

## **INTERVIEW WITH JOHN COLLINS – CREW MEMBER**

### **How did you first get into crewing?**

Helena Crossan (well known for her ultra-running exploits at this stage) asked if I would accompany her as support at The Night of Flanders 100K in Torhout, Belgium in 2007. I was only summonsed in the absence of her daughter who was recovering from illness at the time. I honestly thought it would be support of the most basic kind; a hollering spectator who would have the odd bottle of carbs and protein to hand to a passing blur. Helena, calm as always, was fairly unconcerned with my involvement and just got on with her own prep. However, the events that followed were to take on a surreal twist. Completely unprepared at the time, I discovered the day before the race that I'd have to cycle behind Helena for the duration of the run (overnight, by the way) and give supplies at designated checkpoints. I had to quickly revive the lost art of cycling and cover sixty-two miles in the dark with twenty bottles of Gatorade on my back, not to mention the bottle in each hand! I've been a crew member ever since.

### **Do you think you get as much satisfaction as a competitor?**

I would say almost, though no doubt on a much different level to the competitor. There is definitely a huge sense of achievement being involved, though this relies in many ways upon the achievements of the athletes on the day. I couldn't take satisfaction in just going through the motions as a crew member if it's not going well in the race itself. On the occasions that I've got it wrong, such as missing a waypoint and generally dropping the ball under pressure, I could have cried...so there is a range of emotions felt because of the enormity of what's happening. But make no mistake, it's a MASSIVE buzz. To see 'my' athlete crossing the line after a harrowing race is not merely a huge relief, but to be associated with an athlete who has won is the best feeling I'm ever likely to get in athletics. I suppose I'm really just basking in reflected glory...but I'll take it!

### **What are the specific types of tasks involved?**

The more events I've attended, the more I've found myself doing. As my familiarity with ultra running events grows, I can actually get involved with a longer list of things pre-race. Race briefings are vital and questions need to be asked. The job of drinks labelling and laying out provisions is now becoming second nature. It's a case of getting to know the preferences of the runner. The difficulty is that in the heat of a 100K battle, athletes' requirements can become a little bizarre...like pizza or a hot cup of tea! Normally, I just don't have the pizza but, remarkably, I did manage the hot tea (two sugars) on one occasion...it being my own at the time! I'm not much of an orienteer, and thankfully such requirements have been few. However, negotiating the French Alps (50 Mile World Trail Championship 2009) with Eoin Keith was more than a challenge. Thankfully, Eoin is effectively superhuman in my opinion, and I was barely required. Sometimes it's debatable who's looking after whom.

### **Do you find yourself giving advice and reassurance to runners?**

Not really. However, while I think the runners can compete successfully without my assistance, I do feel that I can help maximise their efforts by being in the right place at the right time, maybe even days in advance of the race. But reassurance doesn't have to be shouted out. For my part, it's more about being there with a bottle of carbs and a handful of Jelly Babies just in case.

### **What have been your favourite trips?**

Each trip has been genuinely unforgettable. My first race (The Night of Flanders 100K 2007) was beyond description as far as I'm concerned, and easily goes to the top of the list. I'd never experienced anything like it. However, the World 100K Championship in Rome (2008) was also particularly memorable, despite it not being the best year for the Irish. The camaraderie among the Irish athletes was inspiring. In fact, I'd go as far to say that the international scene is a close community of ultra-runners. I still reflect on the sight of Helena collapsing fifty yards from me in Rome, completely and utterly spent. She had chosen to compete in spite of flu, and had managed 40 miles or so. I genuinely thought she was a gonner! She would have tried to get back on the road if allowed but thankfully she wasn't permitted. Helena subsequently blitzed the field in the final stages of the 2009 World 100km to take third in Europe and sixth in the World. These are the most notable memories though there are hopefully more to come.

### **Any particularly funny moments?**

Well, it definitely wasn't funny at the time. Picture an exhausted support cyclist 3K from The Night of Flanders finish line...then smack, no-hands, face in the pavement! I maintain it was the technicalities of cycling without holding the handles that did the damage. I categorically didn't faint! Helena, then running six minute miles, offered to send someone back for me after the race, without so much as a look round. That's dedication...I did manage to finish the race as well, eventually!

### **Are these trips addictive in the way that many ultra runners find the running aspect to be addictive?**

Without a doubt. I absolutely love them. The first Torhout race was both fantastic and frightening and really nailed it for me. Given the opportunity to crew at any event, I'd have to ring in sick to work. It's as simple as that!

### **Have you learned anything? Importance of being relaxed around the runners for example?**

It's almost impossible to be relaxed around ultra-runners, in spite of their surprisingly easygoing nature. Easygoing would probably describe every ultra-runner I've had involvement with. Ultra runners are essentially philosophical about what they're doing. I'd say that while they may acknowledge what they can achieve is beyond most people, they don't see it as their defining character trait. I have never found an ultra competitor to be self-centred or in any way lordy, or to be radical in any other

way expect the distances they run. I suppose what I'm getting at is that the outlook of a long-distance runner might be a good guide to a contented existence. Quote... "don't worry about it"...but I always do!

### **Do you think ultra running is different than regular running?**

It's clearly on such a different level to textbook club running that it's easy to forget that ultra runners are people too! I try to legislate for what the runners are going through in races but can't really get my head round it. There's no egotism at all, though I will say that the self-belief of the Irish team is immense and I often don't feel it's necessary to open my mouth while carrying out crew business during races. In every event I've been involved with, from the World Championship in Rome to the Celtic Plate in Galway (where I found myself casually helping out half a dozen athletes) the runners have shown me huge respect and been very grateful for the help. It's a very enjoyable feeling.