10 mile
 – Dublin Marathon
 €1207 raised

By Bernie Rogers

As we were training for the Dublin Marathon anyway we decided to add in the other two races also and raise some money for a charity,

We decided to pick **Join Our Boys** as it meant a lot to both of us, Sinéad in fact has a cousin who passed away with the same



Sinéad Walsh, Bernie Rogers

illness some years back.



Team Archie at the Dublin Marathon



George, Sinéad with daughter Meabh, Archie, Bernie, Isaac

Archie, George, and Isaac are the three children of Paula and Padraic Naughton who live in Roscommon. On the 9th of November 2012 their lives and dreams were changed beyond comprehension.

A diagnosis of Duchenne's Muscular Dystrophy (DMD) is devastating. It is a 100% fatal, neuromuscular disease that affects 1 in every 3,500 boys and each year 20,000 children worldwide are born with DMD; 99% of these are boys.

There are no words to describe how it feels to learn that one of your precious children has a terminal illness which has no cure. Sadly for the Naughton family they have three children who are terminally ill. A diagnosis of DMD means that their children are unlikely to live beyond their late teens or early 20s.

Determined to fight for their boys, the couple set up a trust,

Join Our Boys, which aims to raise awareness of the disease, to work in collaboration and support registered charities funding research into Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy that aim to fund a treatment or cure into this devastating disease and ensure that the Naughton boys and

all the other children with DMD have whatever resources they require to keep mobile and live a life filled with purpose and meaning.

Over the month we raised €1207, far exceeding what we had targeted at, we would both like to thank all of you who donated to this fund and it has been much appreciated by the Naughton family, last week



With Archie at the Dublin Marathon

we sent a cheque for the above amount. In January we will be having an official night organised by the Join Our Boys team and we will be meeting up with the boys,

Thanks again to everyone

Sinéad and Bernie

Note: Sinéad is a sister of Kieran and Fergal Walsh.



Dublin Marathon 2019

Photographs by various

20 Questions: Majella Cummins

I'm from Derrydonnell near where I now live. I was never sporty in my life but about nine years ago I convinced my two sisters to run Galway bay 10K. We didn't know there was such a thing as a 5k, we had that little running knowledge. So we trained a bit with bad runners, not having a clue what we were doing and we all finished it. I think I did it in 54 minutes, it took me a long time to better it. So I'm running since. I've run Dublin seven times in a row, I keep telling my family to remind me not to do it again but then I forget the hardship and sign up again. My sisters never ran again. I only run for the sanity and the day out and rice krispie buns if Marguerite is driving. Marguerite, Donna, and Caroline are the ones that tolerate my waffle most of the time.



1. What shoes do you train in?

Brookes Adrenaline GTS.

2. How many miles did you run last week?

9.5 miles. Leisurely post marathon ones.

3. What's your favourite racing distance?

8k.

4. Where is your favourite place to train?

The Canaries whenever possible but Athenry with good company is great too.

5. What's your favourite race or event each year?

Probably the Streets of Galway, great buzz to it.

6. What annoys you most about races?

Lack of tea at the finish!!

7. What race that you haven't run would you most like to do?

Sea to Summit triathlon.

8. What's your best ever running performance?

Well I had a great run in the Athenry half that was on in Monivea. One of those days that you just love to run.

9. What was your worst ever running performance?

Achill Quest, sliding down a mountain in the rain, landing in bog holes, losing any interest in anything about that race.

Apart from that, well there's no performance so great that anyone of them is the worst!!

10. What's the strangest thing you've seen on a training run?

I can't think of anything unless I make it up.

11. What is your favourite piece of running gear?

Someone to talk to!

12. Who would you most enjoy beating in a sprint finish to the line?

Caroline Freaney, but it would only happen if I tripped her up.

13. What was the best bit of training advice you were ever given?

Someone once told me to say decades of the rosary when you're at the desperate stage running a marathon. Yes I've done it, around mile 20 when I'm wondering why I'm doing something so crazy.

14. In 10 year's time, will you still be running?

Hopefully. I'm hoping I'll get to an age where all the fast ones will have arthritis and I'll win something.

15. If for some reason you were told you could never run again, how would you react?

I would be very upset. Running keeps me sane and its free therapy when you're ranting on to your running friends.

16. Have you ever been bitten by a dog while running?

I'm glad to say I haven't but there is a terrier in Mulpit that tries his best.

17. Have you ever had to stop for an emergency "Paula" during a race?

I'm glad to say not yet.

18. What is your favourite post-race food?

Fruit cake (the Oxford Lunch kind), tea and a glass of Merlot.

19. Your most embarrassing ever running-related moment?

Too embarrassing to say.

20. In your opinion, who is the greatest Irish athlete of all time?

At the moment, Sinéad Diver is incredible, achieving what she has while still working fulltime with kids and only running for 10 years.

