

Inspired by the Art O'Neill Challenge

What is it about walking or running 55km at night from Dublin Castle out to the wildest parts of the Wicklow Mountains, following the footsteps of two 1592 prison escapees, that captures the imaginations of so many willing adventurers? The Art O'Neill Challenge took place on 7 January 2011. A whopping 500 souls, including a large international contingent, signed up to tackle what turned out to be, for some, the challenge of their lives!

Photos: John Shiels (www.actionphotography.ie) and Vanessa Lawrenson

FOR THE VAST MAJORITY, the Art O'Neill Challenge is non-competitive; it is a journey and an adventure which gradually becomes a struggle against oneself in a bid to survive the war of attrition which can last up to 17 hours.

For others, it is an ultra running race with a difference. In the words of this year's winner Eoin Keith, it is "one of the gnarliest events" in the Irish adventure calendar.

Early indications of the scale of this year's event (150% increase on 2009) were seen a few nights before at Dublin's newest outdoor retailer Basecamp (one of the event sponsors). Over 130 people turned out for an information evening given by event organiser Gearoid Towey, Keith and Declan Cunningham from Dublin Wicklow Mountain Rescue Team which covered topics such as logistics, nutrition, safety, route and navigation using a Garmin GPS device.

On the night itself, Dublin Castle became a hive of activity as hundreds of outward-bound folk, clad in waterproof jackets, rucksacks and hiking boots made their way through Dublin's Friday nightlife to the upper courtyard for registrations and kit checks. It had been lashing rain all evening, but the prospect of a damp, cold, snowy night on the hills failed to deter 482 tough adventure seekers from lining up, waiting for the off, on the stroke of midnight.

The uber-tough posse of ultra runners and hybrids (those who elected to run the first 25km to Kippure House and walk the remainder of the challenge) left Dublin at 2am, giving the walkers a head start.

FACING THE ELEMENTS

There was a nervous but excited atmosphere in the castle before they left the comfort of one of Dublin's finest buildings to face the elements which included night-time, rain and snow. All participants also faced a long uphill road section to Kippure House, before going off road, through some of Wicklow's finest but wildest terrain. With visibility near to zero on some of the highland sections, even the most experienced mountain folk would be tested on their navigation and mountain craft.

A few hardy souls chose to go it alone using their map and compass skills, and a Garmin GPS device. For the rest, experienced mountain guides and orienteers were waiting for the challenge party to arrive at Kippure House to guide groups of walkers over the mountains. This was the first of three checkpoints. At Kippure, participants were given hot soup and



"During it you are thinking, never again, and after it, you are planning the next one and telling everyone else they should do it!"

rolls, chocolate and coffee and they were also given access to their kit bag for a change of footwear and warmer clothes before they headed off on to the wilderness section of the route.

The road section from Dublin had turned into a snowy/slushy mess soon after leaving the city limits and the mist had descended over Ballynabrocky, the first off-road hill out of Kippure House. Dublin Wicklow Mountain Rescue Team was on standby, knowing the terrain and weather everyone was heading into.

One of the guides, Paul Nolan, a stalwart of the orienteering and IMRA scene, commented on the trickiness of the conditions. "It only took a quarter of the climb up Ballynabrocky Hill for the difficulty of the navigation to hit home. Visibility was nothing. A few of us guides had joked beforehand about the importance of finding the bridge out of Kippure House to make the right first impression. On the road leg up to Ballynultagh car park, I had plenty of time to understand this was no time for jokes," he stated.

Forty participants decided to call it a day (or a night) at Kippure, and a further 20 pulled out and were brought to comfort by Nathan Kingerlee of Outdoors Ireland before the next checkpoint at Ballinagee Bridge on the Wicklow Gap road. Section two was mentally and physically tough as people fought their own tiredness, the lack of visibility and the first signs of sleep deprivation.



Main: Bitter cold and snowy conditions did not deter the 324 finishers of the Art O'Neill Challenge (www.actionphotography.ie).
Inset: An ultra runner skips across the line having competed the 55km of the Art O'Neill Challenge (www.actionphotography.ie).



Clockwise from top left:

Preparing for the off in Dublin Castle (www.actionphotography.ie). A stunning snowy dawn lifts spirits as participants leave Art's Cross (Vanessa Lawrenson). A job well done! Two participants show their delight at finishing (www.actionphotography.ie). The ultra runners head into the night (www.actionphotography.ie). Welcome break: one of the young participants fuels up (www.actionphotography.ie).

ART O'NEILL FACTS AND FIGURES

Registrants: 500
Starters: 482
Finishers: 324
Distance Covered: 55km
Fastest: 7hr 13min 50sec (Eoin Keith)
Slowest: 16hr 56min 30sec
Youngest finisher: Ruari Cashman (15)
Nationalities: Irish, English, Scottish, Brazilian, American,

German, Australian, New Zealand, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Danish, Dutch, South African
Charities benefitting: Sports Charitable Trust, Dublin Wicklow Mountain Rescue and Glen of Imaal Mountain Rescue
Main sponsors: Basecamp, Flahavans, Columbia, Glenmalure Lodge, Outsider, Red Bull, Garmin and Outdoors Ireland.