

Tomás Ó hUallacháin
Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne
Overall Winner

Ard Fhear! A Neighbour's Inspiration

Two elderly customers prop the counter, their eyes fixated on their settling pints. Applying the crème de resistance is Tomás Mac a t-Saoir. Saddle sore, Tomás hands the men their pint of plain. ‘Anois a bhuachaillí’ exclaims Tomás in his native tongue. The young cyclist, after his 3,053 mile exertion, is at his ease manning the bar of his father’s premises in the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht.

Inspired that a 22 year old neighbour could accomplish such an achievement, I have Tomás join me in the snug once his only afternoon customers are, like their pints, settled.

I asked what made him cycle alone from San Diego to Florida’s St. Augustine. “When 16 year old Kerry teenager Donal Walsh tragically passed from cancer in 2013, a charity in his name was established. I felt the best way to turn a hobby into an awareness mission was to cycle across the U.S to help raise funds for the Donal’s Live Life Foundation.

For 42 days Tomás battled headwinds and punishing terrain on his epic journey, punctuated by only 7 days recovery.

Departing on October 24th it wasn’t until December 11th that he free wheeled to his finish line having seen California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas.

Tired imagining it, I asked had he any downtime whatsoever.

“In Austin I took three days off and had a badly needed night on the beer.”

As someone who’d get lost in a shopping mall, my admiration for his effort soared. Curious, I asked how he managed those infinite, tumbleweed accompanied US roads.

‘Leaving Ireland I was sceptical, scared about cycling a different country. Yet I’ve met incredible people on the way.’

His inventory was limited. A bike bought in San Diego, sunscreen, two panniers, two pairs of bib shorts and an Irish team gilet. Two Donal Walsh cycling jerseys, three pairs of socks, runners and a light jacket.

Cycling shoes, gloves, some casuals and a tub of chamois cream completed the list.

Headwinds were a low point. ‘Thinking I’d have a westerly wind at my back I cycled from west to east. If anyone wants to cycle across America go east to west. The wind will be more generous!’

I asked Tomás about social interaction ‘en-route.’

‘I experienced great warmth and generosity,’ he said. ‘Familiar with Americans from our family pub, I know they’re great people.’

‘I was offered food, accommodation and was treated like a king. The American people have been absolutely incredible to me.’

He called his experience ‘priceless,’ learning much of the diverse U.S. cultures and landscapes, and significantly raising €3907 for the Foundation. For a young man who found cycling after his father banished him from the Playstation, Tomás is an inspiration to us all.

As the old men beckoned our heroic peddler to pull another two pints, a line from their overheard conversation summed up my admiration.

‘He’s a better man than any of us,’

Judges Citation:

By Prof John Horgan, Chairman of the Judging Panel

In an era of “alternative facts” the responsibilities of journalists are always increasing. But it is also important to recognize that the real skill of the journalist does not reside just in the facts, but the narrative in which he or she embeds them.

It is not a coincidence that most journalists describe what they produce not as an “article” but as a “story”. Journalists present their facts in narrative form because that is the way our brains have been conditioned, over millennia, to make sense of facts and to remember them.

In doing this, journalists take certain liberties with the facts – not by changing them, but by organising them. They are allowed to decide, for instance, which are the most important facts in their narrative, where to put them, and how to best engage the reader’s interest.

Most of all, they recognize that no narrative can be long enough to contain all the facts: so their tools are, among others, juxtaposition, humour and – above all – the identification and description of details which, although they are only a small part of any story, are significant enough to engage the reader’s imagination and can illuminate the whole narrative, like a spotlight on a crowded stage.

Our overall winner, I feel, knows this in his bones. From a deceptively low-key introduction, he engages us and our imaginations in a fascinating story, through short paragraphs which keep the reader racing ahead, to a conclusion which ties up the events of the narrative in a way many professional journalists would salute.

On behalf of the judges, I therefore have great pleasure in revealing – many good articles keep the punch line to the end – that the overall winner of this years Press Pass competition is Tomás Ó hUallacháin of Pobalscoil Chorchá Dhuibhne, for his article: Ard Fhear! A neighbour’s inspiration.

