

Claire Jones - Art O'Neill - 21st January 2022

May 16, 2024

Preface.

On January 21st 2022, I set out to complete the Art O'Neill Challenge, an adventure that would bring me from Dublin Castle to Glenmalure in a little over 13 hours. It feels a bit wrong to call this a "race" report as I wasn't really racing. For me, this was a personal challenge and an opportunity for adventure. Time and placing were irrelevant and hence, this report comes with a warning – there will unfortunately be very little stats, times or techy info! You will, however, hopefully get an idea of what I was up to and the experience that is the Art O'Neill (AON) Challenge. I've enjoyed reading so many 3D race reports over the years but have never written one myself, so I thought I'd take the opportunity to repay the debt. That being said ...let's get into it!

The Seed is Planted.



For those who are not familiar with the event, it is a 60k challenge which commemorates the plight of Art O'Neill, his brother Henry O'Neill and Hugh O'Donnell after their escape from Dublin Castle on a cold winter's night in 1592. Henry and Hugh made it to safety in Glenmalure but Art unfortunately succumbed to

hypothermia along the way and hence, the challenge is named in his honour. The history is very much the substance of this event and you can't help but think about their plight when you're out in the vast, dark landscape of West Wicklow. In honour of this history, and for conservation reasons, the event organisers do not provide you with directions or a route map. You have to figure that out yourself. Although there is no one specific "route" per se, there are some mandatory checkpoints along the way. However, you are free to take any course or route that gets you to these checkpoints and ultimately, to Glenmalur before the time cut off. There are 3 options for completing this event;

1. Walk the entire route
2. Hybrid – run the first 30k, hike the second 30k
3. Ultra- Run the full route. I choose the Hybrid option

I'm not sure when I first heard about this event presumably through club chit-chat or a past participant. Nonetheless, the seed was planted a good few years back and something about the AON always intrigued me. So much so that I slowly started to have an annual AON ritual. Around November time, I would get the alert that the event was going to open up for entries. I would inspect all the info on their web page, review the route, review the topography, ask around if anyone had done it or was interested in doing it, almost register, but then ultimately not follow through.

I always thought I wasn't fit enough / strong enough / hard enough / experienced enough etc etc...the list went on! January would roll around and I would see the race pictures and reports online and a little part of me would wish that I had just "gone for it". I'll be honest, I did this for a good couple of years before I actually bit the bullet and started throwing my name in the lottery hat. This year, similar to last year, I got the email from event organisers saying, "Unfortunately you have not been selected for a place on the AON Challenge 2022". My response was bittersweet. I was of course disappointed, but also extremely relieved! I could tell myself I tried but alas, it just wasn't meant to be, the decision was out of my hands. Until of course it wasn't.....there must have been a few withdrawals after the initial selection because a few weeks later I got another email saying "Claire, Congratulations! You have secured a place on the AON Challenge 2022". Oh Crap.....

It's GO time.

Christmas came and went, and I enjoyed it like everyone else. Running fell to the wayside and eating and drinking became my new pastime. I hadn't actually verbalised out loud that I was doing the event as I was still digesting the idea myself and a little part of me didn't want my blissful ignorance to end. Although once January came around I knew I had to start making shapes if I was actually going to get through it. During one of our regular Saturday morning runs I eventually told James Barry of my plans and in true James fashion, he offered nothing but encouraging words!

So I started the process of testing out gear, studying maps of the route and doing section reces when I could. Now the purists will say that the AON should be self-navigated with a map and compass and whilst GPS watches are not prohibited, they are discouraged. I get this. I even agree with the sentiment and hats off to anyone with that level of skill. But I must admit, there was no way I was heading into the Wicklow

Mountains on my own in the middle of the night without some resemblance of a route downloaded to my Garmin! So after a quick shout out on the 3D club page, Sandra Carwood got in touch and sent me on a GPX file of her husband Will's last attempt of the route. With this in my possession, I was one step closer to making this dream a reality – thank you Sandra and Will! Slowly but surely race week rolled around and I would find myself regularly sitting on the living room floor surrounded by running and hiking gear doing the oh-so-familiar pack/unpack/repack pre-race faffing. I haven't quite decided yet if this ritual is; a) a total waste of time or b) helpful mental preparation for something big. The jury is still out on that one – I welcome all thoughts!

