Western Backyard Ultra 2025

By Shane Begley

The June Bank Holiday weekend, typically a weekend to get some rest but for me and 100+ other athletes it was the ideal weekend to take on the Western Backyard Ultra.

This event was hosted in the famous Kilcornan Woods, Clarinbridge organised by the Galway Trail Runners.

The loop for this ultra marathon event

I was first introduced to the format last summer, when I heard about a "last person standing" race, the rules are fairly straight forward.

- Competitors must run a 4.167-mile (6.706 km) loop that begins every hour on the hour.

- Each loop must be completed within the hour to continue.

- The race continues until only one person remains — the Last One Standing.

Preparations had started the evening before to set up the camp, tent, gazebo and the much needed deck chair. All was in place.

When registering, runners added their name to the "Last One Standing Wall of Fame" and when anyone "tapped out", they had to scratch their name off the list. A last piece of cruelty to be inflicted upon the runner later on!!!

The race briefing from Aidan and Declan from the Galway Trail Runners reiterated the rules, and gave us the reminder that there would be only one winner amongst the 100+ runners who lined up. This winner would go on to captain the Connacht team in the All Ireland Backyard Ultra and the rest would be deemed as a DNF (Did Not Finish).

This year any runner who completed the 24th loop (160.9344k which is 100 miles) would receive a medal. This was my goal, to run 24 loops, get the medal, DNF on loop 25 and go home to bed.

We began at noon, the sun having come out after a rocky start to the morning and for the first two or three hours conditions were great.

I eased into the loops, navigating the 6.7km which consisted of a mix of trails, a stoney "technical" section, along some grassy hills and into the woods.

On each loop there was a bit of banter, especially on the up/down piece where you'd get to see your fellow competitors and hear the shout outs "I'm beating Shane Begley in a race"

Upon returning from each loop, i'd have 10-15 mins to rest, eat, catch up with anyone who had come along to support us and then with three mins to go the whistle would begin, warning us: "Three minutes!", then "Two minutes!", then "One minute!", until the next loop began.

Once a loop begins, no aid or assistance from crew or spectators is permitted, so it was a grab whatever I needed before we went again. The first six or seven loops flew by, we had the odd shower in the early laps but the sun wasn't too far away.

Lap 10 [67k by finish]. Now we were on for seven loops in the dark, head torches on.

Midnight was a big milestone, 12 hours already in, halfway there. Lots of runners tapped out at this point and throughout the night we could begin to see the start line getting less crowded as people dropped out.

The night was tough. A few weeks ago I went out to Kilcornan to run the loop in the dark to mentally prepare for this. That time in training was a nice calm night in the middle of the May heatwave.

This night however wasn't as kind to us: 2am or 3am brought the rain: getting soaked, getting back to camp, being handed some beautiful pizza as we finished one loop was a highlight in the darkness.

Mostly I just kept going, completing the loops: eating, drinking and thinking about changing and the skies would open again. 4am the rain is still here. I'm now struggling with my left leg. My knee hurts a lot when I try to walk but it's not too bad when I run.

I'm walking and jogging on **loop 17 [114k at finish]**, it's not going well, this quote is in my head:
> *"The night is darkest just before the dawn."*

I'm hitting the wall hoping to make it to the next lap, 18, to make it to sunrise.

Loop 17 done, one of my slowest so far, I have ten mins to get myself ready to go again. No time to think about changing, Two Nurofen is offered and taken!!

The other promise and motto that has been said is to;
> *"Fail on the trail, Don't quit in the seat."*

I'm gonna start **loop 18 [120.7k at finish]** but with a new tactic, no more walking, just run. Get 18 laps done and it's six left to complete the 100 miles, then five, etc. That's how it went for the next six/ seven hours.

Somehow we were doing **Loop 24 [160.94 or 100 miles by finish]**…so we'd finally made it (my goal) and were down to eleven runners... gonna get that 100 mile medal, tap out, have the Galway Bay Brewery Beer and chill... or so I thought.

Loop 24 one of my fastest, I thought i was finished so just ran round as fast as I could a this point and finish it out, but I got back to..*Congratulations!!, you look fresh, how many more are you planning on doing?*

The next motto enters the conversation, sure it's just
> *"One more loop"*

I knew a few people were done at 24 loops, so headed out on **loop 25 [167.65k by finish]** and I'm in the final six runners left standing. By Loop 26 the six became five. Then four of us line up for Loop 27 and two drop out straight away.

That leaves me in the final two against John Gordon, Mayo AC.

Time to get back on the Athenry singlet as we were on for a Galway V Mayo Connacht Final!

"They're easy until they're not!!"

Loop 28 [187.77k by finish] is when the knee pain caught up with me again and now I can't walk or run without feeling it. I'll keep shuffling along, getting the cheers from the support crew as I make my way round the loop.

I get in with four mins to spare, crossing the finish line holding my kids hands. The whistle goes for the next lap: Three minutes!, Two minutes… and I know if I go out again I won't make it back in an hour.

I gave it everything, mentally I could have kept going but the legs were gone just had no more power, had to drop, and sadly Mayo won this Connacht final.

DNF Loop 29. I ran, walked, shuffled 28 loops officially covering 187 kilometres.

Second Last One Standing, Last Galway Man Standing!

Not too bad for my BackYard Ultra debut!!!

Thanks to the support that the club has given me, thanks to all who came out to Kilcornan to see what we were up to.

Thanks to my support team at home. I had a few support crews for the early loops: my wife and kids were on hand to help. Later in the evening my father and brothers were there. Throughout the night I relied on other runners, and their crews offered to help out. In the morning my owncrews returned to watch help me get through the final few hours.

See ye at the next race,
Shane