Juvenile Club 2019

by Iain Shaw

It was a mixed year for the juvenile club both on and off the field. For reasons beyond our control we had to 'up sticks' and move our training base away from Raheen where we have trained for a number of years and have now settled at Lisheenkyle National School



Seán Doggett (from John O'Connor)

where we have access to a great set of facilities.

We also lost some of our older age juveniles, mainly to GCH, where they are testing the hypothesis that the grass is greener on the other side. To each and everyone one of those athletes, we genuinely wish you all the luck in your athletic endeavours and hope that the excellent athletic foundations laid down at Athenry



Alice Church (John O'Connor)

AC serve you well.

We are encouraged though in the growth of the club, particularly at the younger ages and the number of additional volunteers and coaches now helping at the club. As always, the club could do with more help, and you will be welcomed with open arms.

The year starts with the indoor competition, and 34 juveniles took to the AIT Arena for the Galway Indoor Championships, with many of them experiencing their first-ever taste of athletics competition. Every athlete came away having put in maximum effort and gave an excellent account of themselves. Seán Doggett finished with a brace of medals in the 800m and 60mH and came agonisingly close to a third, finishing fourth in the 60m. There was a real family affair in the shot put with brothers Aidan and Liam Shaw taking medals along with dad, Iain taking gold in the M35 category.

The indoor season then moved onto the Connacht Indoors that serves as a qualifier for the National finals. The competition is stiff at this level and the club fielded 15 athletes. There were 4 medals taken home, and 5 athletes went forward to compete for the club at the National finals (Eoin Hannon, Seán Doggett, Liam Shaw, Leonore Church and Aoibhe Deeley). At the national final, Liam Shaw took silver in the shot put, missing out on gold by the width of a shot.

As spring turns into early summer, Dangan calls, and the Galway Outdoors. This year the competition boasted its biggest ever field across the county and the club fielded a small but competitive team. Double gold

for Cian McNelis including a County record at 800m and triple gold for Liam Shaw were the stand out performances on the day. Just 4 of our athletes went forward to the Connacht outdoors, with Liam Shaw completing another triple gold performance. Liam was also our sole medallist at the National finals taking gold in the shot put with a new national record. The competition turned out to be one of the finest displays of juvenile shot putting in Ireland for many years with the national record being broken no fewer than 13 times. This performance has now raised a considerable amount of attention nationally in Liam as an athlete.



Liam and Finn, Schools CE final

During 2019 Liam secured no fewer than 20 gold, 2 silver and 3 bronze medals, with 7 of those medals at National level. He also set 5 championship best performances and claimed 2 national records in the shot put and broke the AIT indoor stadium record over a dozen times, finishing the year with a 17m27cm throw in the Schools Combined Events.

As our athletes return to school after the summer break the days get shorter and the fields get muddier which can only mean one thing – cross country season. It was encouraging for the club to see so many of our

new recruits keen to try out the discipline at both Tuam and Loughrea and represent their



Áine O'Farrell (from John O'Connor)

club well. We were unfortunate not to bring home any team medals as everyone fought hard and gave it everything, a true display of athleticism from each and every competitor.

The club has a great history in cross country and has produced fine athletes over the years and this tradition continues with Áine O'Farrell and Seán Doggett. Seán is always found at the business end of a cross country race and this year took bronze in the Galway U15 competition, where he was



Under 10 BXC team

running out of age. He was 4th in the even age competition in a close-fought battle. In Connacht, illness ruled Seán out of the U14 race, but he came back strong for the U15 race,

battling hard around a very tough course. His 16th place finish at Connacht earned him a place on the County team for the National finals.

As seen throughout this report, Seán is an all-round fine athlete and he capped off his track and field year with a fine win in the Connacht Schools combined event championships. Áine set herself high targets this year and a fantastic 14th place finish in the National Junior Cross Country was an impressive achievement on a very technical and challenging course. Áine has recently taken the titles in both the County and Connacht junior titles along with the County Intermediate title. Unfortunately, this will be her last year with Athenry AC, as she is making a switch to Galway City Harriers for the 2020 season. The club wishes her well in her future running career.

So the sun sets on another athletics year for Athenry AC, a somewhat challenging year for the club with the loss of some of our coaches that have served the club well over the years and the loss of a number of our top athletes. The challenge of not having a home base is a struggle we have faced for many years now, but that has not stopped us developing juvenile talent that has gone on to represent the club at the highest levels including the Olympics and several World Championships.

It is hoped that over the next few years our own facilities will come on stream to allow us to have the home we all want and to provide the much-needed



Younger age team for Galway outdoors

training ground. Until then we will continue to train, wherever we can to provide an athletic base for as many young athletes as we can and to help them grow as athletes, develop a love for the sport and hope-



Dara, Mehidi, Eoin

fully encourage others to do the same. Medals are nice, but a big smile on the face at the end of a training session is worth more.