Anyway, the point of my rambling so far is to highlight that, for me, all the hard work was done by the time I got to the AON start line and hence if I had started this race report there, it would have appeared all-too-easy. For me, the hardest part, by far, was getting over my fears and signing up for the bloody thing. So by the time race day rolled around, I had worried all the worries and there really was nothing left to do but enjoy the experience. I felt nothing but excitement for what was to come and after some mandatory gear and bag checks, I was good to go. In an effort to keep the event covid-friendly, there was no mass start this year. Instead, a rolling start was employed with the walkers heading off first, then the hybrids, then the ultras. Niall dropped me in to Dublin Castle and I waited patiently for my 9.10pm start time. When the time came I looked around, took stock, and decided to get going. I took a deep breath, walked through the castle gates headed off into the night.



The first couple of kms pass easily and I tell myself I'm just out on another evening run. I check landmarks off my mental race route; Leo Burdocks on the right, St. Patricks Cathedral on the left, over the canal bridge, right at Harold's cross junction, past the Kimmage takeaways, the list goes on. The odd car beeps and pedestrians offer words of encouragements. I'm close to Terenure now and there's a woman standing on the footpath cheering me on and taking my photo. I figure she must be a race martial and I smile for the photo and give her a polite nod. However, my politeness doesn't last long, and I squeal with excitement when I realise its none other than 3D Legend Morag Pollock! I had told Morag I was doing the race earlier in the day and she had come out to give me cheer! I was beyond touched by this gesture and as brief as this encounter was, it spurred me on through the next section of road!



Getting the Right Mindset.

Some years ago, ex-club member and run coach Any Kinane was helping me train for the New York Marathon. In doing so, he has sent me on an article that detailed the route using the analogy "The 5 Bites of the Big Apple". The concept was simple, break the race down into bite sizes pieces (in the case of New York Marathon, each bite was a borough) and eat them one at a time. The concept has always stuck with me and I try to do this with all races now. For AON, I imagined it was two races and I just happened to be doing them both on the same night. I had 30k to run in the first section so all I needed to do was get myself to

Ballynultagh Woods and I would figure the rest out when I got there. With that in mind, I kept focused on this first bite of the apple and did not let myself think about what else was ahead.



Town to Firhouse was fairly uneventful and straight forward and the mileage ticked along handy enough. However, once you cross the M50 bridge at the Old Bawn Shopping Centre, the mood starts to change. You start to leave the city behind, and the climbing begins. The next few kms along Bohernabreena Road transitions you from runner to adventurer and I loved it for this reason. The streetlamps die out and the headtorch's come out. The hilly ascents kill any chatter amongst participants and the objective now is to get to stone cross and make an all-important left-hand turn for Kilbride.

I had done a recce of this section the week previous and I'll be honest, it had filled me full of dread. The landscape around Kilbride is impressive, but also quite ominous and the vastness of the mountains is imposing. Just for reference - If you have ever seen "Ultimate Hell Week", its setting - the Kilbride Army Training Camp - is where I'm referring to. I am, however, extremely surprised to find that in the middle of night, in the pitch black, I have zero fear. My headtorch illuminates a few feet in front of me and this slowly becomes my little world for the night. I can't make out the mountains in the distance, or the length or elevation of the hill I'm running up. I put effort in when I feel the road rising upwards and I enjoy the freeness of the downhills when I meet them. There are no worries in my little microenvironment because all I can do is focus on the few feet of lit up road in front of me. I do believe that there are a million and one benefits of running, and only a few of these relate to physical fitness. The lack of fear I had running through this section was an unexpected lesson in how being present and mindful in the moment shapes your entire outlook on situations and I'm very grateful to this AON experience for reminding me of this.



I'm careful not to push too hard over this hilly section as I was advised by more than person to conserve my energy for the "real challenge" that was the mountain section. I heeded this advice and walk when I need to, using the opportunity to eat or drink. One more steep (4km!) climb and I can finally see the lights of the halfway point – race one done! Before I know it, a volunteer is handing me my checked bag and I'm picking out a spot to position myself.

As I mentioned earlier, my plan was to run the first 30k and hike the second 30k. I was pretty comfortable in my run gear and feeling good, so the temptation is to stay as I am and save myself time. However, I also know that being warm and dry is crucial to getting through the next section and ultimately, to the finish line. I'm already way out of my depth in terms of fitness and technical ability, so I need to control the other variables. Hence, I stick to my original plan and do a full clothing change here, making sure to layer up and get myself water and wind proof. I also use the opportunity to get some hot food in. Catriona Campbell had loaned me a hot food flask and I was so grateful for it at this point of the race! It's 1.30am and I'm ready for my late-night feed. I once again heeded the advice of those that had gone before me and make a point of not getting too comfortable at the fire pits. The hardest leg is still ahead of me so as tempting as it was to stay there for another bit, I knew I had to push on. After a quick bowl of noodles and a hot cup of tea, I checked my bag back in with the volunteers and I was ready for road once again.



