

## ***Wicklow Way Record Run (Saturday 13th September, 2008)***

Sunday evening and I'm looking at the long term weather forecast after the nine O'clock news. Rain rain rain rain, but on Saturday it looks like there'll be a gap, and judging by the pressure patterns there won't be much wind either. Five days is an eternity in long term weather prediction, particularly in such a fluid changeable climate, but it's better than no prediction. Besides, it's starting to reach the do or die point. I've been meaning to try and run the Wicklow Way and try to break Simon Walter's record, a fine record of 18 hours 25 minutes, for many years now. So long that I can't even remember when I first added it to my "must do" list. I had originally got an ultra-running event provisionally scheduled in my calendar for August this year, but the race was postponed. A similar thing happened with a replacement adventure race. So for the two or three months I've been looking at the weeks ahead, seeking an opportunity to give it a go. Do or Die. Now or Never.

With such a short amount of time before the run (effectively 5 days), this was definitely going to have to be a very logistically simple run. To me, it seems like there are 2 approaches to a run like this. I think of them as Siege style and Alpine style, borrowing the terms from mountaineering. A siege style attempt would involve a team of people helping out... timekeepers, runners and cyclists with me all the way keeping me company and helping with food and gear, support crews at various points along the way etc etc. Alpine style would keep the logistics to a minimum, and put the emphasis more on self sufficiency. An independent timekeeper is a "must have". After that, it's all optional. My thinking was that one or two people were all that was really needed, but I'd need them for the whole duration of the run and beyond. A big ask!

As it happens, there is a ready-made set of rules for running a long distance endurance attempt on the IMRA website, written for the Wicklow Round. These dovetailed nicely with the Alpine style approach. So these were duly adopted as the rules I would run by.

I had told a very small number of people about my intention to give the WW a bash. Most important amongst those was my girlfriend, Mary. She offered to help out in whatever way she could, even after the warnings that this could mean getting up at an ungodly hour of Saturday morning, stating a stopwatch in Marlay Park, driving the length of Wicklow and beyond, and then returning to Dublin. So I rang Mary and told her that next Saturday would be the day. One person was all I needed for logistical support, so I now knew the run could definitely happen. It would be good to get at least one more person though.

I now had to let the world know what I was doing, or at least the part of the world that was most likely to have an interest. This is a requirement under Wicklow Round rules. It allows anyone to come along at any point and verify what I'm doing. But apart from that, I wanted to give anyone who wanted the opportunity to share in the day, by running or cycling with me on the route, or by just coming along and meeting me en-route. I also wanted to see could I get anyone else to help out with some of the logistics. I held off for another day or two, watching the weather forecasts very

carefully to see if there was any change in the predictions for Saturday, but things were unusually and reassuringly consistent. On Wednesday I posted out an email to the Adventure Racers, and also to the Ultra Runners. I then posted up the formal declaration onto the IMRA website forum. No turning back now, no matter what!

Richard Nunan, one of my co-workers, picked up the message from the IMRA forum mail shot, and sent me an email on Wednesday evening offering to help in any way he could. So the following morning, when he called over to my desk to tell me how big a nutter I was, I grilled him on how serious he was with his offer, and made sure he realised what exactly he was potentially volunteering for. He was serious; he knew exactly what he was volunteering for, and was full of enthusiasm. This was great news. Having two people in the support crew was going to make life much easier, as all the effort could be shared.

Richard also happens to have an extremely interesting sport background. He had been an Irish international Kickboxer, and indeed was a European champion. However an injury had drawn his kickboxing career to a close (as an undefeated European champion). Richard had been looking for a new interest since moving to Dublin, and conversations with Justin Keatinge and myself had fired him up to give hill running a try. Justin is always evangelising hill running, and Richard is one of several new converts to the sport from the ranks of Justin's company, Version 1.

In a professional capacity Richard had worked on the timing and scoring systems for multi-billion dollar sports events, including the Asian games in Abu Dhabi and the Athens Olympics. With this kind of background he was definitely going to be the official timekeeper!

Saturday morning, 3:00am: The alarm clock roars into life. Years of adventure racing kick into action, causing me to jump straight out of bed, and start to get ready for a big day's endurance. Everything keeps nicely to schedule, until we've left the house and we've begun the short drive to Marlay. As I'm doing a quick mental check in my head of everything I need, I realise that I've left the headtorch behind. feckity feck! Back to the house, dash up to the room, grab the headtorch, and off yet again, now a little behind schedule. Richard drops me a text saying that the weather's looking good at Marley, so I ring him and re-assure him we're nearly there. At 3:50am the south gate of Marlay Park is a hive of activity, relatively speaking. Richard's bike is unloaded from his car and mounted on his brand spanking new bike rack onto the back of Mary's car. Richard's wife, Trish, leaves us to our madness and drives off back to normality, whilst Mary, Richard and myself make our way through Marlay park on the direct route to the board marking the start of the Wicklow Way.

In order to remove all ambiguity the Wicklow way records have traditionally been run (and cycled) board to board. There is an information board at each end of the Wicklow Way, at Marlay Park and Clonegal, which are considered the start and end points. The route of the Wicklow way varies a little from time to time, as sections are worked on or improved, or very occasionally re-routed entirely. Overall these have very little effect when considered against the full 130km extent of the way. For the purposes of setting the record I was going to run the route entirely and exactly as it was marked on the ground on the day. The other prominent events run on the route, The Wicklow Way Relay, and the Wicklow Ultra, both use a few shortcuts to cut out some of the sillier sections of the Wicklow Way. These were strictly off limits for me. There had

been a few changes since the previous record. I wasn't particularly worried about working out whether the route was a little harder or a little easier as a result.

As we approached the board I caught sight of Jason Reid waiting patiently. Jason had responded to my message on the IMRA forum where I invited anyone who was interested to run along with me for a while. Clearly Jason was a classic hard-nut kiwi, as the 4am nominal start time didn't discourage him in the slightest. In fact, it turned out that Jason had slotted this in nicely with his main sporting target of the day. He intended to run with me all the way to Glendalough, a not-insubstantial ultra run in itself, where he hoped to catch the first bus of the morning from there back to Dublin, and get to the antipodean pub in time to watch the All Blacks play Australia in the Tri-Nations. We were running a little late, so I decided we'd start the Clock at 4:15 rather than 4:00. Richard got his handycam going and did a little filming of the pre-run preparations. 4:14 comes, and I ask Richard to give me a 15 second warning, and a countdown from 5.

