

Paul McGreal

Off-road triathlete and founder of Dirty Events

IDA MASPERO CAUGHT UP WITH BORDERS-BASED PAUL MCGREAL, FRESH FROM THE EUROPEAN CROSS TRIATHLON CHAMPIONSHIPS IN HOLLAND AND STILL BASKING IN THE AFTERGLOW OF STAGING THE FIRST CELTMAN EXTREME OFF-ROAD TRIATHLON IN TORRIDON

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE CARTER; STUART MCINNIS; IAN BELL

How did you get into multisport racing?

Not by the standard path, I guess. I was the archetypal geeky, non-sporty kid. A generous teacher, as so often is the case, introduced me to orienteering and I became reasonably good at it. It instilled in me a life-long passion for the outdoors, for mountains and for navigation. Orienteering led to mountain marathons, then adventure races. Along the way I started cycling, and I forced myself to take up swimming about seven years ago. I'm not the greatest swimmer, but I now really enjoy wild swimming. I live in Selkirk; in winter I train in the pool, but by April I'm itching to get back into St Mary's Loch. When the evening sun streams through the water it's just magical.

What's the attraction of off-road racing for you?

The sport has taken me to amazing places I wouldn't have found otherwise. I like the challenge, having to rely on your own wit to cope with whatever comes up. The freedom, the sense of adventure and the teeny-tiny element of risk just make me feel alive.

What's your typical training regime?

I used to be organised about it, but since starting Dirty Events earlier this year, demands on my time have changed and I'm still figuring out the work-life balance. Depending on the time of year, I try to train for between 10 and 20 hours a week, doing a combination of outdoor swimming, off-road running and cycling.

How did you make the move into organising events?

By small steps, I guess. Having competed in a lot of events, I knew what worked from a competitor's perspective. I felt there was a bit of a gap in the market: the kinds of events I really enjoyed there were very few of, and they were tiny. That's where the idea for the first Dirty Triathlon in 2008 came from.

How did your company, Dirty Events, come about?

By osmosis, really. Until last year, we organised the Dirty Triathlon as a Borders Triathletes Club event, as happy amateurs in our free time, and I was still working full-time in Edinburgh. To the Dirty Triathlon I added the Craggy Island Triathlon over on Kerrera, near Oban, last autumn. Then I started developing the idea for Celtman at the back end of

last year. Suddenly it became too tricky to combine with a regular job, so going solo was an obvious – yet scary – decision to make. I still work part-time as a stage lighting and sound consultant – that pays the bills, the events certainly don't! It couldn't be further away from the world of off-road racing, from the mud and the hills.

At the end of June you staged the inaugural Celtman – tell me about that.

It's modelled on Norway's notorious Norseman, an extreme triathlon of a kind that had not been held in Scotland before. The amazing wilderness of Torridon was the setting for Celtman – a 3.4km swim in Loch Shieldaig, a 200km road cycle and a 42km run taking in two Munros. We had 128 starters and 122 finishers, with the fastest race time being 12 hours 10 minutes. Needless to say it was a pretty special weekend; the expressions on people's faces at the finish line, the emotion and the sense of achievement, were unforgettable.

The Scottish adventure racing scene seems to have taken off in the last few years – why would you say that is?

Yes, adventure racing in its many guises seems to be on the up. I reckon it's a combination of a number of things: a new generation of outdoor-enthusiastic people, Scotland's magnificent landscapes and, to be frank, having the access laws that make it possible. Triathlon is certainly a growing sport, and the off-road, the dirty bit of it, is growing very quickly too. A lot of people doing cross tri are mountain bikers, hill walkers or climbers. The outdoors is in their blood, and racing is an extension of that, with a competitive edge. I guess the attraction of the off-road stuff is that it's in touch with nature, good honest fun, and has a laid-back, friendly atmosphere.

What has been your most memorable moment, either as organiser or participant?

It has to be Celtman. Seeing something that I've been planning and working on for so long take on a life of its own – it's the most rewarding and satisfying thing I've ever done.

For more information about forthcoming Dirty events, including a new off-road, night-time duathlon series and Celtman 2013, go to www.dirtyevents.com





Down and dirty (clockwise from above left): a participant comes a cropper at this year's Dirty Triathlon around St Mary's loch, Scottish Borders; Celtman winner Alex Glasgow triumphantly crosses the finish line; Celtman kicks off with a dawn swim in Loch Shieldaig; uphill battle during the Craggy Island Triathlon on Kerrera; Paul McGreal on his road bike