Bronagh (from John O'Connor)

As a final word, I want to thank all our fantastic coaches and the ever-growing bunch of volunteers we have, you are the lifeblood of what we do, without your sacrifices this club would not exist. See you all in 2020.



Athenry AC's been running for 10 Years and all I got was this Lousy T-Shirt!

10th year running from Church car park anniversary, November 2012 with other photos.

by Philip Magnier



Type II Fun* Run: Braemar

by Kenneth O'Hara

**"Type II Fun: An activity that was, in all honesty, a negative experience at the time, but on later reflection seems like it was a lot of fun".*

Having always liked the mountains and mountain running I've really taken a shine the last few years to events with a navigational aspect to them too. Local orienteering events hosted by Western Eagles are great fun and the kids also enjoy them which is great, but they are a bit on the short side at 4 – 6km long.



The Punchbowl

The annual Rogaine 6 hour score event (Setanta Orienteers) held in June every year in the Wicklow National Park is the perfect event in my view. It's long enough that it's tough without being completely soul destroying whilst also testing your navigational abilities with some real remote, open mountain locations and challenging terrain.

But having completed a few 6 hr events and with my navigation improving every year I was tempted to try out one of the longer events. Rogaine also has a 24 hour event whilst the Mourne Mountain Marathon has a great two day event but the problem with these events

is they are mandatory team events. Trying to find a willing team-mate in a club full of members with an aversion to anything unpaved is tough!! So when I

came across the **Type II Fun Run** (the official name) my interest was definitely piqued.

"There will be no set course, no feed stations, no support, no massage tent, no mercy. The race will be won by strategy, not chiefly by speed. Only skilled navigators and those with the ability to embrace discomfort will make it. 30 hours, a mix of mandatory and optional checkpoints..."

So a 30 hour navigational event set in the Scottish Highlands, solo participants allowed and it tied in nicely with my 40th birthday towards the end of August. A quiet mention at home to test the waters was met with 'Nice one, that sorts your birthday present'. Enough said. I signed up.

If I'm honest it was probably the first time I was a little bit nervous about an event. I'm very much of the persuasion 'try it and see, what's the worst that can happen' but this was a big step up. A new part of the world to me, night time navigation and the distance was reportedly a minimum of 85km, 30km longer than I'd previously run. But I had a little over three months to prepare so I was willing to give it a go.

Training went well over the summer. I got in some good mountain running on holidays



in Spain, some 7 and 8 hour runs in Connemara and Wicklow and another good performance in Rogaine, so confidence was rising. Typically

though I got sick at the start of August and ended up on antibiotics so went into the race a little undercooked, but as my goal was just to complete the race I was happy enough that I'd get around.

The race was being held in a Scottish village called Braemar in the Cairngorms National Park, near Balmoral Castle & Glenshee Ski Centre. Starting at 10.30am Saturday morning you had 30 hours to hit as many controls as possible. Each control was worth a certain amount of points depending on how difficult it was to reach (control points ranged from 5 – 50) so the person with the highest amount of points scored within the 30 hours was the winner.

Typically with these events you don't get your control point coordinates until the race starts and it's up to you to plot the controls on your map and figure out the best route between them to score as much as possible using just a map and compass, no GPS allowed. This event did it a bit differently as they wanted to try and encourage runners who wouldn't be the most confident at navigating to apply. A couple of days beforehand they released all the controls on Komoot, a navigational app which you could have on your phone and use as a guide. I felt this took

from the fun of it though and stuck with the map and compass but it was handy for studying the maps and plotting a route prior to the race started.

The Cairngorms National Park is a lovely spot. It's the largest park in the British Isles with some very remote locations and some of the highest peaks in the UK. Studying the possible routes in the run up to the race I had a feeling that peaks like Lochnagar (3,790ft) and Ben McDuì (4,295ft) would be included so I studied the maps around these areas religiously. Luckily I was right, Lochnagar was a mandatory control and Ben McDuì, the highest point of the course, was a 50 point control. Unluckily, these peaks were 30km apart as the crow flies, and the route between them was anything but straight (or flat). So it was going to be a tough day.

There were forty two controls including four mandatory ones which everyone had to hit in a particular order. Beforehand I felt this took from the variety of route choice available but I needn't have worried as everyone still had their own version of what the optimal route was.

One of the biggest worries I had going into the race was sleep deprivation. Would I try to sleep or just keep on trucking through? If I was going to sleep, where would I sleep? There are both's dotted around the area so these were an option if I could plan a route near some of them. Would I

come back to the base at the village hall and get a kip there?

Once the controls were released and I figured out a route for myself the choice became

obvious. For me I felt there were two distinct loops which could take in a high number of controls without too much wasted mileage (unnecessary doubling back on yourself) or wasted climbing (when you're up, stay up. If you come down,

stay down). Once I was up high I would try and stay high until I absolutely had to descend and then I would stay low again as long as possible. Whilst the

shortest route was sometimes straight up and over a mountain, with 30 hours of racing I wanted to mind the legs and reduce the climbing as much as possible. I was going to omit a small cluster of controls which were far to the south at the Glen-shee Ski Centre and another which

were far to the north in Tom-intoul. The benefit of this route choice too was it split the course in half with me passing back through the village in the middle. This would allow me take a break if needed.