5,4,3,2,1...4:15, and we're off. Jason and myself trot off down past the first of many Wicklow Way marker poles and head on into the dark tree lined paths the route meanders along through Marlay Park. My only specific preparation for running the Wicklow Way was when I cycled over to Marlay Park on Thursday evening in order to recce the exact start point and route of the Wicklow Way. I was very familiar with the route all the way from the exit of Marlay Park to Shilelagh/Tinahealy area, but oddly enough I had rarely seen the section that was closest to my house. As I was going to be running this in complete darkness I thought that a quick route check would be a good idea. Given the meandering nature of the route I was glad I did. I also found the Park Ranger, and told him of my intentions. He was quite surprised to hear that I wasn't the first person to try to run the full length of the Wicklow Way. He let me know that the south gate of the park (through which the route exists the park) was being replaced, so there were currently no locked gates, but instead a few small barriers that were easy to run past. That was a stroke of luck.

The weather on the morning was pretty much as forecast. It was dry, finally, after what seemed like a month's monsoon season. However, looking up towards 3-Rock we could see that there was low cloud enveloping the mountain. It was probably going to be a bit misty up there. The forecast was for a bright clear day, with little or no chance of rain. I tend to be a very conservative dresser when it comes to going out onto the hills, whether running, cycling, or adventure racing. This morning I was brave enough (by my own standards) to wear shorts rather than leggings. These shorts had a pair of nice deep pockets, which would be handy for bringing bits of food and gels along. Even at 4 in the morning this wasn't a problem. I had chosen to wear one of Aldi's finest winter running tops, so as to make sure not to get too cool before sunrise. It would be much easier to cool down from being too warm than warm up from being too cold if anything was to go wrong.

I had only very briefly chatted to Jason before the run, so I knew very little about him. I had come across his name quite a few times, as he also had an interest in adventure racing. From the off we were both happily running at the same pace. The trails through Marlay Park were extremely dark at that time of the morning, and I was glad I had recce'd the route. Leaving the park and heading down towards the M50 underpass I was back on familiar territory. Heading up past Columba's college we began the first climb of the route. Jason and I were settling into a conversation that

was to continue non-stop all the way to Glendalough. This made that whole section of the run very easy, as my mind wasn't really thinking about running at all. Running at conversation pace naturally leads to slowing the pace of the climbs to a sustainable level.

We passed by the car park at the entrance to Kilmashouge woods which marks the start of the Wicklow Way relay. Running along any parts of the relay route always tends to bring back memories of some of the great days racing I've had in the past as part of Relay teams. One of the advantages I had going into the record attempt was that over the first 3 years of the relay I had run every one of the 8 legs at least once, and so had gained a large amount of familiarity with the Wicklow Way route. Indeed, in the inaugural relay Hugh McLindon and myself had run it as a team of 2, alternating every second leg. I had no doubt that I would be revisiting some of the feelings of fatigue I experienced towards the end of that particular effort.

As we headed uphill towards 3-rock we started to experience the expected misty weather. By the time we left the forest and headed up towards the "woca wocas" on the open mountain trail visibility was down to only a few feet. Luckily this was an area I was very familiar with, both from running and cycling. So despite the rather technical underfoot conditions, and running by headtorch light in extremely thick mist, both the pace and the conversation remained steady. The mist disappeared by the time we dropped onto the road and headed in the Johnny Fox's direction. The first rendezvous with my support crew was on the road where the Wicklow Way makes an extremely acute turn off the main road. Thankfully they had managed to find their way there as expected.

The night before the run I had marked up the two main Wicklow OS maps with all the rendezvous points where I was hoping to meet the support crew. Mostly these consisted of the Wicklow Way Relay changeover points, plus a few additional points at the start and towards the end of the route. Each of the points was given a name, in case of any confusion. All of them were chosen to be reasonably easy to find by road, under the circumstances. The part of the route where we were most likely to run into problems was in the early sections, as it isn't on the OS maps, and it was still dark, making driving unfamiliar roads much more difficult.

Despite having all these intermediate points on the route I had very deliberately set off on the run with no target times in mind, either for the intermediate points or for the run as a whole. This was very much a designed tactic. Over the years I have learned that pacing is by far the most important attribute to doing well at ultra running. And in my own case I have a very well tuned sense of pace over distance. I was going to trust my own pacing ability to run the optimal speed over the route on the day. Target times would only be a distraction, and in my opinion were more likely to have a negative influence on the day. Missing a target time is unimportant if you're running the correct pace for the conditions, but could cause you to speed up to try and "make up" the lost time, which would be a very dangerous thing to do in an ultra run. I had made one guess before the run, which was that I was probably going to be able to manage it in 16 hours if all went well. I let that guess dictate the 4am start time. I wanted to finish the run in daylight, since I had only been on the Clonegal section of the Wicklow Way once before, and didn't want to have to do any route finding in the dark if it could be avoided. There was useful light up until about 8pm, so a 4am start would enable me to finish in daylight if I managed to run the route in 16 hours. The

16 hour guess was based on Simon's existing record, and trying to judge where my current ultra running form stood in comparison's to Simon's form back in 2000.

I knew that Simon had done his record attempt with a strategy of having three 15 minute rest stops at intermediate points along the route. Strategising for rest stops, food and drink, and run-walk patterns is another key component in finishing long ultra runs. My stopping strategy was simplicity itself...I was planning to run non-stop. There were likely to be a few enforced stops on the day anyway. When I met up with my logistical support I was going to grab food and drink. I had no intention of rushing these encounters, as it was more important to grab what I needed and stay fuelled and hydrated than to save a minute or two in "transition". So I was likely to be stopped for a minute or so at each rendezvous. This strategy should gain me an easy half an hour on Simon's time once I was able to sustain it. My other strategic decision was to try to run the entire route without a defined walk-run pattern. However, I would use my judgement to decide if a climb wasn't worth running up and to just walk it on a case by case basis. The criteria for deciding what was too steep were likely to change during the day with my level of fatigue and weather conditions.

