

## MAYO ULTRA 300 EVENT

I've always been fascinated by people who cycle long distances but I never thought I'd be one of them, I only fell into it when I was asked to help out with a charity cycle my one friend was organising, I said I'd do some of the training with them and suddenly a few months later I was in Mizen with the destination set as Malin Head. I didn't know it was going to be non-stop either !!. That was a supported cycle, with lead cars, people setting up food stops for us on the side of the road and full mechanical support, which makes life much easier for the cyclists, but you still have to pedal the bike.

Over the next couple of years, I did some more long charity cycles, I enjoyed every one of them and met some great people and cyclists in the process and eventually I went solo and competed in a 24-hour race on a 44km lap near Athy. Again, that was supported, I had people following my progress and feeding and looking after me all throughout the event.

In 2019 I changed track and went racing with the Irish Veterans Cycling association (IVCA) which was a shock to the system. The first season went ok and with that experience under my belt I felt I had prepared well for 2020, then Covid 19 happened and most of the 2021 & 2022 seasons were lost.

Last year my plans changed again. I had hoped to combine racing with the IVCA with a return to some longer endurance riding and had entered the Wild Mayo Ultra as a preparatory event for doing the Mondello24 race as part of a 2-person team with my daughter Emma. Training was going well until I got bronchitis in April which took a long time to clear up and I had to postpone my Mayo Ultra until 2023.

Solo unsupported ultra-races usually take place over distances from 200 km up to many thousands of Kms across continents. My chosen one was 300 kms around Mayo taking in a loop around the north of the county before heading out to Achill and back to the start/finish in Westport. One feature of the course is that most of the climbing comes in the last 100kms.

Training had gone well for me during the spring of 2023, and I was happy enough with how I was feeling coming up to the race, even when I picked up the dose of sinusitis that was circulating around home the week before the start. I thought I'd be OK with time for it to clear. As luck would have it, it took longer than I hoped but on Saturday 13th on May at 7.24 I was on the start line ready to go.



After a wee bit of razzmatazz I was off, my plan was to ride to 121 kms where there was a shop where I could get a coffee, some proper food and refill my water bottles. All seemed to be going well, sure I was passed by a few of the lads who started behind me and all of the supported riders but at times I could also see one or two up ahead of me that weren't drawing away. Turning off the main road to Furnace was my first taste of Mayo's back roads, we climbed and

dropped around beautiful lakes, then it was out into the mountains and up the main climb of

the first half of the course. I just rode over it steadily trying to save my energy for later and then had a lovely drop back down the other side. At this stage the breeze was rising, and we had what every cyclist dreams of, a lovely tail wind up to the north coast and the climb to Ceide Fields.

At my first stop in the shop, I was disappointed to find there was no deli so a coffee, and a couple of protein bars was my lunch, I filled my bottles, loaded up a few more bananas and headed on. While I was there, I met 2 of the other racers and one of them who knew the course said that he was worried that the wind would be a big factor in the next stretch to Achill.

He was dead right, up to the stop I had been fairly close to my schedule, but time just ran away on the long stretch south through Bangor Erris and on to Mullraney, a head wind and no shelter meant I was working hard at times to maintain 20 km/hr. Things didn't improve much



on the Atlantic drive until I turned north towards Achill sound, the tailwind was glorious again, even if it was going to be short lived.

Achill Sound was a compulsory stop, where the organisers had facilitated a bag drop there so I had some fresh supplies, a change of clothes and lights suitable for night riding ready to go.

The ladies at the stop were kind enough to give me some flapjacks

and a Coke and those along with some of their good cheer rubbing off on me gave me a boost heading out into Achill and Minaun.

Minaun is a beast, the first 1.6kms averages 14.5% with stretches at 20% and the road is narrow, rough and exposed. I had decided to strip anything I didn't need off the bike at the bottom and pick it up again on the way back down to save weight but even at that, it was torture trying to stay going uphill, a couple of cars tried to pass me at one stage and I had to clip out to get out of their way and had to walk a bit to get somewhere not so steep that I could get going again, higher up cramps stopped me again but I did ride the bike up most of it. Up top the wind was howling and we were in the mist and low clouds which meant that getting back down was almost as hard as getting up.

After that it was a case of getting out to Keem and then every kilometre would be a kilometre closer to home. I didn't find the climb into or out of it to be as bad as some had said, with the wind and the climbing I probably hadn't eaten enough in a while, so I sat on the beach for a minute and ate another flapjack before heading for home.

The wind on Achill was swirling all over the place, one minute in your face, the next pushing you along, it was hard to settle into a rhythm. I had one final stop to fill my bottles at a garage before pushing on for Achill Sound, Mullranny and home. Once I was off the island the wind was mostly side to tail and while the legs and body were tired, I made reasonable progress back to Westport.

I finished the 300kms with 3300m of climbing in just over 14 hours, 13 of those peddling the bike, a little slower than I had hoped but I hadn't expected the wind to be as strong early in the day.

It's a great event, well worth the trip up to do and I hope it's set me up for a tilt at the Mondello 24-hour race in June.

