

Stephen Smyth - IM 70.3 Youghal 2022 Race Report

May 16, 2024



FOMO

Fear of missing out is what made me do it. Early August 2021 there was a bit of a buzz about 70.3 Cork on the club social media and despite my best efforts to ignore it I got caught up in a whirlwind of peer pressure/enthusiasm/sludging and one-upmanship which resulted in me giving the nice people in Ironman a chunk of money for a race that was over a year away. So loads of time to train....right? I settled into a fairly decent routine of track sessions (which I got a huge amount of benefit from) tempo runs, club swim sessions, long cycles and runs and even the Zwift league over the winter. The results were there to be seen and I figured I'd be able to give a good account of myself. Things were going just grand until mid summer when a bout of gastro wiped me out for a few days and sapped my energy , particularly for running, for a good couple of weeks. Then a little back issue in July had a similar effect. The upshot was that I wasn't making the track sessions and I hadn't got my distances up to where they should have been for the long runs.

But enough excuses. As long as it wasn't too hot I reckoned Id be ok....I just can't handle running in the heat. One thing that I did do in the weeks before the race is make a trip down to Youghal and did a practice run of the bicycle course . Including a dry run of the infamous Windmill Hill. it is genuinely terrifying the first time

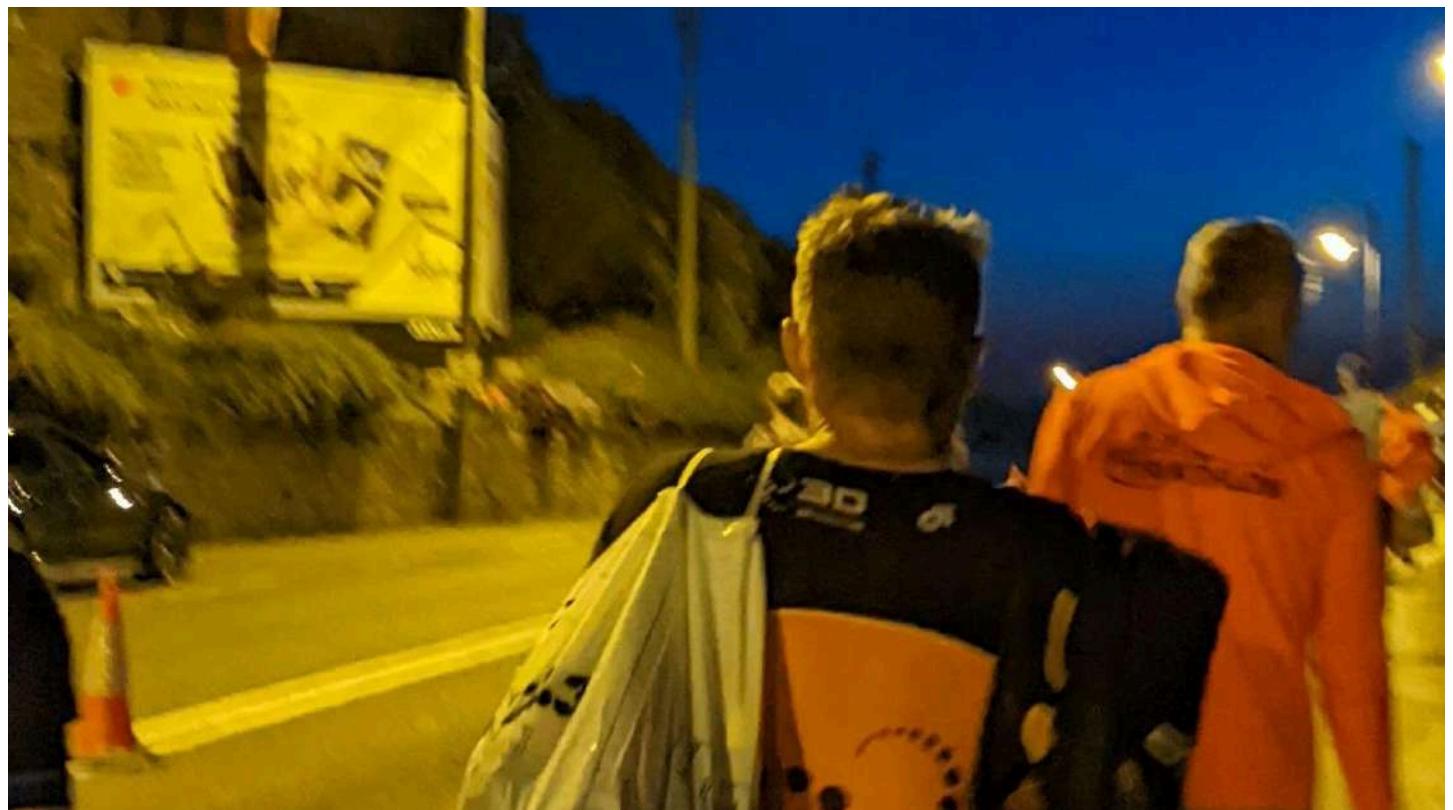
you see it. Like somebody put a wall where a road should be. But through sheer stubbornness I got up it which, if nothing else, gave me the confidence to know I could probably do it on the race day.