I arrived over on the Friday and took a drive around, getting a feel for the area and what some of the possible road / trail crossings looked like. My big task for the day though was to check the river below the

village and see what the water level was like. My route choice had me crossing this river at the start and finish of Leg 2. By using the river it allowed me

collect an out of the way control called the Punch-bowl at the Linn of Quinch and avoid a 6 mile trek to the nearest bridge crossing.

The river was about 20m wide and was very deep and fast flowing in

parts but after a bit of wandering I found a bend where the current had formed a berm of gravel and I reckoned I could take a diagonal line across where it would be just over knee deep. I just hoped I wouldn't have to do it at night.

Job done I headed back to the B&B to rest my legs, get my gear ready and study and ponder over my route choice for the hundredth time.

Saturday morning dawned to the sound of the promised heavy rain. I had left home the day before to a yellow rain warning along the west coast of Ireland and it had made its way to Scotland by Saturday morning. That was one gear selection made for me, I was starting out with my heaviest rain jacket (I brought 5 different ones to cover all eventualities!).

As I was staying two minutes from the village hall I could take my time and still arrive early for the race. There were some very apprehensive faces around but the mood was generally chirpy. There seemed to be a lot of solo entrants with a few teams involved too. A cou-



Linn of Quinch



Looking back East Lock Muich

ple of quick words from the organisers: up until 30mins before the off they still weren't sure if they could run it due to the bad weather conditions but they were going to give it a chance with a couple of changes to the route;



Looking West along the loch with Carn an t-Sagairt Mór in the distance

Lochnagar summit was no longer a mandatory control. Due to the bad weather they were not going to force anyone to mount any peaks. There were plenty of scoring opportunities without hitting any mountain tops. It was still a valid control if you wanted, just not mandatory. (It worked well with my route so I still intended on hitting it)

If anyone had intended crossing the river below the town this was now out of bounds as the river had risen over two feet during the night due to the rain. (Fleck that!)

So 10.30am hit and off we went in torrential rain. With 30 hours ahead of us it was a fairly subdued pace for a race start but a few of us took off running. My first loop saw me heading in an East-South Eastern loop towards Balmoral and down towards Loch Muick before heading up into the mountains to take in a few high peaks and then back down towards Braemar. It was approximately 35miles and I had allowed myself 14 hours for it due to the terrain and climbing involved.

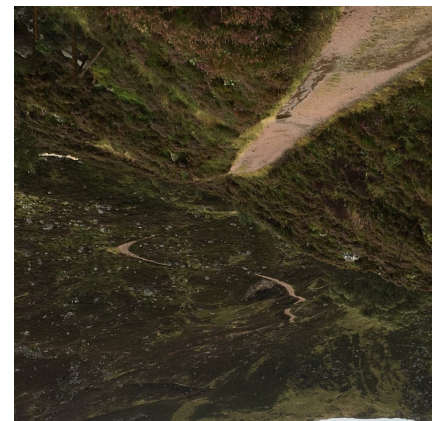
The first control, Creag Coinnich (1,755ft) was a peak on the edge of the village. A trail led from a small row of houses up through a forest to a point overlooking the village. It was a small 5 pointer but I always like to get points on the board early, if for no other reason than to boost the confidence. It was a steep climb and although raining heavily was quite muggy too. It wasn't long before I was soaked through and I had no idea if it was from rain or sweat.

Control 1 was hit fairly quickly (20 mins) and was followed by a dodgy, slippery descent through high ferns, down to a forest trail which should bring me to the main road. On the decent I fell in with a group of two other solo competitors and we tagged along for a while. Hitting the main road we were confronted with a high fence which wasn't indicated on the maps and which we had no hope of climbing over. It didn't make sense to turn back and the forest ground was too rough to travel along the inside of the fence so the only option we had was to use a small river flowing under the road nearby. The fence crossed over the river at ground level so by jumping down into the river we could get under the fence. Not normally what you'd like this early in the race but we were soaked through anyway so it didn't really matter.

We had a mile on the road before cutting back into the forest where we split up on the various trails. I knew from here it was another 7 miles to the next control at the Royal Lochnagar Distillery in the grounds of Balmoral Castle and there were many different trails and junctions between so I needed to concentrate. But the rain was heavy and it was a pain to get the map out in that weather so I kept heading in a general Eastern direction when hitting

a junction. Also, there were so many trails in the forest that weren't on the map it was near impossible to keep track of where you were. Luckily I could use the surrounding peaks and river crossings as guides to keep a rough eye on where I was.