Now for the hard part

The first mile or so is road. I've borrowed hiking poles from a friend, so I take my time to try them out, finding my rhythm and at this point I'm thinking "this aint so bad". Alas, the road eventually runs out and we are into our first climb over Black Hill. Looking back, this was not the hardest section in terms of the elevation or terrain, but it was a trial by fire of sorts. The ground is very wet and boggy and trying to stay upright becomes the main challenge. I'm successful about 90% of the time. It hadn't rained for days and I had made the VERY naïve mistake of taking my gaiters out of my bag during one of my many faffing sessions on the living room floor. Big Mistake. Huge.

Within about 10 minutes of climbing I had two soaking wet feet but with no headspace for negativity I choose to ignore the sludging sensation and decided I just had to just get on with it. Lesson learned the hard way – never ever leave your gaiters at home, Wicklow is Wicklow regardless of the weather in the rest of Ireland!

The higher we climb the thicker the fog becomes and it's at this point that the headtorches start to disperse. The darkness is disorientating and it's all too easy to go off course. The terrain gets more difficult through Billy Byrnes Gap and I even fall into a large hole at point. Some time passes and I begin to realise that I'm on the right side of the Ballinagee River and all the other headtorches are on the left. I stop periodical to attempt a crossing but there is no safe way, so I decide to just walk along with the river. I know it runs south so I know I'm heading in the right direction, even if I am a bit spooked that I'm completely alone on this side. I eventually find a safe place to cross and I'm helped by the headtorch's of 3 hikers on the other side who guide me on my foot placement. They are a friendly bunch and we navigate the next couple of kms as a group. I was so busy trying to stay upright/navigate/not fall into rivers that I hadn't taken in any food over this section and I could feel myself failing. That alltoo-familiar "bonk" sensation was creeping in so I make an effort to get some food in. I arrive into Check Point 2 tired and hungry, but also pretty proud of what I had just done. For context, the first 30k of road running took me 3.5 hours. This next section of 10k took me the same length of time. It's now 5am and they can't get the porridge into me quick enough!

With 20k still to go I push out of Check Point 2 and immediately start into another steep climb. The next section reveals itself to be a long and hard hike through gorse and bog and I'm cautious with every step. More experienced hikers push by me with decent speed, but I could not afford to take the same risks. So onwards I pushed, slow and steady, falling into the odd bog hole but getting back up again. I enjoyed the toughness in a weird way, there were many times that getting from A to B was a full body activity and the constant changing of terrain kept me fresh and on my toes. There were a lot of times I would have to lower myself down from a ridge, or pull myself up out onto a riverbank. My legs had started to get tired now and the softness of the ground meant it was very difficult to get good anchorage. So I figured out a system for such scenarios...