Pre Race

Unsurprisingly, accommodation was very difficult to find, particularly after COVID, everyone had booked their places well in advance. So a group of us banded together and booked an airbnb in a little town called Kilmacthomas which was a 40 minutes drive from Youghal. Everyone arrived down around the middle of the day on Friday to register and to do the all important setting up of their bike in transition and the loading up of the famous Ironman transition bags.

Then all back to the house. 90% of the chat was about what a terrible idea it was to put Windmill Hill on the course. Just mean-spirited and cruel. Especially seeing as it was right at the end of the 90k. The other 10% of the chat was about what time we needed to set our alarms for. We settled on 3am. Like I said, it was sooooooo early

Race Day



3am and everyone is up, coffee is on and people have their breakfast of choice. Then all into the cars and off we go. Despite having booked tickets for a shuttle bus from an edge-of-town carpark, our resident Parking Guru, Sean Rooney, reckoned we would be able to park a lot closer to the race start and sure enough he was right. There was still a 2 k walk to transition but it was better than hoping that the shuttle bus would run exactly as it was supposed to....this is Ireland after all.

Once in transition all you could do was check your nutrition and hydration were on the bike and also....vitally....check your tyre pressure. More than one of us had to pump up their tyres. After that you make

the all important toilet visit then on with the wetsuit and walk to the startline



The Swim



Despite the fact that it was 6 in the morning the entire town seemed to have come out to cheer us on. As AC/DC blasted over the speakers, I took my position in the queue for the start, shuffled forward and just as I approached the timing mat, turned to the complete stranger beside me, wished them luck and said, with a smile, "This was a terrible Idea". They smiled back in agreement then we launched ourselves into the sea.....which was absolutely lovely. I can never remember a race where the water temperature was as perfect as it was that morning. it was also almost completely flat. Dream conditions . There was a very slight current but it was only against us for the first quarter of the race. It was a little busy at the first two buoys but then I was able to find my own space and go into cruise mode. The time flew and before I knew it I was

standing up and jogging up the red carpet to the cheers of the spectators. While I didn't check what my swim time was, I was happy that I had gauged my effort right so that I wasn't gasping on my way to T1. Into the changing tent, on with helmet and shoes, wetsuit in the bag and off we go again..

The Bike



The start of the bike course is nice and flat so you can settle in fairly quickly. I would be a relatively strong swimmer so the roads were not too busy with other racers either. As the cycle went on a few people that I knew, who would be much stronger cyclists than me, whizzed by and said hello (one of them even did so twice, but that's a story for them to tell). For the first 50k the roads are basically flat. But this being rural Ireland the road quality isvariable. Some sections were like riding on the continent, others were very unforgiving. So much so that at about 40k the canister which I keep my spare tubes, gas, levers etc, popped out of the bottle cage as I was on a fast downhill. I had a couple of seconds to make a decision and I decided to plough ahead and hope I didn't get a flat. In hindsight that may not have been the smart thing to do as I would only have lost 20 or seconds most likely. But on the day I had a head of steam up and I didn't want to lose that momentum.

Once you reach Midleton there is a series of long drags for the next 25k. Nothing overly arduous, but you just have to set your effort level and stick with it. Regardless of whether people are passing you or not. I'm not the worlds best climber so I just had to accept that some people that I had passed earlier were going to go past me, but I was fine with that. At this point I should mention the weather. Earlier in the week the forecast said it was going to be around 21 degrees on race day. But as the day loomed closer this got revised up....and up and up. Now they were saying it was going to be around 26 degrees, maybe more. It was only once I started these drags that I became conscious of the temperature. But the course was well planned so the water stations were exactly where they needed to be and I even managed to take the offered water bottles and dispose of the empties without slowing down, which made me feel like I was a pro cyclist.