As it was relatively early in the race I was still coming across groups of runners. I'd run with them for a while but eventually would push on. The conversation typically involved some version of 'So much for waterproof f**king jackets!', no matter the brand nothing was keeping the water out today. An interesting point too, even in a race like this where I had no hope in my head of competing I was still ticking off each runner as I passed them. That competitive nature doesn't disappear too easily!



Broad Cairn

As I neared Balmoral and hit some wider forest roads I was passed a couple of times by some big Range Rovers, wondering in my mind was Elizabeth around. And quietly hoping it wasn't Prince Philip given his recent mishaps with Range Rovers.

The control was located within the grounds of the castle so I planned on taking one of the back entrances to cut out a big trek around to the front gate. But as I approached the gate a Range Rover appeared behind me, 'Afraid, you're not going

that way mate'. It turns out that Queenie was in residence and the grounds were on lock down, this was her private protection who travel with her. I was the fourth person they had to stop and they were trying to contact the organisers to arrange an alternative control.

I had no choice but to go the long way around and arriving at the front gate was met with some local Bobbies who were having a good laugh at the whole thing. I heard later that one of the earlier runners was lucky not to have been shot at when he jumped a wall and tried to get through the forest before being stopped. A new control point was agreed at the main gates and the local Bobbies decided to hang around and show the runners where to "dib".

Thankfully at this point the sun had come out and it was getting warm. I had spare clothes in my bag but didn't want to put them on too early as if they got wet I had nothing to wear later. I decided to wring out the water from my t-shirt and tie my jacket around my waist to try and dry it. God knows what the Royals would have thought had they looked out and seen lads stripping off at their gates.

So the first mandatory (20 pointer) control was hit and this is where the real route choice begun. I decided to keep low and head for the eastern end of Loch Muick, collecting some low level controls before

heading up my first Munro (Peak over 3,000ft) at Broad Cairn. Everyone had differing views though and some were taking a more direct route up the mountains although I felt that would have meant missing out on some easy points or else adding in some extra descending and re-climbing to get to them. My route was fairly straightforward in terms of navigation too which meant I could push on without worrying about too many junctions.

For the next 9 miles I was pretty isolated, the only other people I met were a group of scouts who were hiding under a bridge trying to shelter from the rain which had returned with a vengeance. But eventually I arrived into the Spittal of Glenmuick to a beautiful vista of the 2 mile long loch stretching out in front of me surrounded on three sides by towering mountains, the tops of which were hidden in the low cloud.

At this stage I was 17 miles and 4 hours into the race. Whilst the route so far definitely hadn't been flat the big climbs were now about to start. So spotting an old boathouse I took the opportunity of some shelter to get some solid food and a change of clothes, I didn't want to be wet heading up

onto the exposed areas. So far I'd been surviving on a few gels and nut bars but I'd packed some sandwiches just in case. I'd no idea how my stomach

would react to them after a few hours running but I was glad of some real food for a change.

Crossing the bridge over the River Muick and another 10 point control, I met another runner on the far side of the

loch, Jamie from Bowden in Scotland. We ran together for a while but he eventually pushed on and I was left on my own again. I was on a trail along the southern shore of the loch which was rising gently to the foot of Broad Cairn. It was a nice gravel path but as the ground around me got steeper the water running across the path turned into rivers in parts and the path was effectively washed away. Eventually I came to the foot of the Switch-back climb which was the start of over 2,000ft of climbing over the next 6 miles. I was happy though as this was another 5 point control and I was ticking them off nicely.

On the climb I could look North across the loch and see the peak of Lochnagar in the distance, fleeting in and out of the clouds, it seemed a long way away. After a long 3 mile slog I eventually crested the peak of Broad Cairn (3,274ft) and picked up another 15 point control. There were pretty well defined paths along the ridges up to this point so the under-foot conditions weren't too bad thankfully. It was now fairly exposed though and the



Lochnagar peeking through the clouds in the distance



Looking East from the upper slope of Cairn Bannoch

winds were pretty high. I was thankful I'd changed into dry clothes but although the rain had stopped I jumped in behind some big rocks to get some additional waterproof layers on to try and keep the wind from cooling me too



Looking South from the upper slope of Cairn Bannoch

much. It was also beginning to clear up now so I could see for miles, it was just peaks as far as the eye could see.

From here I had about 3 miles of a trek across the undulating ridge line between Broad Cairn and my next junction. The wind was strong and I was taken off my feet a few times with gusts. Thankfully it was a side wind most of the time which was tough going but when it turned into a head wind I was nearly at a standstill. Hitting the last slope up to Cairn Bannoch (3,314ft) the path finished and I had to climb the last 200ft up through a boulder field. It was tough going but the boulders were spread out enough that it wasn't too difficult. The areas with packed rock could be tricky though as you try to get a foothold whilst the wind was trying to blow you off your feet. The views from the peak were amazing with the clouds well and truly blown away for now and just below me a rainbow had formed over the Loch.