Richard put away his handycam as I grabbed some food and water, and joined us on our run. His intention was to run at least as far as Ballinastoe woods. This left Mary on her own in the support car for a while. Having a third person in the conversation ensured that there was never going to be a dull moment, and we trotted off downhill chatting away happily. The long climb up from Glencullen towards the top of Curtlestown woods is usually a tough draining affair, but by taking it at conversational pace it was more a case of drifting up the hill rather than grunting. Coming down through the newly felled woods at the top of Curtlestown disaster nearly struck. The light from my headtorch wasn't good enough to enable me to tell the logs from the rocks, and I went for a bit of a slide on a still damp log. Luckily I was able to recover the slip and didn't smack into the ground. Just behind me Jason had an almost identical experience.

Controlling descending pace at this early stage of the run is one of the trickier things to do. Descending too fast will pound the muscles and probably result in a lot of pain and loss of speed later in the run. Descending too slowly will also cause a lot of muscle jarring from the effect of braking (and of course, needlessly reduce running speed). I tried to "drift" down, letting the incline allow me to float down the hill at a natural speed with the minimum of effort.

As we hit the fireroads in Curtlestown there was enough pre-dawn light for me to run comfortably without my headtorch. The weather was definitely improving. There was no sign of any low clouds out here. The forecast was proving to be accurate.

The next rendezvous point was Curtlestown car park, but there was no sign of Mary when we got there. Luckily I was feeling fine and had plenty of food and water with me. Richard was running with his phone and had been sharp enough to exchange numbers with Mary earlier in the morning. He phoned her up and let her know that she should head for the next rendezvous point, which was the Crone Woods car park.

Eventually we were able to figure out where she was and how to direct her to Crone.

As we got to the trail that runs along the river through the Glencree valley we were greeted by a fabulous sight. The early morning mist was hovering over the grassy valley about 2 or 4 feet high, contouring with the ground underneath, creating a ghostly scene. We were all in agreement that it was worth starting out at ridiculously early times in the morning to get to see sights like this. It's always an enjoyable to run along this section of the Wicklow Way, but in these conditions it was truly magical.

We arrived at the next rendezvous at Crone Wood car park soon afterwards, and thankfully Mary had successfully navigated her way there, arriving about 5 minutes before us. I had been carrying a small rucksack with a H2O bladder system since the previous rendezvous, but decided it was more trouble than it was worth and swapped it out for a water bottle which I would hand carry. I had pre-filled several bottles with an energy drink mixture. The mixture was made from a powder I had acquired from my Turas adventure race team, Wilsa Helly-Hansen. On a long run like this the body seems to get more fussy about what its willing to eat and drink, and I had discovered on the Turas that this particular mixture was quite palatable. It also felt like it was giving a bit of a kick, which is useful, even if it's only a psychological effect. I also had water, Coke, some yop-like fruit drinks, fruit juices in small cartons, and bottles of Aldi isotonic drink in the car.

Running through Crone woods brings back memories of the many many races I've run over the years along the main fireroad. Thankfully I don't have to worry about who is in front or behind, but just have to continue to keep up the careful efficient pace over the rolling terrain. We're still running together, keeping an enjoyable 3 way conversation going. We're a few hours in now, and we still haven't seen another soul outside our own small group this morning. As we reach ride rock I hear shouts of awe from beside me. Looking out to the east we see yet another wonderful early morning treat. The sun was rising up beside the distant Sugarloaf. The morning blank of mist was still covering the landscape in a ghostly translucent layer, and the sky was acquiring its azure colour for the day, with high cirrus clouds reflecting back the emerging sun. Yet again we were all struck by how lucky we were to be out here in this classic daybreak scene. Jason tried to grab a few shots on his compact camera, as we ran on, taking it all in and storing the vision in the camera of our mind's eyes.

Running up towards Djouce Mountain we catch sight of a lone walker in the distance. It's still very early in the day and my mind wonders what someone is doing out walking at this hour of the morning. I'm sure he must have been questioning what 3 runners were doing, slowly but steadily running up behind him. This section of the Wicklow Way always seems like a long drag to run. I usually reach it many miles into one of several long hill races. There is always a temptation to ease back and just walk up, but I'm feeling good and it's reasonably easy to continue to "drift" up the hill in a slow steady run. Out to the east the views are changing slowly all the time, but are still awesome. This is easily the best light I've experienced since the early days of summer. A part of me wishes I had a camera here to capture the panorama... but mainly I'm happy to commit the scene to memory and push ever onwards, grateful that the day is turning out to be as close to optimal conditions as I could have hoped for. We never got a chance to even greet the walker, as he turned to climb up Djouce

shortly before we ran straight through the junction and continued contouring around its south eastern flanks.

At this point I was coughing and spluttering quite regularly. An old lesson was re-learned as I ate a very nutty muesli bar. Whilst they are tasty, and a good natural source of energy, nuts seem to stick in my throat when I try to eat them while I'm exercising. Still, I've unwrapped the bar, and it is very tasty, and I will need the energy, so I eat most of it. Jason accepts an offer of some of the bar, and joins me spluttering along the trail. From now on I'll stick to more easily digestible food.

Richard was originally intending to run as far as the next rendezvous point, which is at the high Ballinastoe woods car park. When we arrive there he is still feeling good, so he decides to continue running on with us. Mary is there to meet us again, and I drop off the water bottle and decide to run the next section without carrying any liquids, as it's relatively short, and mainly flat and downhill. There is one long gentle uphill section right in the middle. Richard slowly drifted back from Jason and myself, and we last caught sight of him running up the hill in the distance behind us as we went through the gate at the top. He would later claim that he was simply escaping from the rugby conversation that Jason and I were thoroughly engaged in. Jason has a bus to catch from Glendalough, and every now and then we try and calculate if we're going to make it there in time. It's a marginal call. We work out a few alternatives, with the mostly likely one being the option of Jason running down to Laragh and catching the bus there.