What goes up must come down, so there were some fast descents towards Youghal , though somewhat tempered by the quality of the road surface . Once I was within a few kilometres of Youghal I had two thoughts. One, even if I get a puncture now I will be able to get to T2 and two, I was nearly at that f##king hill!!! Once in the town I emptied my remaining water so as not to be carrying any more weight up the hill than was absolutely necessary and switched to an easy gear to try and loosen the legs up. The corner at the bottom of the hill approached, I switched to my easiest gear, said a quick prayer to the cycling gods, turned the corner and.....

The ROAR that greeted me was like nothing I have ever experienced. Hundreds upon hundreds of people either side of the road screaming at you to Get. Up. That. Hill. It was visceral, it was undiluted raw emotion, it gave you 20% more power in your legs. There was no way I was not going to cycle up that hill. I am not sure what I said but I know I roared back at the crowd, then they roared back even louder and I went even harder. Then I saw Caitriona Campbell, in club colours at the side of the road, yelling louder than everyone else. That was another 10% extra power in the legs. I still get emotional thinking about those 2 minutes and 48 seconds. Incredible. I was at the top, the dismount line 100 metres ahead of me and then I became really, really conscious of the heat. I racked the bike, into the tent, put on runners, visor and a healthy extra layer of sun cream. Grabbed a bottle of water and trotted out

The Run



The first 2 kilometres of the run are downhill into the town.I took it nice and easy and made sure I drank. It became very obvious very quickly but this was not going to be a fast run. As I said earlier I struggle to run in the heat at the best of times nevermind after just finishing a long cycle. So I plodded along and it just got hotter. I made the decision that I would walk through every aid station rather than try to run. The course was a convoluted one through and outside the town with lots of turnarounds. However this did mean that the water stations were very frequent because one station could serve both sides of the road. On the first lap there was some shade in the town but I knew that the closer we got to midday this would disappear and it would only get hotter. As I approached each water station the volunteers would offer one cup of water to drink and then ask if you wanted more water thrown on you. It was an offer I always accepted. Once you got

outside the town, many of the residents were standing outside their houses with garden hoses and they would spray you literally from head to foot to keep you cool. Lifesavers.

So far, my plan of taking it easy and walking the aid stations was working , although I noticed that every time I started to run again the legs took that little bit longer to get into gear. At this stage I was beginning to see other 3Ders on the course, Conor Gogarty and Sean Rooney were well ahead of me but I was ahead of Alan, James and Maggie. All I wanted at that point was to maintain that status quo. But my legs were just not going to make that easy for me. They were getting progressively heavier and heavier. I had energy, my heart rate was fine, I was hydrating to beat the band but my legs just wouldn't work the way I wanted them to.

Somewhere between 13 and 14k the wheels just came off and I had to resort to a run/walk strategy. I would make little deals with myself. If you run 400 metres you can walk for 200 metres etc etc. All the time I was conscious that my clubmates behind me were drawing closer. While everybody was suffering in the heat, every time I saw them they were running while I was walking. How much of a buffer did I have? I figured if any of them was going to catch me it would be James. So I just kept going. Eventually the finish line was in sight and, as always happens, my legs then decided that they would let me run across the finish line, rather than crawl. And there was still no sign of James. Once again the crowds in Youghal were unbelievable and, just like the Hill, I found energy that I didn't have before and actually ran across the line like I was in the Olympics!



The Aftermath

Once I had managed to find my way to the athletes tent and got myself some pizza and a 99. I was able to get my medal engraved with my splits. This was how I found out my time. 6 Hours 24 Minutes 53 Seconds. Which I was delighted with. I had told myself beforehand that under 6 hours would be amazing, but between 6 and 6 and a half hours would be great. So to get inside that bracket , after that run, was fantastic. I looked at my splits and realised that I had been faster on both the swim and the bike than I thought I would be. By quite a margin too. I managed to find Sean and Conor (in the pub near the finish line , naturally) and as our

other clubmates crossed the line we were able to check their times. It turns out that James did beat me, as he started his swim a few minutes after me, but if I didn't have the motivation of not letting him pass me I would have been much slower and probably disappointed. And I certainly wasn't disappointed



Conclusion

I have a few takeaways from the weekend:

- Where possible, do things like this with clubmates. It makes such a difference.
- If, like there was this weekend, there is another race the next day, go and cheer them on. You will know the difference it makes.
- Nobody ever does a perfect race. Just take what comes and roll with it.
- Windmill Hill was the undisputed highlight of the race.
- The people of Youghal went above and beyond in their support for the both races. An atmosphere like nothing I have seen, anywhere.

And finally, my last takeaway point is that no matter how enjoyable the race was, it's hard to beat watching people do twice the distance the following day, from the comfort of a stool at a bar on the run course....

LEARN MORE