The paths had long ago disappeared so the compass was out again to keep me heading northwest through some boggy

ground towards Carn an t-Sagairt Mór where I had some decisions to make. Hitting the bottom of the climb, I'd hit the mid-point of a loop with Lochnagar 5km off towards the north east. It was a 20 pointer control, one of the highest points of the course at 3,790ft high and I'd intended on hitting it but was now having second thoughts. At this point I was 26 miles and over 6 hours in, the low cloud was back and the wind was still strong. Looking at the route over to Lochnagar on the map I'd have a 10k round trip on an exposed ridge with another 2,000ft of climbing involved. Given that I was already getting cold and hungry I decided to omit it and use the time to try and hit extra controls on the second loop later.

So I headed straight up the final 300ft steep climb to the peak of Carn an t-Sagairt Mór and a 15 point control. The cloud was thick here and visibility had dropped to about 20ft so I was completely dependent on the compass. It was rocky ground with no clear path but I just had to keep a steady north east bearing to the crest at 3,435ft. This was an eerie climb, the cloud had deadened any sound and the remnants of an old RAF jet which crashed here years ago appeared and disappeared through the moving clouds, lending a creepy feel to it. One good thing though was this was the high point of the loop for me. It was all downhill to the village from here.

Climbing down the far side turned out to be torturous. It was a boggy boulder field with hidden crevices everywhere. Getting a solid footing was tough and was really slow going and I had a few nasty falls. It feels it took an age to cover the next mile down and across the valley floor to where I knew I could pick up a trail down to the main road.

Picking up the trail I knew it should be downhill/ flat all the way for the next 7 or 8 miles so I tried to pick up the pace a bit. After another 3 miles of trail I hit Callater Stables, the bottom of the big descent and another 20 pointer mandatory control. I was getting fairly tired at this stage and craved real food. I couldn't stomach any more gels/ bars and just wanted something solid. I was 29 miles and 8 hours in and by my calculations I had another 6 miles to go to get back to Braemar. I remember spotting a chipper there the night before and for some reason salty chips popped into my head and that's what I wanted.

I tried to run but my legs were gone, there was just no energy there and they were in pain. The lack of real long mileage



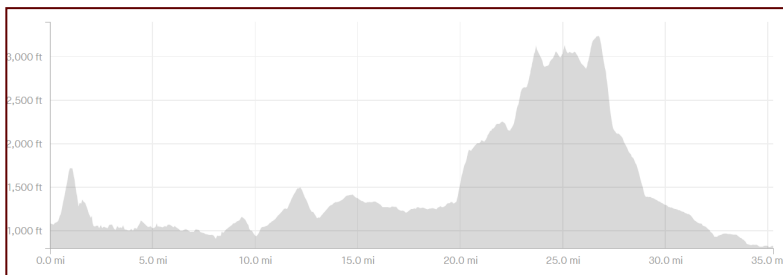
The rainbow is just about visible in the centre of the photo

was showing through now. I had planned on picking up another 5 pointer on top of the Morrone Viewpoint on the way back but as I got there and seen the climb needed for 5 points it definitely wasn't worth it and I definitely was in no shape for it. Thoughts of salty chips are all that kept me going but regardless of my numerous attempts to get running it took me nearly two hours to get through the final 6 miles. I just hoped the chipper would be open.

Shuffling back into the village I

passed some lovely looking restaurants and debated going in but reckoned I was too mucky and sweaty to even try and get in the door. I could see the lights on in the chipper and

me hanging around. I put on some fresh clothes, heavier this time as I was heading off for the night, got some fruit and sandwiches into me and off I went.

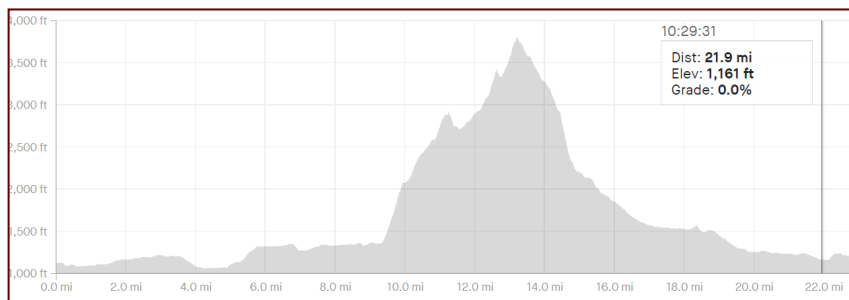


First 35 miles of the race

my hopes rose but as I reached the door the girl working there was just closing up and had turned off all the cookers. I think she saw the disappointment in my face (I reckon I looked fecking distraught!) so she offered to heat me up a pie. Anything was better than gels at this point so I gladly accepted. After hours of isolation and crap gels some tea, pie and a chat was heaven right now. The girl working there was a Geordie and came up for the summer to work and save money for Uni. She was great for the local gossip and was telling me about the billionaire owner of the fancy hotel across the road which apparently had some famous Picasso paintings.