Mary is waiting for us at Oldbidge, where I pick up another bottle. Mary is much happier navigating in the daylight, and will shortly have Richard back as a co-pilot. We let her know that he isn't far behind us and set off on Jason's last leg of the route, up the steep road climb from Oldbridge towards Glendalough. The sun is warming up the day nicely at this stage and for the first time in the run I'm beginning to err on the side of being a little too warm. I've got a lighter sleeveless running top in the car, and decide to swap into that when we get to Glendalough.

A nice surprise awaited me when we reached the military road (between Laragh and Glenmacnass). Brendan Doherty had driven out and was there to greet us and cheer us on. I was so busy returning his greetings that I nearly missed the turn onto the brand new section of the Wicklow way that runs down from the road to the Glenmacnass river. The section from here to Glendalough is probably the biggest change in the route since Simon set his record. The route used to go down the road to Laragh, and then along the south side of the Glendalough valley. Now it crosses the Glenmacnass river, and has an extra hill to climb, up onto the southern spur of Brocagh, and back down and into Glendalough village. We're doing well on time, so Jason decides that he more than likely will be able to catch the bus in Glendalough even if he sticks to his original plan and runs all the way there.

We arrived into Glendalough with 10 minutes to spare before Jason's bus departed. It had been a real pleasure running with Jason, and had made the run out to Glendalough pass by without any mental effort or stress whatsoever. Indeed up to this

point I was still very much restraining myself from running faster, rather than having to work hard to push on. Both Mary and Brendan were parked at Glendalough, just outside the main car park. Brendan passed on greetings from Jane and Graham Porter, who weren't able to make it out as they were setting off to climb Kilimanjaro, the lucky things. Their tales from the world of ultra-running were a strong inspiration for me, and even without their physical presence their influence was definitely playing an important part in the day.

As I picked up fresh liquid supplies and changed into my lighter running top Mary filled me in on the story of Richard, who had managed to get himself lost after he dropped back from us on the run. Mary was going to head back to Oldbridge to try and find him again. Richard had phoned to say not worry about him, and to concentrate on supporting me, but I reckoned I could miss the next rendezvous without it being too critical and told Mary this so that she could go off and have plenty of time to relocate Richard. In the end Richard found his own way back to the road and was picked up by Mary without too much delay.

I set off from the carpark and crossed the bridge over the river, and for the first time on the day I was running alone. There was no change to physical challenge or effort, and the pace remained consistent. But it's a very different mental experience running solo, especially so far into an ultra run. Without a conversation to keep me engaged I would have my own thoughts for company for the rest of the run. Not so much the loneliness of the long distance runner as the self-analysis of the long distance runner. I was also about to hit the crux of the route. The climb up out of Glendalough to the shoulder of Mullacor is a long continuous relentless climb that's a real mental and physical test either on foot or by bike. After getting through this and descending to Glenmalur it is followed by another huge climb up to Slieve Maan. These were the main sections of leg 5 and 6 respectively of the Wicklow Way relay. I was never too sure which one was harder, but I reckoned that today would be the day I would answer that question for myself.

One of the first thoughts to hit me was that I was now on leg 5 of 8 of the Relay, so I couldn't be that far off being half way through. Still, the real Wicklow way has a substantial extra section after the end of the relay, which I was mentally considering as leg 9. For the first time I started doing some analysis of how I was doing. About 5 and a half hours had elapsed. The weather was almost perfect. Considering I had just run from Marlay Park to Glendalough I was feeling relatively fresh and not too tired at all. It was looking like I was well on target for easily breaking the record. Indeed at this point things were looking pretty good for having a really good attempt at achieving my most ambitious target.

OK... now that I'm running alone I can come clean with myself. I really started the day with 3 rough targets in my head. The pivot target was 16 hours. A nice round figure, but one I reckoned was a realistic target based on my fitness levels and some off the top of my head estimations based on Simon's record run as well as my own time in cycling the length of the Wicklow Way. Any worse than this and I would be

very happy to break the record, but would feel that I would need to try again to give it a better shot. From that figure I set 18 hours in my head as the absolute worst time I should be doing, even allowing for a crash of some kind on the run. In the other direction I had 14 hours as my ultimate target time. If I could get close to this I would consider it a top class run, and never have to run it again.

After running along the flat valley floor for a kilometer or two the trail turns left and heads steeply uphill to begin the long climb of leg 5. As I reach the steps overlooking the waterfall I slow down to a walk to climb this section. There is very little time to be gained, but a lot of energy to be expended by running anything this steep. Even at walking pace I'm still pulling away rapidly from the lone walker who has also started climbing up the steps. Out to my left the waterfalls are looking great in the tree-speckled sunlight of the mid-morning. My thoughts wander to what it would be like to go canyoning down this section of river (cold, wet, dangerous and exhilarating, probably). Reaching the top of the steps I break back into my steady running effort, being careful not to go too fast up the hill.

Another thought enters my head, which is that I don't really have to try too hard at this stage to try not to run too fast. On the contrary, the mental discipline now required is to maintain the speed at a sufficiently high level to get an optimal time, rather than trying to conserve energy. I've crossed the border line. Now I'm really ultra-running. From now on the day will be a real trial of physical and mental endurance.

I remember the last occasion I was running up this hill was the only time I did this leg of the relay. I think it must have been my worst single leg that I ever ran in any of my 4 or 5 Wicklow Way Relay races. On that occasion I had started to tire about half way up, and cramped up on the way down. Not good. But today is different. A good steady sustainable pace up the hill ensures I get to the top in much better condition. It's probably the slowest I've ever done the climb, but that's allowed under the circumstances!

The section after the boardwalk ends, which brings me around to the steep start of the descent, is treacherously wet. I had decided to use normal road training shoes rather than trail shoes for the run, as I was well used to training in moderate off-road terrain in this style of shoe, and they would be more comfortable and give my legs better protection over such a long run. The downside was that in slippery conditions I'd have to be much more careful to keep my grip and balance. This was the first time in the day that I had encountered conditions that were continuously challenging. I didn't let the pace drop, and paid the price with one big splashdown into the slimy grass. It was only a short moment of pain and annoyance though.

