

World Age Group Duathlon Championships

A World-Class Challenge for Congleton U3A member Bill Boynton

At the age when many of us think that a 6-mile walk would be challenge enough, 67 year old Congleton U3A member Bill Boynton has taken up the Duathlon and is about to take part in the World Age Group Duathlon Championships being held in Edinburgh in September.

The sister event to the triathlon, and just as taxing, the Olympic distance duathlon has 3 phases: a 10 km [just over 6 miles] run with a dash into transition to change shoes, don helmet and grab bike; 40 km [25 miles] flat out cycling in time trial mode; return through transition followed by a final 5 km run. It is very much an endurance event, lasting more than two hours. The most daunting aspect of both tri- and duathlon is probably the fatigue, stress and lactic acid felt in the legs when getting off the bike and into the final run. Marathons are painful but this is hell!

So why is Bill subjecting himself to this? He likes a challenge, but the answer lies a little deeper. After a sickly early childhood [confined to bed for 9 months with rheumatic fever, with no drugs available], Bill started running at the age of 16 and, within two years, was school and county mile champion. He improved at university, though a Blue proved elusive.

Then, for nearly 40 years, he did not compete or belong to an athletics club. Career and family limited his aspirations to jogging, sailing, and hill walking, the Lake District being a particular favourite.

On retirement, having moved to Congleton with wife Sandra [jazz singer with the U3A band and member of Congleton Choral Society], Bill joined Congleton Harriers and trained with them. "The training was fine but I remember my first hilly cross-country race – I felt my throat had been ripped out!" Soon injuries struck, common in older athletes. 'Two Achilles' injuries in three years persuaded Bill to give up running, buy a road bike and join Congleton Cycling Club. Within 6 weeks, he fell off and tore his right meniscus, which meant another year of rehab.

Sane people would probably have given up. Instead, Bill got into shape and, over three years, walked the Annapurna Circuit in Nepal, cycled up the major French cols in the Alps and Pyrenees with Congleton friends and completed various long distance walking and cycle challenges. After lots of physiotherapy, he was able to resume running with the Harriers last year and won an award as "2nd M60" [male over 60] in the North Staffs Cross Country League. "This gave me quite a buzz as I was 66 and beating nearly all the guys 5 years younger, plus a lot of men 20 years younger, so my competitive instinct was fully restored."

In the meantime, Bill's daughter Sophie had become a top amateur triathlete, winning silver medals at four of the last five World Age Group Championships, a source of great pride for the family. It was Sophie who suggested that Bill had it in him to compete in the duathlon. "She undoubtedly inspired me and, although I was doubtful I could shape up, there was a desire to attempt something that would make her proud of me in return."

The World Duathlon Championship takes place in Edinburgh in September 2010 and Bill was excited at the idea of being there, as long as he could perform reasonably well. After a trip to Vietnam and Laos in February this year, Bill found a marvellous coach and has committed himself to an arduous but scientifically-based training programme. Ken's plan requires eight training sessions a week over 12 hours, initially to build base strength and endurance in running and cycling disciplines. Each session has specified heart rate zones, and thus avoids overtraining and minimizes the risk of injury.

After two months, the training was tapered for a week so Bill could enter the 3rd UK qualifier at Milton Keynes to seek a place in the GB Age Group Duathlon Team. To his surprise, Bill won his age group, gained selection, and posted the second fastest time in the qualification series to date.

With this success comes inevitably the desire to improve. “My time of 2 hours 29 minutes is a pretty good start but I need to make more progress. My running speed is excellent [he completed the last 5 km in only 22 minutes] but I have a lot to do to achieve real speed on the bike. As serious cyclists will tell you, time trial speed is a technical as well as a physical skill.”

Bill is now in Phase Two of base training and is preparing for his big day in Edinburgh. “It is the only race in 2010 that matters to me, so I train solo with Ken’s programme and turn down suggestions from friends to take part in running and cycling events that might deflect me from my goal. It is rather a monastic approach but the challenge itself and its novelty prevents boredom. I never ever thought I would compete in a world championship, so you might say that it will be the race of my life.”

So is there any health risk in undertaking at 67 the hardest training programme he has ever experienced? In February Bill visited a Wirral hospital for a ramp test [heart monitoring while cycling on an exercise bike against increasing load] and a carotid artery scan. He has slightly above-average cholesterol readings so this was prudent. The tests were thorough but found nothing of concern and, of course, the training itself keeps his cardiovascular system in great shape.

Bill accepts that his quest is slightly obsessive but he has plenty of time for other interests too. He attends U3A French and German classes and is a regular of the Keele University World Affairs Group. He is also a particular fan of Mahler and has been attending the full cycle of symphonies at the Bridgewater Hall.

The above article is an expanded version of the report featured in the July edition of the Congleton U3A Newsletter.