Afterwards I went back to the car, stripped out of the wet clothes and curled up on the back seat in a sleeping bag. I'd covered 35 miles in exactly 10 hours with 5,720ft of climbing and I felt every inch of it. I had no idea if I'd sleep given the caffeine gels I'd taken but after a while I dozed off. I'd parked up the end of a quiet car park but some other runners had a similar idea and after a while someone slamming a car door woke me and I decided to get up. I reckon I'd slept for just over a half hour and I'd had about a 2 hour break but there was no point in

I stopped off in the base at the village hall for a few minutes to check in and see how things were going. I was happy to see I was in the top ten in terms of scoring so far (about 40 entered). There were a few lads laid out on the floors trying to



2nd half of Kenneth's effort (watch reset itself to 0)

get some kip whilst one lad was cooking noodles on a little camping stove: park that idea for future! I got chatting to an English lad, Steve, who was getting ready to head out and we had a similar route planned so we left together at 11pm for the next leg.

It turned out neither of us were in peak fitness so to save the legs we decided on a quick march for a while. We got to chatting about fuelling for the race and he mentioned he stopped into one of the restaurants after Leg 1 for a big feed. Feck it! I should have realised they'd be well used to manky looking hikers.

Seeing as the river was too high to cross we now had a few miles on the road before reaching the Mar Lodge estate. This is a private estate which has some rental accommodation on it but more importantly it was accessed by a bridge over the river. Steve had planned to stick on the road all the way to the Linn of Dee where the road curved back over the river but I reckoned we could shave a few miles off by cutting through the estate. Luckily, with the Scottish 'Right to Roam' laws you can go just about anywhere. The estate was unlocked so we cut in through, keeping quiet and keeping our head torches off so as not to disturb anyone.

From here our plan was to pick up the last mandatory control at Bob Scott's Bothy and another control close by at Derry

Lodge. They were 9 miles into this leg so we just jogged along the forest trails for the next while, the ground fairly easy going but rising gently. We were in the wilderness again here so there was no background light and all you could hear was the high river rushing somewhere in the darkness.

We hit Bob Scott's and picked up 25 points each between the two controls here. Steve's route had him heading east towards Devils Point whilst I planned on heading north up the Derry Burn towards Ben McDui.

We said our goodbyes and I dipped into the forest towards

the bridge over the burn only to be stopped in my tracks fairly quickly. The bridge had been washed away. Out with the map to try and find a new route. It was a maze of trails here and with the high level of the river my options were limited. I picked a route which should bring me north up along the burn, it was on a higher contour but should bring me out in the same spot as originally planned. I set off but after 10 minutes felt I was climbing way too much. Out with the map again, I reckon I missed the planned turn in the woods and was now heading directly up Derry Cairngorm. Not the end of the world as I had planned on hitting this peak from the other side but I now had a big climb ahead of me.

It was a fairly steady, steep climb and after about 200ft of elevation gain I exited the forest onto the exposed slopes of the mountain proper. The wind, which I was sheltered from in the valley below, was beginning to pick up now. Even though this was a well packed boulder field there was a fairly well defined path so it was just a matter of getting the head down and being stubborn. This was a steady 4 mile climb though covering 2,300ft of elevation and on tired legs I struggled with it. The higher I got the stronger the wind got too.

At around 1,000ft I lost the path. I knew from the map that it skirted one of the lower peaks on the East side around this elevation but I couldn't find it. The ground turned into a rough boulder field so I really wanted to find that path. I didn't want to head too far east to try and find it as there was a big cliff drop off in that direction and with there being no visibility I didn't want to be worrying about that. I turned off my light and had a look around. It was pitch black, even with my hand against my fore-

head there wasn't even a shadow, it was just blackness. I've never experienced anything like it. I got out a small handheld but high powered torch I'd brought as back up and shone it around. No sign of the path but I could make out a small peak up to my north west. I decided to head for that. Once I was at the peak I would have my location on a map and could take a bearing for Derry Cairngorm.

This was easily the worst and toughest part of the race. The underfoot conditions were lethal. It was a mix of loose shale and large boulder field. Every footstep was grounding at a different angle so it was hard to keep balance. It was like climbing stairs but every step was at a different angle than



Top of Switchback Climb

the previous and some of them were liable to slip away when you stood on them. That combined with utter blackness and strong gales which were lifting me off my feet meant there were many falls and twisted ankles. It took me 2 hours to cover the 3 miles to the peak of Derry Cairngorm (3,795ft) by which time it was 5.30am and the day was beginning to brighten up. Although, when you're still stuck in thick cloud, brightening up is all relative.

From here I planned on taking a North West bearing to pick up a path west of Creagan a Choire Etchachan. This would bring me to the base of Ben McDui which, being the high point of the course, was a 50

pointer. I was also looking forward to it in a weird way as it would have been the highest peak I would have ever climbed. That plan soon went out the window though. The descent off Derry was as bad as the ascent. Rough boulder fields and high winds meant I was consistently blown off course. I knew where I wanted to go but finding a route to it was nigh on impossible. I was beat and soon realised my left ankle wasn't in the best shape, one of the many falls had obviously done some damage. I took stock of where I was and decided to just take a quick line out of the boulders and re-group.

