

Race Report – Lough Cutra Castle by Derek Meade

Event Distance – Sprint Plus - Swim-800m, Cycle-40k, Run-8k.



So when the alarm went at 4am on September 11th a brief thought flashed in my mind about why a supposedly sane adult would want to get up at this ungodly hour and drive across the country to put themselves through a world of hurt. Thankfully, I didn't dwell on that thought and instead dove straight into race mode and after a quick breakfast and with the car already pre-packed I was on the road by 4.45am.

Only a few weeks earlier, with the late cancellation of Tri-Athy, which would have been my only triathlon of the year, I, along with fellow Trilogy member Mark Sythes decided to have a crack at this Sprint Plus distance. A bit more than your regular sprint and just a bit less than an Olympic. However, by the end of the day we had convinced ourselves it was more or less an Olympic given the difficulty of the course and the longer than expected swim. More on that in a bit.

Just to set the scene. I have only done one Tri-Laois and one Try-Athy, two years previously. Not exactly a massive backlog of experience but this Triathlon thing has a real habit of making you a lot more stubborn and competitive than usual and I was determined not to let Covid destroy the year completely, nor was I going to let the small matter of mashing myself around a tree in the Slieve Blooms only a few weeks previously stop me from getting one triathlon under my belt this year.

So onto the event. All of the pre-race info and race briefings were conducted remotely online which I have to say worked very well. The website had all the course and race info and very little was omitted. The whole Castle race series seems very well run and certainly takes in some stunning locations.

Our race was due to kick off at 8am. After ditching the car around an hour earlier, in what can only be described as an "interesting" and "challenging" route into the car park area, the registration process was seamless and in no time we were assembling our gear in transition in the shadow of the stunning castle and beside a beautiful glassy and calm lake. The adrenalin was building. It looked like our race had about 70+ competitors. My first thought was how fit everyone looked and what the hell was I doing in the middle of all these fine specimens of triathlete. Anyway no time to dwell on that and before long Mark and I were suited up on the shore of the lake ready for the start.

The weather was dull and grey but not cold and apparently the water was a lovely 15 degrees. I saw the swim buoys disappearing in the distance and saw a red and white one not too far away which I hoped would be the turnaround point but alas our turnaround was a good bit beyond that. So far, in fact, that I could barely see it and I thought I must be in the wrong race. Ah well, no turning back now.

There was a 5 second gap between swimmers as we headed out. I hung to the back as swimming is my big mental block and is a nut I just haven't managed to crack yet despite the best efforts and encouragement from our own brilliant Eimear Matthews.

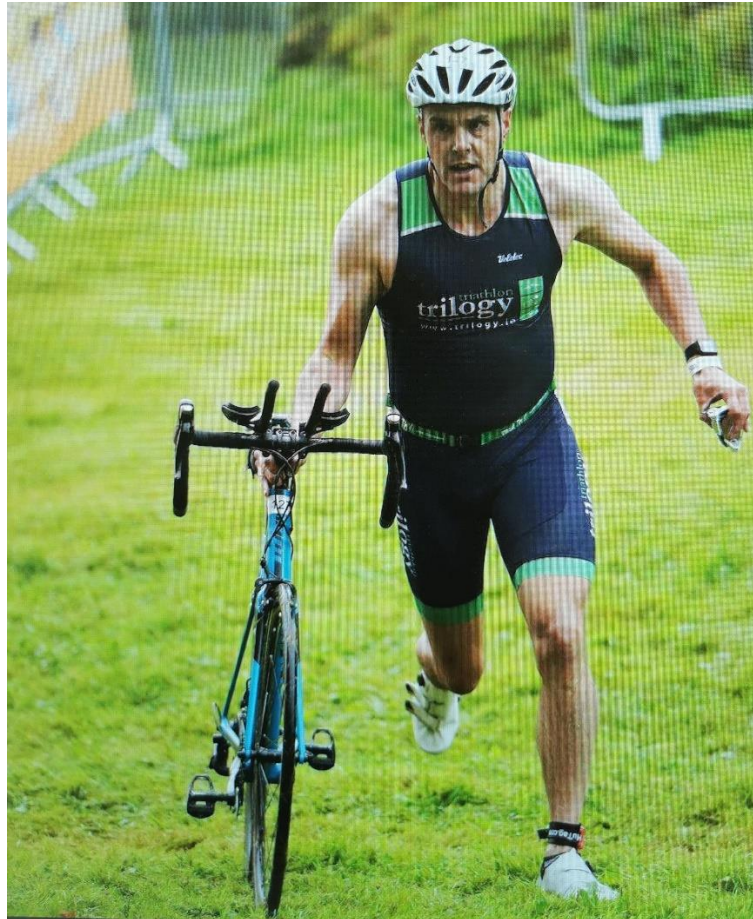
The water was lovely and there was no initial cold shock and I knocked out the first 100 metres or so confidently. However I took a break and made the mistake of looking at all the other triathletes disappearing into the distance and suddenly all the doubts came flooding back. For the next 20 minutes or so all I can say is that it was one of the biggest sporting mental battles of my life as I tried to churn out blocks of 25 and 50 metre bursts before treading water to recover. All the time my fellow competitors were disappearing from view. I even managed to find a new best friend as one of the safety crew in a kayak shadowed me and we struck up a great conversation for the remainder of the swim. I'm pretty sure you shouldn't have time to have full blown conversations during a race but believe me I was thankful Mr. Kayak was there as he kept me calm and I just kept plugging away.

