



Blackstairs Cycling Challenge 23rd April 2017

The end of April, it can only mean one thing, time for the annual pilgrimage up Mount Leinster. This was my 3rd time doing this event, it's a super day out particularly when the weather is kind. It is always really well supported (estimated 800 participants this year), made up mostly by mid life crisis aged folk from different cycling & triathlon clubs around Leinster. It's for a great cause, a number of worthy charities in fact, is a super route, is really well marshalled/signaled and has become something of a must do for the old dogs of Athy Tri Club. Don't argue lads, we are the old guard now!

There are a number of distances on offer but most take on the 80k or 105k, with only the super human going back for a 2nd lash at the main climb to complete the full 140k route.

The 105km route takes you through Goresbridge - Gowran – Thomastown (25k) - Inistioge – Graiguenamanagh - Borris(53k Food Stop) - Ballymurphy (60k)- Kiltlealy – Bunclody (80k) - Nine Stones(Mt Leinster 93k) - Tom Duff - Ballinree - Corries – Ballinkillen (105k).



The morning started with a very organised registration & superbly well stocked breakfast selection in Ballinkillen Community centre. The grub is top notch at this event. We managed to gather the majority of the ATC crew for the start at 9am. I counted 11 of us at the off. Well, 9 really after John O'Toole blanked us for his real friends & DJ Loughman took off like a bat out of hell with his bluetooth soundsystem blarring out his ar5e or back pocket or wherever he'd hidden the mad music making device. I've never known a fella like him for cycling gadgets.

Once the masses stretched out a little the ATC peloton was lead by club big guns Padraig Kavanagh, Joe Dunne & Maggie Owens/Peadar for the 1st hour. Padraig was clearly in a hurry to chase down his Mt. Leinster demons (more on that later) & set a serious pace. Despite the pleading of less able cyclists (namely myself), that pace didn't falter and my involvement in the ATC peloton ended at around 35k with the approach of the 1st climb of the day at Inistioge – which goes on for about 6k and has a fair bit of bite in it. I'd not see the ATC wolf pack again till the food stop at Borris.

The rule of thumb at these events is to fuel up in the 1st half so you have the energy for the 2nd and we most definitely did that. With a top notch selection of sambos, cakes, buns, bars,

sweets and hot/cold beverages on offer, the challenge is not settling in for the afternoon. With twice as many calories as required taken on board (and as much as myself and Ducky Dunne could fit into our jacket pockets) we were away for the 2nd half. I was keen to hang on to the back wheels of ATC's cycling superstars but a chain malfunction and a less than elegant bike dismount on the 1st hill after Borris left me cursing myself for not getting the bike serviced and had me on catch up once again. Not one of the ATC wolf pack stopped to offer assistance to a fallen hound btw, every dog for himself on this now – or maybe they were just glad to lose me.

Thankfully I found welcome company on the road when I met up with John Cuddy & we partnered up for the next 25k or so, settling in to a much more suitable pace in advance of the challenge ahead. I thank my lucky stars that Cuddy ran that "hard 15k on Friday" otherwise I'd have been on my own for sure!! The route is kind enough through to the 80k mark with some undulating hills as Seamus Rowan would say, but at the 82k mark things get serious. At Bunclody, you take a sharp left and start a climb of 400 metres over 11k. Bar a 1k leveling off midway this is lowest gear (stairmaster) stuff for about an hour. This section, is what the Blackstairs cycling challenge is all about.

There is an unwritten rule amongst cycling sportif enthusiasts. That is, you don't dismount on Mt. Leinster. Now, there is no shame if you have to stop for a breather or god forbid walk a bit, but pride and ego is rife in the midlife crisis age group and if you happen upon a lad doing the "walk of shame" on this climb you don't even offer a word of support or encouragement. In my experience it's met with a scowl. Those who opt to rest/walk will be the first to sign up for the following year's event as soon as registration is open to lay that "dismount demon" to rest.

As the 9 stones at the top of Mount Leinster came in to sight, so too did the rest of the ATC crew. All looking fresh and enjoying the views. There were some nods of acknowledgement for those who "didn't unclip" & once all heads were accounted for & before the chill set in we headed off for the white knuckle ride that is the Mt Leinster decent.

In the event briefing document there is a bold & capitalised section that **reads "Please observe EXTREME CAUTION at the following points....."** it goes on to list several sections on the route but prime real estate in the briefing is reserved for the warnings pertaining to this particular decent. It is lethal, with cyclists having to negotiate a narrow gravel pathway, cattle grids, oncoming car/cycle traffic as well as hikers, sheep and more than the odd water bottle.

Now, I understand the "need for speed" by cycling enthusiasts but Holy Mary Mother of God some folk risk their lives free-wheeling down this mountainside. My heart races AND skips the odd beat worrying about my own safety and that of my fellow cyclists as some push their bikes and bodies to the limits of safety hurtling down this mountain. I'm a whimp on decents, that is true, but I know I'll not come a cropper on them. I wish some of my fellow cyclists would take more care.

After the dreaded decent, it's a nice spin back to Ballinkillen for a feast! Copious amounts of Irish Stew, sambos & a never ending serving of cakes and yummy treats. It's an all you can eat buffet and as one lad said to me "If they served a pint, I'd never leave this place".

So, another hugely enjoyable day cycling in Leinster, while I brought home an extra kilo or two in weight, thankfully no demons travelled home with me!

An honorable mention must go to Rob O'Brien, who after collecting the "Homer Simpson Doh Award" for forgetting his cycling shoes went on to complete the course in his runners on clip on

pedals. And finally, a shout out to Arnold Kane who after drafting for 104.9km, made a dash for the finish line and with hands aloft, technically won the (nonexistent) club race. A great club day, with a superb crew. Same time same place next year.....

