



Susie Mitchell heads the field at the Spink in Glendalough, Co Wicklow during last year's Wicklow Adventure Race series

Photo: www.actionphotography.ie

you're not sure how far you can push your body and at the end you're delighted that you've made it through."

Of course, even within the endurance-racing scene there are the really tough challenges that test the mind as much as the body, events like the sleep-inducing Beast of Ballyhoura. Thirty-six hours of gruelling physical punishment, the race begins at 5am on the Saturday morning of the August Bank Holiday weekend and goes right through to 5pm the following day, crossing tough terrain along the borders of Tipperary, Limerick and Cork.

When Mitchell first went to take on 'The Beast', she had never

competed for any longer than 10 or 12 hours. The psychological barriers were going to be just as tough as the physical obstacles.

"We started in kayaks in that race and you had to navigate in teams of four with one girl and three guys. There was a lot of off-road biking and running through the mountains. But the most challenging part was just trying to get through the night and staying awake. Your body really just wants to shut down.

"We got to about half six in the morning and at one stage, Cormac my husband was cycling alongside me and he started to fall asleep on the bike."

That was when the patch of dirty

grass came calling.

"When you're that tired it's like a five-star hotel," says Mitchell.

"You're kind of on-edge so you just doze for five minutes and it's amazing how that revives you. After that there was a swim in a quarry so that was a really nice way to wake up and that kept us going for the rest of the race."

Mitchell spends her week working as a fish vet, travelling around the country to fish farms. But it's on the weekends that she goes from the waters to the wilds.

"People can look at you askance when they ask you what you're doing at the weekend and they think you're mad but it's within everybody's

ability to get into it. It's amazing what you can pull out of the bag when you're under pressure. You will keep going. I think people do surprise themselves and you learn things about yourself, especially over the longer races, that you have resources there to draw on and come through."

And if all comes to all and you start to fall asleep, there's always that five-star hotel on the side of the road, that dirty patch of grass that offers some respite. Then it's onwards and upwards, climb a mountain, jump in a lake, push on and over the line.

Not a bad way to spend your days... and nights.

Where adventure begins

With no shortage of rugged countryside, Ireland is seen as something of a hub for adventure racing with a busy calendar of events during the year. Some of the better known include:

WAR: Wicklow Adventure Races

A series of races that take place at various mountainous locations around Wicklow including Glendalough, Glenmalure and Powerscourt.



Rás na Ríochta

Taking place in Kerry in July, this one takes you across some amazing scenery with a strong mountain-biking element

Beast of Ballyhoura

Now a fixture on August Bank Holiday weekend, 'The Beast' takes no prisoners over 36 hours as mixed teams of four run, bike, kayak, abseil, orienteer and shoot. They say you have to be prepared to "meet your demons" if you're going to take part.

Connemara Rough Diamond

An assault course is thrown in to this one for good measure, just in case the usual diet of running and cycling doesn't tire you out.

Gaelforce

This Mayo event has exploded over the last couple of years with the run up Croagh Partick a big draw to competitors.

Most of the adventure races include a 'Sport' category which is specifically designed for beginners and takes place over a shorter course.

From the trail to the track

Over the past 12 months Susie Mitchell has branched out into a new direction. While on holidays in New Zealand she tried track cycling for the first time and immediately got hooked on the competitive element as she zoomed around on the banked indoor track. It's a sport that usually only comes into public consciousness here when we watch the Olympic Games and see the likes of Chris Hoy winning gold medals in the velodrome.

"It's such a buzz cycling on the boards once you get your confidence up and get used to the incline. I fell off at the start and got some nasty burn from the wood but you just get back on the bike and get going again.

"I found out there was a track in Ireland, on Sundrive Road in Dublin. It's actually an outdoor track and I never even knew outdoor tracks existed."

Never one to hang around, she won a bronze medal in the time trial event at the 2011 Leinster Championships and by October she was competing in the World Masters in Manchester.

A very different focus to adventure racing, even the longest races in track cycling only take 15 minutes and Mitchell is planning on heading back to Manchester this year.

She's already shown her potential on the bike by winning the Dublin Cyclocross league last year, a series of road cycling events in the capital. So perhaps some of the tougher adventure races will be taking a back seat in 2012 as she concentrates on the bike?

"I'm hoping to go back to Manchester next October and to be a bit more competitive, maybe win a medal, depending on the day. I think I could."



Susie Mitchell belts around the banked track on Sundrive Road in Dublin