I carefully pick my way though the relatively new rock steps down the initial steep section of the descent. It's not worth risking the fall onto the hard pointy rocks here. Hitting the fireroad, I head down the nice long steady descent at a good "drifting" speed. About halfway down I meet the only large groups of walkers I would encounter on the route all day. My watch is showing the elapsed time since the start so I do the mental calculations to work out the time. It's not eleven yet... it's still the morning! Looking across the Glenmalure valley I can see the trail the Wicklow way follows in the distance working its way up Slieve Maan. From half way down the descent the next climb looks long and imposing.

When I run into the crossroads at Glenmalure I see the welcome sight of Mary and Richard waiting for me at the agreed rendezvous point. They have been joined by Brendan Lawlor. Prior to my arrival Mary had gone into the Glenmalure Inn to see if she could get me some chips as a nice treat. Despite it being breakfast time at the inn she cajoled them into making some specially. After all that effort there was no way I couldn't indulge myself in a few chips. I had reckoned that the climb out of Glenmalure would be a good section to reload my energy reserves, so I packed a considerable amount of food into my pockets, in the form of filled bread rolls, Nutella filled mini-brioche, and a handful of Jelly sweets and coke bottles (the sweets rather than the drink). I left with lots of words of encouragement from Brendan and the support crew. It was good to hear Brendan saying that I looked very fresh, as he was seeing me for the first time on the run.

Running down the route my mind was churning a few more thoughts around. I was now on leg 6 of 8 of the normal relay, or leg 6 of 9 in my internal version of the relay. I must be over halfway at this point. Indeed I must be getting to the point where I've run straight down the length of the OS map sheet 56, which to me is an impressive achievement. A little less than seven hours have elapsed since the start. The first major crux climb is behind me, and the time is still looking very good indeed.

I'm a lot less familiar with the climb out of Glenmalure than the climb out of Glendalough, mainly because it not a route I cycle very much. I remember that when I ran leg 6 of the relay in its inaugural year this was a good long hard climb. And indeed that's how it was turning out again. The unfamiliarity of the climb seems to be having the effect of making me annoyed at its relentlessness. But I can match the relentless climb with some stubborn relentless climbing of my own. About half way up I discover that the "trail fairies" have been working on this section of the Wicklow way, and a long section that was previously quite boggy and technical has been bulldozed and hard-packed into a much more runnable track. Even with this the climb still seems to go on and on and on. At least I had answered one question for myself. Even before reaching the half way point of leg 6 I knew that it was definitely harder than leg 5.

I had given Mary an optional rendezvous point on the road high point of the infamous (from the Wicklow 200 cycle) Slieve Maan climb. It was about 20 metres off the Wicklow way, but I would see them if they were there. As it turned out there was no sign of them. I would have gladly taken a gulp of coke at this point after the long climb, but overall I was still fine. Another one of the Wicklow way's ridiculous loops came next, and it turned out to contain the boggiest section of the entire route. The short ride through the pine trees was saturated from all the recent rain, and it was hard to find somewhere to place my feet without them sinking in beyond my ankles.

Memories come back to me of one of the most amazing pieces of running I had ever seen. I had put together a very strong team for the 4<sup>th</sup> running of the Wicklow Way Relay. Unfortunately the runners on both leg 4 and 5 had gotten lost, and we lost about 20 minutes as a result, which dropped us from leading the race to being 3<sup>rd</sup>. When Gerry Brady took over the running for leg 6 the rest of us were feeling quite deflated as a result of blowing such a good chance of winning. But Gerry had other ideas and set off on his mission to haul us back into contention. We drove around to the Slieve Maan road high point and anxiously awaited the runners. I have never seen

such focus and determination on any runner as I saw in on Gerry at that point. His focus was so total that he didn't seem to register our screams of encouragement. He had taken a huge amount of time back and looked as if he would get us back to 2<sup>nd</sup> by the end of his leg. In the end he not only got us back to 2<sup>nd</sup>, but built a good enough lead to enable us to hold off the chasing team whilst overhauling the team in front. He was totally and utterly spent at the end of his leg, but had single-handedly hauled us back in such an inspirational fashion that we had no choice but to give it our all on in the remaining legs.

The ridiculous loop eventually takes me onto the military road, for a quick run downhill before turning off again for another small hill climb on the other side. Looking in front of me I can see the hills of south Wicklow ranged out in front of me. This felt like another border line being crossed. I was leaving the big mountains (relatively speaking) of the northern section of the Wicklow Way behind and from now on would be in the smaller undulating hills of south Wicklow. Half way up the second climb of leg 6 I went through the 8 hour mark. I had the big crux climbs behind me. Things were definitely looking good. I started projecting forward and setting a more definite target time for myself. It had to be 14 hours. 6 hours remained to run my 3 remaining legs. That must be feasible!

The run down to the rendezvous at the leg 6 to 7 changeover seems to wind its way all over the mountain, only re-enforcing my opinion that this is the hardest leg of the relay. I pass a few tourists working their way up the Wicklow Way in the opposite direction to me. The last walker I pass gives me a big smile and greets me by my name. He must have been chatting with the support crew. I was very glad indeed to see Mary and Richard at the rendezvous. There is always the danger of confusion developing as a result of them missing the optional rendezvous. I needn't have worried though. They were doing a superb job and were in total control. I grab a yoghurt fruit drink, fruit juice and a handful of sweets and head out on the relay leg I've run more than any other.

My first thought as I head out on this section is that it was good not to be drinking isotonic drink for a change. I'm getting quite fed up of drinking the stuff, to the point where I need to switch to something else to ensure that I continue to consume enough liquids. The fruit juice is very tasty, but by the end of the carton I can really notice its acidity. For the rest of the leg I'll just have the yoghurt drink.

Being an ultra-runner I'm always happy to take the longest leg of the relay when they're being allocated amongst the runners. Indeed I would have a definite preference for the longest legs. As a result I'd raced this section of the Wicklow Way at least 3 times. As I run along my mind wanders back in time again to memories of past racing along this part of the trail. In particular I remember watching Gerry Lalor set out from the start of leg 7 and waiting anxiously for Gerry Brady to arrive, wondering if he could keep up his blistering effort to the end of his leg. He arrived in like an out of control steam train and handed over to me, 3 or 4 minutes behind Gerry Lalor. We were in second, but unfortunately for me the team which Gerry had relegated to 3<sup>rd</sup> had the strongest runner in the race, John Brooks, running leg 7 for them. As a result I kicked out of the transition knowing I'd have to run as fast and as optimally as I could for the leg to give the team a chance. I used this memory to

recreate the race atmosphere and pressure in my mind, and keep my pace going at a good steady fast tempo.

