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FOCUS ON ADVENTURE RACING

Athletes will face the most grueling of all Irish races this weekend when they tackle the Beast of Ballyhoura, writes Laurence Mackin



It started off with a 42km trek through the desert with a horse carrying out backpacks, then we ran another desert marathon without the horse, and then we did a 164km mountain bike. Then we did some whitewater swimming and then we slept for two hours. And that was day two of a nine-day race.

Welcome to the grueling world of adventure racing (AR). Whereas Lawrenson is an Irish athlete who regularly competes in the growing extreme sports that puts marathons, triathlons and many other endurance events into the shade. There are three types of adventure races. They range in duration from between three hours to up to nine days.

People normally start out with the three-hour ones... and it goes all the way to something like the Primeval Quest (mentioned above), says Lawrenson. She was also part of an Irish AR team that came 10th in a world championship event in Fort William, Scotland, and the team of Meg. This was the first time a locally Irish team had competed in a world series event and received a ranking, from a formidable field of 50 teams. We had a cracking race and at one stage we were in 10th place, but then the team picked up some injuries, she says. Adventure racing isn't like its infancy here, but the scale of the athletes involved is formidable. "A lot of athletes when they are finished their professional racing go to AR. The top swimmer in the world is Mike Flower, whose captain is Mike Flower, is a triathlete mountain bike racing champion. And now for the last few years he has been an AR champion."

There is a lot of objection to the AR circuit about whether it could become an Olympic sport but Lawrenson says it is a genuine possibility. "Olympic sport by its nature is very prescriptive. In AR the whole point is that the athletes don't know the course until just before the race, they don't know the distances, they get a bit lost and just

before the race you are given a map and you have to navigate with your team through wild places. [AR] appeals to the adventurer." Lawrenson has spent the past few months organising an adventure race, the Beast of Ballyhoura, which will be a test of some of Ireland's toughest athletes on to the Galtee Mountains this weekend and will cover courses Tipperary, Limerick and Cork. The event will have two competitors, a 22 to 28-hour main team race and an intense three-hour Ballyhoura Blix. "The Beast of Ballyhoura is the only 24-hour race in Ireland this year," says

Lawrenson. "This weekend people are going to run along the lines of a mini triathlon/ultra triathlon race. We are getting all these people, including people who really don't know what they are getting themselves into" - at this point she flashes a grin that is probably unswerving, and it made all the worse by the fact that one of the rock leaders on the race is made up of several of Lawrenson's close friends, together with singer-songwriter Julie Turner. "They are being given a map at 7am, with points marked on it just like grid references. Then they are being taken somewhere else on a bus where we are going to release them

like a herd of cats into the wild and hopefully we'll see them at the finish line 24 hours later." That 24 hours will see the teams scramble over a mountain or two, and run, kayak, mountain bike, abseil and stretch their way through the arduous mountain terrain of Ballyhoura. Justified about it makes the muscles ache. The Beast is not the only AR course to be running the Irish country side at the moment, and Lawrenson and a team of organisers are hoping to have a well-timed race in Galtee next year. At the moment, they are trying to secure a funding so they can put on a top-class event. The director of the international adventure racing world championship has given his backing to the plan, which would see a three- or five-day race, featuring the world's best adventure racers, competing over the Kerry landscape. But for now, the Beast is the most immediate challenge. Whether Lawrenson will have any friends left on Julie Turner's team come Sunday evening, only the Galtee Mountains can tell. ♦ The Beast of Ballyhoura starts next Sat at 7am and continues into Sun. See www.ballyhourarace.com ♦ Published on page 6

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Coming to grips with the Beast of Ballyhoura

LAURENCE MACKIN

It's almost midnight in Ballyhoura country and the rain is hammering down on the roof of our jeep, which is half-way up a mountain. Driving the jeep is Vanessa Lawrenson, the organiser of the 'Beast of Ballyhoura', a 24-hour adventure race that took over large sections of the Galtee mountains and coastlines Tipperary, Limerick and Cork at the weekend.

At this stage, fourteen teams consisting of four people in each team were running, mountain biking, kayaking, shooting, orienteering and abseiling their way across rough terrain in appalling conditions. Lawrenson is trying to drive, with the aid of my shoddy navigation, and stop every minute for a minimum number of phone calls.

The shooting supervisory call to say they are worried: distance has descended, the rain is relentless, and there are two teams responsible on a mountain that are facing a 50m-abseil through a very waterfall. A few handheld phone calls later and the teams are located, disaster is averted for another few minutes.

The weekend had two main races, a short intense Ballyhoura Blix that saw a field of 55 athletes do a 16km mountain run followed by a 20km mountain bike ride which gave first-stayers state of adventure racing.

However, the main focus of the weekend was the race. At 7am on Sunday the teams received their maps, getting their glimpses of the grueling course, with a marked series of control points where they had to electronically tag off using wristbands. At 11:37 the race started in glorious conditions and rain over the night hours later the first teams had made it to the abseiling point in teaming rain.

