

Mirjam's Celtman – my bit part

Dave Robertson

Mirjam had set her goal on competing in the Celtman Extreme Triathlon in 2017. This is a scary race based in Torridon. It starts at 5am with a 3.8km swim in a sea loch, with many jellyfish participating. It is followed by a 202km cycle and ends with a full marathon distance run, including two Munros. The second part of the run is a high mountain section and for safety reasons athletes have to be accompanied over this part by a support runner. I knew that Mirjam was fantastically fit so was slightly surprised and flattered when around New Year she approached me to be her support runner. Unsurprisingly I wasn't her first choice but she was finding it difficult to recruit a support runner as there were various other epic races the same weekend such as the Arran Triathlon and the Hadrian's Wall Rat Race.

I had already entered the Tiree Ultra race in September, so supporting Mirjam on the Celtman fitted well with my training.

As her race got closer I was feeling fit but slightly nervous. I got more nervous when a few weeks before the race Mirjam ran, and came first woman, in the Ben Lomond hill race. Very impressive, and what's worse, she casually let drop that she had cycled there beforehand! I could only hope that the full Celtman cycle would tire her out before she got to me.

Then I messed up. On the Monday before the race I slipped cycling down our drive and bashed myself about a bit. I cycled in to work and back but the next day my right thumb was quite sore and I was unable to hold on to the bike. Ann rolled her eyes, put me in the car and drove me to Minor Injuries. X-rays resulted in an elbow to tip of thumb plaster cast and an appointment for the following day to get a lightweight cast applied. When I called Mirjam that evening she wasn't exactly delighted. She absolutely needed a support runner and it looked unlikely I'd be able to do it. We both searched around for possible replacements.

Next day when I was having the cast applied I asked about running over mountains in it. Apparently this isn't a common question but I was told it should be alright, although it might be a bit uncomfortable and I shouldn't get it too wet. Having failed to find a suitable replacement I thought I might have to try this.

Our next task was to convince the Celtman organisers that a runner in an arm cast was a suitable support for a tired athlete and not a danger to them. Surprisingly the reply came back remarkably quickly that it should be fine but to wave the cast at the kit inspection team for final confirmation. Panic subsided and there was much relief all round.

Mirjam and Ty travelled up two days before the race so that Mirjam could try the pre-race swim held the day before the race. This gave the athletes, especially the less experienced, an idea of how cold and rough the water might be and how friendly the jellyfish were.

Ann drove me up as I wasn't able to drive, and we met them in their cottage on Friday afternoon. Mirjam was somewhat subdued and intense, and Ty was doing a good job of seeming relaxed. Looking out from the cottage window that evening we could see lumps of rain travelling East at quite a speed. The forecast for race day wasn't any better.

After a certain amount of nervous preparation everyone went to bed early. Mirjam and Ty would be up before 3am to make the 5am race start but Ann and I planned a relaxed morning as I wasn't needed until about 2pm at the earliest. When we got up Mirjam and Ty were long gone, and the weather was worse than before, low cloud, strong winds and some very heavy showers – it looked like a tough day to be out. Mobile signals weren't always strong, but occasional updates of the live tracker showed Mirjam doing well, so we went for an early lunch near the finish in Torridon. In the café we got chatting to a member of the Torridon Mountain Rescue Team. He had been one of the kayakers on the safety crew for the swim, and had expected to be part of the mountain safety crew as well. However due to the bad weather the MRT had decided to close the high level part of the run, and everyone who was fit to continue would finish on the lower level route. This was merely the mountain path round the back of Liathach rather than the two Munros of Beinn Eighe. The main reason for closing the high mountain route was the bad weather, but specifically the low cloud. If there was a casualty to evacuate there was no chance of getting a helicopter in and it would take most of the MRT to get a single casualty down. This would leave inadequate cover for any further incidents. We texted Ty so he could update Mirjam. I prepared to run, Ann carefully taped a plastic bag over my cast and drove me up Glen Torridon to the changeover point. This was a bleak spot at the foot of the Beinn Eighe path. The cloud base was just above us and only a small stand of trees to blunt the wind that swept heavy showers up the glen. After a further kit inspection at the check point I cowered in the trees until Ty arrived and we both cowered waiting for Mirjam. She arrived looking wet, determined and still slightly peeved. Ty had been caught in a traffic jam and had been slightly late at the previous transition dropping her from 2nd to 4th woman. She had made up the 2 places back up on the first part of the run and was keen to stay ahead. Trying to avoid getting into a domestic discussion we set off down the road at a walk and jog and then up the mountain path into the mist. The wind howled, the rain lashed, the mountains loomed. Near the top of the climb the sound of pipes cut sharply through the mist. It was all extremely atmospheric! Mirjam was running very well, and my tasks were to persuade her to eat and drink occasionally and give an idea of where we were and how far to go. It was wet and windy but every 2km or so we passed a group of MRT helpers who were all very encouraging, and often handing out jelly babies, salty pretzels and other goodies. After 2 ¼ hours of dancing along what I thought was a fun mountain path we emerged onto a tarmac road for the last 4km. With the finish in sight we picked up the pace we passed a bloke in a cagoul who asked if this was Mirjam finishing. I turned to answer to discover this was Dougie Vipond who was waiting to interview her as the second woman home. As she crossed the finish line the Adventure Show camera was right on her. Meanwhile Dougie was pumping Ann and Ty for information on Mirjam so he could do a sensible interview. A brief change of clothes later Dougie interviewed Mirjam. She was possibly not at her most coherent after 13 hours 26 minutes on the go and she can't remember what she said, but look out for her on the Adventure Show later in the year. Ty, Ann and I may sneak into the background.

It was great fun to be a small part of Mirjam's epic adventure and I'm grateful to both Mirjam and the Celtman team for letting it happen. I'm completely in awe of anyone who completes this epic race and can't imagine what it is like to do the whole thing. My small part was to keep Mirjam company over the last 2 hour 44 minutes, remain calm, and not slow her down too much. Fortunately I wasn't too unbalanced by the cast and was able to keep up.

The cast was replaced a couple of days later as there were some wounds inside that had to be inspected. It was a bit damp and sweaty but otherwise fine. I wouldn't recommend running with one, but it wasn't as bad as I feared.



What not to wear when running (photo: Ann)



Nearing the end of the mountain path. (photo: Alligin Photography)



Finishing in improving weather (photo: Ann)



Camera getting close (photo: Ann)