Even though the climbs are not as steep or as high as the earlier sections of the race they feel like they are getting harder. I'm well beyond the point where my legs are asking me to stop running and to have a little lie down. Mental concentration is getting more and more important to ensure that the pace remains steady. After a long fireroad climb another great vista of south Wicklow opens up before me, and I play games with myself trying to judge where exactly the Wicklow way will take me. In the distance I can see 5 or 6 windmills perched on a hill that weren't there the last time I was down this far into Wicklow. They seem a long way away though, so I'm not sure if the route will make it that far.

As I clatter downhill memories come back to me that the last time I was on this section of the route was about 18 hours into the Rogaine, in the darkness, feeling extremely sore and uncomfortable, not moving particularly fast. I'm in much better shape now, and relish zig-zagging down the tree-lined fireroads to the road junction, knowing how much faster I'm moving now in comparison.

When I cross the fence on the road I again remember back to trying to chase down Gerry Lalor, and keep ahead of an unseen John Brooks. I can see in my mind's eye Gerry ahead of me on the road, as I caught my first sight of him, and I again set off in pursuit of him. Of course, with this being an action-replay I know that I'll catch him again this time. The trick is to ensure that it's not a slow motion replay! This section of the route is a very long road section, so these mind games are very effective in not drifting off into boredom and keeping the steady forward progress going.

Just like the original live version, it takes a while to chase Gerry down and overtake him. I cross to the other side of the valley, heading down the one bit of non-road section on leg 7 before the river ford. As I'm heading down that I think about an online conversation I'd had recently with Ryan Sherlock. After I had posted up my intention to run the Wicklow Way Ryan had posted that he would like to try and break the cycling record sometime in October. It sounded like he was similarly motivated, and had the idea in his mind to do this for some time.

Very few people have cycled the entire Wicklow Way. I had heard of one attempt to go from South to North which failed agonisingly close to the finish when Robin Seymour ran out of energy trying to get up the last climb towards 3 Rock and couldn't continue. The only successful attempt that is known of, and therefore the record time, was when Beth McCluskey, Peter O'Farrell, Paul Mahon and I cycled it several years ago from North to South, with considerable logistical assistance provided by Jane and Graham Porter. We completed it in a board to board time of 12 hours and 4 minutes. As well as 2 punctures we had quite a few long refuelling and chatting stops along the way. This record is just waiting for someone to come along and break it.

As I ran down the short off-road section I was thinking about how it had been a little sketchy on the bike, because the tall grass was hiding the small rocks and hollows,

and envisioning Ryan flying down this at speed, taking it all in his stride. I looked at my watch to see that I was more than 9 hours in at this point. Ryan is one of the best mountain bikers in Ireland, and is particularly good at Marathon (long distance) races. I reckoned that Ryan would be finished his cycle down the Wicklow Way long before the 9 hour mark would be reached, and felt a little envious of that, as I had still got a long way to go at this point. Both Ryan and I both felt that for a biker of his ability something closer to 8 hours would be a more realistic target. This gave me an additional motivation to get the running record today. If I could break the record I would hold the running and cycling records simultaneously. I reckoned that if Ryan cycled it to the best of his ability it would be highly unlikely that anyone would have both the long distance running and cycling ability to be able to do that again.

Back on to the roads, and thoughts return to running, and trying to keep ahead of John Brooks on this section. I remember a few short sharp climbs on this section, but they pass by easily enough. However the relatively steep road descent down to the river ford hurts. The quad muscles are starting to get tired from all the pounding they are receiving. As you get further and further into an ultra run it actually becomes harder to run downhill rather than uphill. Uphill is a matter of persevering and keeping energy levels up. With downhill running the pain can get so severe that it becomes necessary to walk. As far back as my first real ultra run, a flat 100km race, I had noticed that my quads were the first muscles to give out and cause problems. I had an advantage over most other ultra runners in tackling this issue though. The huge amount of cycling I do strengthens up the muscles that running training doesn't normally cover.

At the river ford Mary and Richard are waiting at the second optional rendezvous. It's great to see them. They cheer me through and I splash on through the ford and begin the ascending. This little off-road climb can sometimes seem like a very testing drag, but my form is still good and I can jog my way up without needing to drop back to walking speed. The undulating section in the heather bounded track on the open mountain which follows seems to have been badly affected by the recent wet weather. Several sections look like a herd of wilder beast has migrated through, such are the number of hoof prints, and the depth of the mud. I realise that I've a bit less liquid than I'd like on this section, and ration out the remaining drink to last until the next rendezvous at the end of leg 7. My familiarity with this leg makes it go by with little or no fuss.

Reaching the bridge at the normal end to leg 7 I was expecting to find Mary and Richard, but there is no sign of them. This is worrying, as I've been out of liquids for 10 or 15 minutes now, and I've been really looking forward to grabbing some coke and restocking on water. I've still got the small bottle that held the yoghurt drink, so I plan to use that to get some water out of the next stream that I cross. The next short section is a nasty little road section which has that little bit too much traffic, mostly moving at high speed. When I get to the acute switchback turn a few hundred metres down the road I find Mary and Richard waiting for me. Phew. That's a welcome sight. I take on quite a lot of coke whilst Richard gets ready on his bike.

I run out to start leg 8 of 8 from the relay, leg 8 of 9 in my internal relay. The going is

much tougher now. I've been running for a long time, and even though I'm getting quite close to the end, it's getting ever harder to keep the pace up. My body is telling me that it's time for a nice long lie down, but I have to just ignore that. As we climb the laneway out of the transition I warn Richard that probably a bit too tired to talk, but manage to continue the conversation all the way up to the gates that lead onto the boggy farmer's track. I advise Richard that this section will probably be too mucky to cycle on, and send him off to do a loop around.