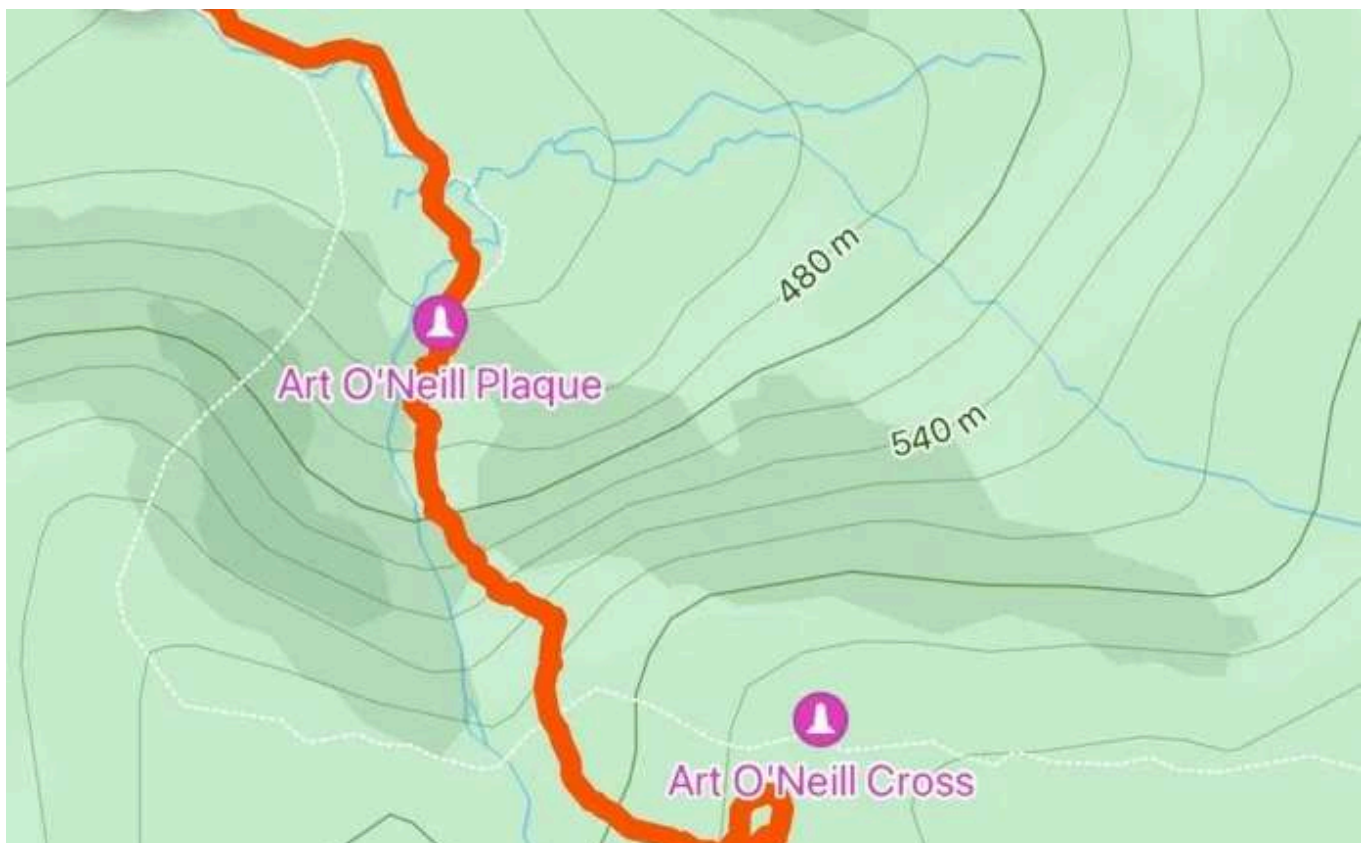
- Step 1- Bum slide down into the stream
- Step 2 – anchor walking poles and choose footing carefully
- Step3 – take your poles off and throw them up onto the ledge in front
- Step 4 – grab onto gorse and pull yourself up until you can throw a leg over
- Step 5 – stand up, dust yourself down, move on to the next one

It was strangely familiar to my system of getting out of the deep end of Belvadere swimming swim after a tough Monday night session!

The sun eventually came up a little after 8am and it gave me a huge boost. I could see for the first time since starting the race and that lovely orange hue of Wicklow is a heart-warming sight. With the newfound brightness I try to reorient myself, I should be hitting Arts Cross now but its nowhere to be seen. I also haven't seen a person for a very long time and I now longer had the darkness to blame. I keep going in the hoping that I will come upon it any moment, although I eventually hit the Glenmalure Valley and I know that I've swung too far west and I've missed it. Missing Arts Cross has 2 implications. It's a mandatory checkpoint so I think I will be a DNF now. Secondly, and more importantly, Arts Cross check in was a signal to my husband Niall, that I was on the homestretch. I didn't mind waiting at the finish for a lift, but I grew increasingly concerned that my friends and family tracking me would think something had happened. I spent a bit of time worrying about this, but in the end decided that I had to redirect my attention back to the task at hand and get myself to Glenmalure.



The last 8k treats you to early morning views on Lugduff on the left. It is simply beautiful and I'm happy to be enjoying the mountains from sea level again. I round into Baravore carpark (the old finish line) and I know I have less than 5k to go. I'm back on road now and the sun is up, so I remove a few layers and reset my mind for the last stretch. I jog/shuffle the next couple of kms and soak up the feeling. There is a little hill before you hit Glenmalure Lodge and I can't wait to get over it and into the finish. Once I've crested it, I'm overwhelmed to see Niall in the distance, and I throw my hiking pole into the air in a "I DID IT!" kind of way and start bounding towards him. He ushers me in towards the official finish line where my friend Sinead is also waiting with a "Claire 4 Art 2022" sign. I can't quite take it in, I had missed the cross and wasn't expecting anybody!



It would transpire that I was in fact within 300m of Arts Cross, as you can see in the picture to the left. This wasn't close enough for me to see it, but it was enough to register me at the checkpoint. So whilst I was frantically trying to get text messages out to tell people I was in fact alive and well, there was no panic, I had made all checkpoints and an official finisher!

I want to say a very BIG THANK YOU to all the amazing club mates and friends who helped get me to this finish line! You're the best!



If you are reading this report and also thinking of doing something bold this year, whether that's your first triathlon, returning to racing or perhaps taking the plunge and going long - my advice is to just go for it! Take the plunge and sign yourself up – everything else after that is "figure-out-able". That is the one big lesson I'm taking from AON. I can also guarantee you will you have an abundance of 3D help and support along the way!!!

Beir Bua, Claire J :)

