Longford is a town of around 10,000 people located 120km from Dublin on the main road to the north west of the country. It stands on the banks of the River Camlin, a tributary of Ireland’s longest river, the Shannon. Being in the hinterland of the Shannon it is relatively flat. Although there are no mountains in the area it is nonetheless breathtakingly beautiful.

**With the clock just gone 10.00 over one thousand runners set out on the journey through the town. We passed under the Dublin-Sligo railway bridge in the early stages, which lent a ceremonial solemnity to our passage.**

As the course transitioned from urban to rural, from light industrial to farmland, the gaps between runners started to open up. As the first rural narrow link road passed under our feet a troop of dappled horses emulated the humans by running around the field to our left. Like us they did it for the exhilaration, just to get the heart thumping and the blood pumping.

We headed out on the wide-open N5 as families stood outside their houses encouraging the runners. The road bypasses the pretty village of Clondra but it revealed itself in a glimpse through trees and over water. Reaching the bridge at Tarmonbarry and running into the neighbouring county of Roscommon gave the impression that a milestone had been passed.

Road resurfacing works had left loose gravel on the surface, and our percussive shoe shuffle beat our time as we continued on through Roscommon. The voluptuous number 8 (the course is marked in miles) winked at me to let me know that I was nearly a third of the way into my journey.

The leisurely chicaning of the road revealed multihued greens and browns, then additional pinpricks of yellow and pink hedgerow flora added to the vista. For about a half a mile the purple loosestrife and heather brought an enchanting burst of colour.

My senses became filled by running through countryside that is so magically beautiful. Silver birch, Scots pine and ash trees were my companions on this solitary stretch of the road. Filled with a giddy glee, I passed the halfway point.

On the approach to Rooskey the hall of trees, with the sun sneaking through the leaves and skittering across the road, was cool and calming. Passing through the village the encouragement of local people was invigorating.

**Continued on page 29**
1st CROSS-STRAIT WOMEN'S HALF MARATHON

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people was very welcome and the tinkling claps of one little girl did much to buoy up my flagging spirit.

The course briefly joined the N4 Dublin-Sligo road (the N5 is a branch off it heading westward to Castlebar) before taking the beautiful R371 backroad. This was running at its best: a grassy strip separated the narrow tarmac tyre-tracks that made up the road as the hedgerows and trees snuggled in on either side. The River Shannon made her majestic presence felt on our right and the road arced left in deference.

People continued to pile out of isolated homes and urge me to my goal. As this charming little road wound its way back to the N4 I was greeted by feathered applause as a lawn full of starlings took to flight.

The main road is always tough, but I could now see fellow competitors. The openness of the road and the stiff breeze made it that bit more difficult: as we approached Newtownforbes the wind whispered at me to slow down – but when I got to the village the cheers of the crowds countermanded the order.

Turning off the main road again the pleasant undulating route ushered me along, until I met the accursed railway bridge which identified itself as UB461. It is not a difficult climb unless you have already run 40km, and I had. It scuppered my revival, with the descent being inadequate reward the effort of the climb.

I was passed by a couple who were locked on to a metronomic pace. With the finish just a mile away I tried to mimic their stride. I would like to have said that I coasted down the Battery alongside them, but it did not flow like that; my finish was less of a sprint than a shuffle. But simply crossing the line, even if it was a couple of hours after the winner, made me feel as if I had taken the prize.
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