My theory was proved to be horribly correct. This was the longest continuous section of mucky boggy terrain I was to encounter over the whole day. The Wicklow way track seems to be used as a route to herd cattle through, and as a result the ground is very mucky to a considerable depth. I think about how Ryan is really going to hate this section when he is doing his cycling attempt, and at least I don't have to drag a bike through. It's pretty hard work just dragging myself through. No amount of careful foot placement can improve matters. I know that to my left there are open fields where the ground is probably more firm and grassy, but I have to stick to the marked Wicklow Way, no matter what.

Eventually, after what seems like at least half an hour, but was probably a little shorter, I make it out onto the roads, and can increase the pace again. It's taking a lot more concentration now to keep the pace high, and I sometimes notice that my speed drops when my mind wanders off. I was expecting to find Richard on this section of road somewhere, but there is no sign of him. I was later to learn that he punctured not too long after leaving me, and had to call Mary to be rescued.

This leg of the Wicklow way relay was radically changed after the first year of the race. Rather than follow the marked route the relay goes by road straight past the Dying Cow pub and on into Shillelagh. However I was one of the runners who had run the original route in the first year of the relay, which follows the Wicklow Way proper for a lot longer. I could remember from that experience that this leg can seem a lot longer and a lot tougher than its paper description would suggest.

By the time I reached the Dying Cow pub this was definitely the case. At this point I must be a long way down OS Map sheet 62, and be well on the way to having 100 kilometres behind me. I was certainly feeling it. At the Dying cow the Wicklow way turns sharply right and follows the road up a very steep hill. Almost immediately I decide that it's not worth trying to run this hill and settle back to walk up as briskly as I can. It's a relief not to be running. As the steepness of the hill alters in places I occasionally break back out into running before resuming my uphill march. As the hill eases back its steepness before cresting the top I have to make a big mental and physical effort to get running again. To my left the windmills that I could see in the distance a few hours back are looming above me on the hilltop, spinning in the gentle wind. I look out to my right and see the bulk of Lugnachoilla far in the distance to the north. I suddenly realised how far I had run today to get to this point. I'd normally consider lugnachoilla to be at the southern end of Wicklow, and there it was miles to the north of me.

The route to the next rendezvous is all on road, and seems to take an age to cover. All

ultra runs seem to involve experiencing a big mental low along the way, and in retrospect this was where I was getting mine. The road seemed to go on and on and on, without really getting anywhere. Even though I was gently descending it was still taking a big mental effort to stay running at a reasonable pace. I knew I would eventually reach a crossroads intersecting with the relatively busy road into Shillelagh, but there was no sign of it. Finally I got to a junction, but it was only a minor one, rather than the bigger one I was hoping for. At least the weather was good, and the thought crossed my mind that it would be oh so easy to give up at this point if it was a nasty rainy day. After another few kilometres I reach the busy road where the original leg 8 of the relay turned left to Shillelagh. I don't have the luxury of finishing in Shillelagh, so for me this is the end of leg 8, and all that remains is leg 9 to the finish. Time to say good bye to the Relay route and all its great memories.

Leg 9 is the one part of the Wicklow Way that I don't know very well at all. The only time I had covered the ground previously was when we cycled it. I had spent some time studying this part of the Wicklow Way on sheet 62 the night before the run, building a mental image of the route for myself, and cross referencing it with my memories of the cycle.

A shimmy through the crossroads takes me to a short little hill, which cruelly gets a little steeper with every step. At the top of the hill, as arranged, Mary and Richard are parked and waiting for me. Richard is videoing as I approach them, and I shout out that it really feels like ultra running now. I think they may have been a little worried about how I was looking. But considering the amount of running I had already done to get to this point I was in very good shape. I went around to the food stash and resupplied my pockets, took yet more coke and isotonic on board, and grabbed a water bottle before once again heading off down the route.

Restarting running is really getting hard now, but this will hopefully be one of the last times I'll be doing it from a standing start. After a few hundred metres I'm back into the groove and running my steady pace, aided by the flat and gently descending road. A right turn takes me off this road and onto lesser road which looks as if it going to inevitably bring me up a long hill to the forests I can see on the skyline of the nearby mountain. The road runs flat and then descends for a while, until after twisting through a bridge over a river I'm confronted by a very sharp incline ahead.

This must be the famous Coronary hill. I remembered Simon's thoughts on this hill from his write-up, and in particular his thoughts on the aptness of its nickname. Under normal circumstances I'd probably put my head down and slowly run up this hill. However this was a long way from being normal circumstances, so I dropped back to a fast walking pace. For some reason the French national anthem was playing in my head, and I marched up the hill in time with my mental orchestra. As the anthem ended in triumph the hill eased back to a gentler incline and I resumed running again. Just after cresting the saddle which the road runs through, the Wicklow way turns right, and into a very large forest.

I remembered this next section from the cycle, and from my study of the map of the area. It was dark when we had cycled this section, and it seemed to twist and turn so

much that it felt like you were going around in circles. A lot of the forest had been felled in the intervening time, but running up the fireroads it still felt as if I was corkscrewing my way up the hill in ever decreasing circles, which was quite irritating. I wondered what the Wicklow Way planners were thinking, putting in such apparently convoluted routing. After what seemed like an age the route straightened out and slowly climbed uphill through the forest. I remember from the cycle that eventually I would take a left turn off the fireroad down a track to the road at the bottom of the hill. Cresting every bump in the climb I wondered would the left turn be nearby, but yet again it seemed to take an age to appear. Looking out beyond the hill to the panorama beyond, I could see the vast plain of Leinster, with an occasional hill in the distance. Nearby was one other lower hill, which I was pretty sure was going to be the last hill I would encounter before finishing. Knowing that this hill was lower than my current height and that the rest of the route was flat and downhill was very encouraging. The finish was now beginning to feel tangibly close.

Finally I made it to the left turn, and rapidly descended down the track to the road. It felt like I was nearly there, but I reminded myself that there were still plenty of kilometres to be run. From my mental image of the map I reckoned that there must still be at least 15km to go, which would probably be an hour and a half's running, all going well. Still plenty of work to be done.