Thanks to Keith Richard and Gann Clahy of the Killarney Outdoor Education Centre this report got a fine-hand experience of the abseiling section, which involved negotiating a 75m drop through a waterfall. It was so thrilling as it was terrifying, and after eight hours racing it must have been utterly exhausting. After the abseil it was a short gorge-run to the mountain bike, and off to a cyclo-pagan shoot, where the teams had to pick off dismounting clay in a 100m-long mountain-top facility after an energy-sapping cycle up the trail in the pitch dark. After that, came more climbing, some forest on purpose-built trails which, when completed, will make up more than 90km of the race's extensive mountain-biking system in western Europe. To make things that bit more challenging, gully-grooving mountain heads locked in the forest and were vital to the race, two of them contained mandatory control points where riders had to tag off.

Then it was another bike ride to kayaks and a paddle to the bank line through wet hills, rapids and over natural debris in the water. After 24 hours of racing and more than 50km, the first four-member teams to cross were Irish AR (Duney), Paul Malone, Brian McDonnell, Willy Black and Kris Keith opted to take a lengthy but easy loop track that only one other team went

for, and the helped secure them the top spot.

"The course was really well thought out. There were lots of challenging parts and we even had a bit of jungle lighting in the woods," said a thrilled Malone, a mountain after crossing the line in the majestic surroundings of Blackwater Castle, Clonkerry, Co. Cork.

"We were so wet going in to the abseil that we didn't even really notice the water," said Gerald Toomey, whose Teamus team came second. "The best trails were excellent, an absolute pleasure to ride. Orienteering at the beginning was probably the toughest. The weather was bad but in the full picture of what's going on you're focused and you don't have time to think about it."

Vanessa Lawrenson was upbeat about the race's progression. "The course reports are doing this year was to blow people's minds with adventure racing and have them say 'this is amazing, I want to do more'."

Lawrenson and her team have spent months organising the course, and has got a bit of a reputation among the locals. "I hear that one is very mental," says young local learner Paul. "I think it's absolutely brilliant for the area, but at the same time I think they are a bit mad," said Thomas Cook from Aughrim, Co. Limerick. The adventure race may have not secured the locals' hot, match-like love, but it has certainly left its mark on the area.

Top: Brian Galvin crosses the Blackwater river in Glenangary Woods, Galtee Mountains, Co. Tipperary, by zip wire during the Ballyhoura Bear Blix race; and (right) competitors neck out on river-racing. Photograph: Mark Kieranagh



Diversity on a wide scale at Portlaoise World Fleadh

HILARIA HOORAN

Ireland's biggest session trail kicked off a part of the annual World Fleadh in Portlaoise, Co. Louth, yesterday. As well as a craic, a performance from Jack & the first of a series of masterclasses with top musicians including Ian Higgins on the bodhrán and Rossa on the uilleann pipes, sessions were held in 21 of the town's pubs.

"The World Fleadh is growing and growing," said festival director Ric Cunningham. "Last year there were 10 pubs involved in the music trail. This year there is double that."

Among the 60 acts confirmed was a number of internationally-acclaimed performers including The Proclaimers, Katie Milne, Duncan Blak, Nobhoise Flower, Carlo Nuzic and John Collins. "We always set out to have a line-up of top traditional musicians and we have a mix of Celtic traditions and overseas influences. We want to open people up to different types of music," said Cunningham.

"They might come to see Duncan Blak and discover a band they'd never heard of in the music trail."

The World Fleadh is hoping to follow on from the success of the inaugural festival in Ballyvaughan, Co. Kerry, last year, which attracted 50,000 visitors. This year the organisers are expecting 80,000 visitors over the course of the festival, which will generate at least €20 million for the local economy.

The World Fleadh is based on similar Celtic-themed festivals across Europe and the US, such as Celtic Festivals in France and Milwaukee in the US.

According to the organisers, they wanted to bring Irish stages, musicians and dancers

"I've played all sorts of great festivals around Europe - in London, Denmark and Holland - and in the US, but there was never anything of this scale here," said Frankie Gavin, who has recorded in albums with the group De Dannan and will be performing in the World Fleadh with his new group, Hibernian Rhapsody, ahead of their performance in the uilleann pipes sessions were held in 21 of the town's pubs.

"Lots of musicians have been performing in leading venues like the kind of audience. It's great that we finally have a here too," said Gavin. Another musician who will be performing is leading harpist Triona Meara, who is originally from Portlaoise. She has played with the RTE Concert Orchestra and on this occasion will be collaborating with step-dancers and dancers from Canada and Carr Dúise.

"Portlaoise has really come a long way and it will be great to share the community feeling with everyone who comes for the fleadh," said Meara. "The line-up is wonderful and everyone in the town has been really looking forward to it."

To facilitate the festival, a 100-seat dome and a big top with a capacity of 5,000 have been erected in the town. As a result of the bad weather, all the major concerts were due to be held outdoors will now take place inside the specially constructed big top.

As well as music, performance, there will also be theatre, cabaret, workshops, demonstrations, masterclasses and a craft fair.

Tonight, the first Concert Celtic Band will perform at the call from Dána, while the Wolfe Tones will play at the festival which will generate at least €20 million for the local economy.

"There'll definitely be a buzz about the town. People like to have had to travel to see more annual bands and now

Kerry matchmaker remembered

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