I followed the natural slope down to a point which I thought was the western slope of Creagan a Choire Etchachan. Once I got there though I knew it didn't feel right. I was now just below the cloud line and could see for a few miles and realised I had come out on the east side of the peak. I had two options, climb back up through the boulder field to try and find the path or drop down into the Derry Burn and pick up the path there. Neither was appealing. I didn't fancy the boulders again and nor did I fancy the extra 1,000ft of climbing back up the other side I would face into by dropping down to the valley floor.

As I weighed up my options though I realised I was being forced into a third option. My ankle was swelling badly and quite sore with movement quite limited. I knew I would struggle to do much with it and the climb of Ben McDui was definitely out. Not being able to move properly here is dangerous as I could get cold very quickly. I was in limbo. From where I was the only achievable controls were a good distance away if I wasn't climbing McDui. Frustrated but knowing

it was the right call I decided to head for base.

Now I just had to deal with the 13 mile trek home but more importantly I firstly had to deal with the ledge which I found myself precariously standing over. I needed to get down to the valley floor below me and follow the burn back around to Derry Lodge but between me and the floor was quite a steep drop. From where I was I couldn't see any easy way of getting down and I wasn't going to go back the way I'd come, there was only one thing for it.

I took off my backpack and placed it on my chest so I could lean back into the earth and lay back as prone as possible, trying my best to slide down on my ass/ back whilst grabbing every thicket/ tuft of grass/ heather bush in reach to prevent me taking off at speed.

After all the rain it was slippery as hell with some nasty rocky bumps too. It took a while and I had some nervous moments but eventually got to a point where the slope started to ease out and I could chance standing up. Looking back up at what I'd just done I quietly cursed myself for being an idiot, it looked lethal from down here.

But it was done and I felt better knowing that it *should be* an easy walk down from here on well-marked tracks. Once on the valley floor I got to the Hutchison Memorial Hut, another bothy made available for walkers and hikers by the local community. I popped in for a break from the rain and met two other competitors who I'd run with briefly early in the

race. They were wet and tired and pondering their options. They had come up the Derry Burn as I had planned but it had taken them 2 hours longer than expected and they were shattered. They had planned to head to Ben McDui but didn't know if they had the energy. We chatted for a few minutes and I got on my way again.



The Punchbowl

The remaining journey was just a war of attrition, taking me much longer than expected. My ankle was completely seized up and walking was tough but as I was miles from the nearest road there was nothing I could do. As I neared

Derry Lodge I met a couple of competitors who had taken a few hours kip and were only now heading out on Leg 2. Even though it felt like I was out there for days there was still 10 hours

of competition left. I honestly don't know if I would have had the energy to keep going the 30 hours if I hadn't been injured.

Eventually, 6 painful hours after cresting Derry Cairngorm, I reached the main road back to Braemar. I was in quite a lot of pain and still had 6 miles left to go on the road. I was noticeably limping and had to stop regularly. I made a deal with

myself that I wouldn't thumb a lift but if someone stopped I would take a lift. I went on for a few miles before someone pulled up and asked was I alright. 'How long to the village?' I asked. '4 miles, do you need a lift?'. Feck it, at the rate I was going that was over another hour. I took the DNF.

So my watch had died but I reckon I covered another 25 miles in 11.5 hours for a total of 60 miles in 21.5 hours (excluding the break) and nearly 10,000ft of climbing. Arriving back to the base I was surprised that there were a handful of people that had finished before me even though there was a few hours left. I was placing 6th on the live lists but there were plenty still out there and although I informed them of the lift I took for the last 4 miles they left me in the results, finishing 11th on 150 points.

It certainly was the toughest event I've taken part in. The distance was double anything I've done before and the legs really felt it later on. I think if (when) I was to do it again I'd definitely try and take a bigger break in the middle to get some life back in the legs, get some real food in and also avoid being stuck on the high peaks in the darkness of night. I was afraid to take too long a break this time in case I left myself short of time in loop 2 but I covered more ground than expected so I think I'd benefit more from a break.

As I check the website to refresh my memory whilst writing this I see it has now opened up for next year. Hmmm!

Maybe next year I can get a team member!

Looking for team members to run in 2020!



www.facebook.com/athenryac/
www.athenryac.com/contact
Details on **group training** at:
www.athenryac.com/training

GALWAY

www.athenryac.com



Stop the Lights!

Athenry AC donated €500 to the Athenry Christmas Lights Committee and Tidy Towns who did such an amazing job around the streets, arch, and castle in Athenry. Thanks guys and gals!
(Group photo by John O'Connor, arch by Philip Magnier)