I was surprised to meet Mary and Richard as I hit the road. This was not a pre-arranged rendezvous point, and up until this point I had only met them where arranged. They seemed to be enjoying the day, and were very much into the spirit of the run at this stage. I exchanged quick greetings and continued running. I hadn't planned to pick up any supplies here, and I was happy to keep going, even with the opportunity to grab some refreshments. Checking the time and estimating how long was left to run, things were looking good. Finishing in less than 14 hours was now such a strong possibility that I turned it into an imperative target.

The road headed off in the "wrong" direction, away from the last hill, before winding its way around and then back towards the "right" direction. At this stage I was running along pretty much automatically. Gentle bumps, rather than major inclines, made it easy to just run along steadily. This was more like classic road running rather than hill running. Time and distance passed steadily by. Eventually I reached turn-off onto the fireroad leading up the last hill. Mary and Richard were parked at the junction, and I grabbed a last swig of Coke, more as a mental boost than anything else. This was the last rendezvous on the route, so I told them I'd see them at the finish and headed up the Wicklow way and into the forest.

I had strong memories of this hill from my time cycling the route. The first climb was relatively easy to cycle, and proved to be equally straightforward to run. My strongest memory from the cycle was Beth getting her first puncture of the day here, only a (relatively) short distance from the finish, and waving us on, confident in her ability to get it quickly fixed. We all ended up coming back to help with the repair, but we were all so tired that the puncture probably took 2 or 3 times longer to fix than it should have. At least I had no puncture worries now.

Unfortunately, the climb turned out to be a lot longer than I remembered, although my map-memories had already led me to believe it might be. After the initial climb the track slowly descended along the side of the hill, until it turned and began its second major ascent. As soon as I began running up the hill the memories of cycling it came back to me. At this stage I was no longer worrying about conserving energy for the run to the finish. This was the run to the finish. As I started descending again after the second climb I knew that it was all downhill and flat from here.

As I followed the occasional marker post for the Wicklow Way down the fireroads I came to the first ambiguous marker I had met all day. The marker was so far in off the fireroad that it wasn't clear whether it was indicating to make a right turn downhill on fireroad, or to go to the marker and turn down a track from there. A quick investigation revealed there was no other track, although there was more than enough bashed down vegetation to indicate that I wasn't the first to be confused by this marker. Allowing for the possibility of route finding problems like this was what led me to start the run at 4am. I was glad to have encountered this problem in daylight, and as a result to quickly figure out the right way to proceed.

As I reached the end of the fireroad coming down off the hill and turned onto the minor road that led out of the forest I was greeted by Mick Hanney, who had driven out to see how I was going. Mick, as ever, was full of good natured enthusiasm, and gave me plenty of encouragement, telling me I was nearly home and dry, with only about 5km on road to go. He had also brought along his camera and started taking some pictures. I was glad that there would be some taken.

The potholed minor road led out onto a bigger tarmacked road. It was all road-running from here to the finish. Shortly afterwards I came to a junction where the Wicklow Way branched right towards Clonegal. A signpost on the junction indicated that it was 5km to the finish. I knew that up until now I had been running at roughly 10KMPH. I was now 13 hours and 20 minutes into the run. If I maintained my pace I'd finish in a time of 13:50 or thereabouts. In real time, that would be 6:05pm. I pushed myself on, and threw everything into one last effort to get to the finish as fast as possible, and upped my pace.

Mick was at the next major junction, with about 3 km to go, taking pictures. Again he shouted encouragement and said I was running well. I knew myself that I was running very well under the circumstances. The fact that I was able to up the pace at this point indicated that I had judged the effort very well throughout the day. Another kilometre down the road and I could see the church spires of Clonegal in the distance. Even though it was now getting more difficult to hold the higher pace, this sight spurred me to keep the effort up. The evening sunlight was lighting up the scene around me beautifully. Ireland is a great country in this weather.

After another few minutes of intense running the road side houses were becoming more frequent, and it felt like I was on the outskirts of the town. I passed the signpost indicating I was entering Clonegal.... Keep pushing, nearly there. The church bells were starting to ring out, and I knew this meant that it was almost 6 o'clock. It looks like the increase in pace has knocked about 5 minutes off my estimate for the last 5k.

Mary Richard, Mick and his kids were on the road ahead of me... throw everything into the run to the finish, there is nothing to conserve.

I round the last corner at the village green and run up to the Board indicating the end of the Wicklow Way and slam into it. Woohooo! Done! Finished! I stop my watch and immediately head over to the bench next to the board and take one of the hardest earned sit-downs I've ever had. Richard confirms a time of 13 hours, 46 minutes and an all important one second. I think it's going to be several hours before I stop smiling. That's over four and a half hours taken off the previous record and it's well within 2 hours of the cycling record. I was tired, sore and stiff, but not quite as bad as I thought I would be. Richard and Mick took a few photographs at the board, as I babbled away in delight, discussing the ups and downs of the day. After putting on some warmer clothes we made our way to the local chipper in Clonegal. Burgers and chips might not be thought of as the ideal dinner for ultra-runners, but I reckoned I'd done enough exercise on the day to have earned it!

Looking back on the day, it was one of the best runs I've ever managed. The whole day was almost perfect, with only one or two minor niggles throughout. Many years ago I had set myself three big targets in Ultra running, inspired by the stories and achievements of the ultra runners I knew. 3 or 4 years ago I had achieved my first target by breaking the record for the Wicklow Ultra race. Breaking the Wicklow Way record had now added the second. Within a month, and much to my own surprise, I managed to complete the set, but that's a whole other story...

Within 2 months, Ryan Sherlock went on to break the cycling record in a time of just over 8 hours, which was a superb time. I think it makes the possibility of one person holding both the running and cycling record at the same time almost impossible. I'm glad that Ryan left me with a small amount of time holding both records simultaneously.

I'd like to thank everyone who helped me in any way with the record attempt. Biggest thanks goes to my logistical support Mary Connolly and Richard Nunan. Without their help it would have been impossible to run the route so well. A huge thanks also to Jason Reid for co-running such a long distance with me. Thanks to Brendan Doherty, Brendan Lawlor and Mick Hanney for meeting me en-route and giving me support and encouragement. It was all very much appreciated. Finally I'd like to thank everyone who contacted me with messages of support both before and after the run.