At one point I could hear the announcer back at the castle saying the next race was ready to hit the water only to also hear, "Oh we still have a swimmer in the water from the last wave. Oh dear, it looks like they are going the wrong way". Yeah pretty sure that was me he was talking about but I was kind of heading the right way back, sort of.

Anyway terra firma, I had done it! Swim complete. I proudly exited the water in 71st place out of 71 competitors but a place ahead of those who did not start! Believe me this was a victory, 31 minutes (yikes) for 1000m. No way was it the advertised 800m. A few checks after with fellow competitors confirmed Garmin was telling us all it was 1k. When I had done Try Athy I didn't even put my head under the water and was disgusted with myself, so this was a moral victory for me.

So now it was onto the bike. My favourite discipline and a good 40k giving me a chance to make up some ground. I was buzzing now that the swim was done and exited transition with renewed energy. The route took in a paved road out of the castle grounds before hitting the Clare and Galway roads for what would be two 20km loops. Unfortunately, the weather had turned nasty and heavy rain started to fall, making the road quite greasy. The route wasn't overly hilly but did have a few sharp short hills that needed more power getting up them and a lot of care on the descents. There were some nice flat long sections allowing you to get onto the tri-bars and put the power down. Unfortunately, a nasty headwind appeared on the straight sections which was unwelcome but nonetheless I started picking off a few fellow competitors giving me a boost in confidence. Whisper it carefully but this was actually becoming enjoyable!

A last minute decision to add the tri-bars was a good decision and I finished the 40k in 1 hour 22 minutes. Happy enough considering the difficult conditions and my tribulations in the water. I also managed to get myself up 21 places from last place to 50th.



Now back to transition I just thought go and enjoy the run even if it's a slow jog treat it as a victory lap and enjoy the scenery and the support of the marshals etc. Oh my God how wrong was I! The run can only be described as pure torture with a sprinkle of pain and suffering topped off with a dollop of "this is ridiculous!!!"

Straight out of transition you were confronted with short sharp slippery and mucky hills up through a forest trail where you had to dodge massive tree roots and rocks protruding from every angle ready to nip at your ankles and put you on your backside. With the legs still in bike mode this was a horrific start to the run. A fellow competitor came alongside determined to have a chat. I just wanted to lie down and die. My legs were burning and my lungs were bursting. Coming out of the forest of doom we then had to traverse a cowfield with all the expected droppings and lots of holes and hollows and of course it was all uphill. Yeah sure just finish us off completely!

After the hell of the 'forest of the broken ankles' and the 'field of the massive cowpats' I emerged onto a stony track taking me back towards the castle and was greeted by a host of marshals of all ages, some of whom were massively enthusiastic, but I have to say their support and encouragement was exactly what I needed and all of sudden the legs and lungs started working just that bit better. The loop finished through the castle courtyards and past the front of the castle. It as

stunning and the buzz around there was excellent despite the massively reduced crowds due to



Covid.

Slight drawback was the thought of doing the run loop again but somehow it was fine. Maybe knowing what was ahead allowed the mind to prepare the body and after getting through the forest and fields for the second time I allowed myself relax and enjoy the run in. As I headed up the finishing straight in front of the castle I was disappointed I had no one to race. I put the afterburners on anyway and also that special face you do at the end of races. The one that suggests that it's all grand and this triathlon lark is a handy gig. Yeah pure BS. Anyway I finished the run in 47 minutes

and had a final total time of 2 hours 55 minutes. I had got up to 48th position of 71 after emerging from the water in last place. I'll tell my friends I finished top 50. They don't need to know how many entered.

I was ecstatic! I had done a proper triathlon coming back from a recent injury and conquering the open water swim which was my Achilles heel. I was immensely proud and delighted to be flying the Trilogy colours along with Mark who finished a few places a head of me in his first triathlon. A fantastic achievement for Mark also and we told each other how great we were far too many times.

We hung on to support fellow club member Mark Pierce who completed the Try-a-Tri earning another high finish while we also spotted another clubmate Damien Oliver who blasted through the Aqua-bike event.

Within half an hour myself and Mark had convinced ourselves we were going to tackle "The Gauntlet" on this course next year. That's a half ironman by the way. Watch this space.

