



## Marathon money-spinners

*The Irish marathon calendar is in danger of being swamped by quantity at the expense of quality, argues David O'Dwyer*

*The smaller marathons can't be expected to match Dublin's prizes, but the sums on offer do not appear fair in relation to the amount of money generated by these events*

**When the first Dublin Marathon was held in 1980, the only other marathon in Ireland was the National Marathon Championships. This annual race was held at various locations around the country, usually in a rural setting, and never drew more than a few hundred entrants.**

But as the logistics and organisational requirements for the event increased, and the number of competitors declined, it was decided to incorporate the National Marathon Championships with the Dublin Marathon. Apart from the recently revived Cork City Marathon, which made its first brief appearance in the mid '80s, these were the only marathons of note in Ireland.

It's a sharp contrast to 2009 when there will have been ten high profile marathon events run, including three in May alone.

One feature of the 'new' marathons is that they are mainly in rural venues. Connemara and Longford started the trend in 2001 and 2002 respectively. More recently the Dingle, Clare Burren and Mourne Way Marathons have been added to the calendar and the big selling point for these marathons is the stunning scenery along their routes.

But Dublin and Cork are the only marathons that have any official connection with an Athletics Ireland championship. The Dublin Marathon incorporates the National Marathon Championships and the Cork City Marathon incorporates the Cork County Marathon Championships.

If the organisers of the new marathons wish to broaden the appeal of their events, then they must offer something else apart from the scenery.

Here is one suggestion: ask Athletics Ireland to get involved with an offer of official county or provincial championship status. For example, the Connemara Marathon could incorporate a Galway or even Connacht championship. Dingle could offer a Kerry championship, and so on.

As they stand, these marathons offer a unique package to the competitor and attract healthy enough numbers, albeit to a particular niche market within the running community. So long as the current running boom continues, then these events will thrive, but are we in danger of over doing it? Are ten marathons on the island of Ireland too many?

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that most if not all of the new marathons offer a decent return for the entry fee and the events are pretty well organised.

There is no real method for calculating the quality of a race, however, and as the average entry fee continues to creep ever closer to €100, you have to ask if the quality of these events is also increasing? Is there a danger that we will be swamped by quantity at the expense of quality?

Cork and Dublin have official status, but the other marathons run in Ireland are promoted by enterprising individuals or groups. There is no governing body to control any aspect of these events. As the cost of entry to many race events continues to increase, it appears that the longer the race the more a race promoter can charge.

It is easy enough to bulk up the numbers by including a Half Marathon, 10k or even a relay event. This doesn't take into account that most events also have a main sponsor on board.

What happens to this money? One area where the funds are not being distributed to is prize money. With the exception of the Dublin marathon where €10,000 is on offer to the winners of the men's and women's race along with a €5,000 bonus for breaking the course record, the prize money on offer in the other Irish marathons is pretty paltry.

The smaller marathons can't be expected to match Dublin's prizes, but the sums on offer do not appear fair in relation to the amount of money generated by these events. ■

*The Dublin and Cork Marathons are the only two Irish marathons that carry official championship status*



TOMAS GREALLY - SPORTSFILE.COM

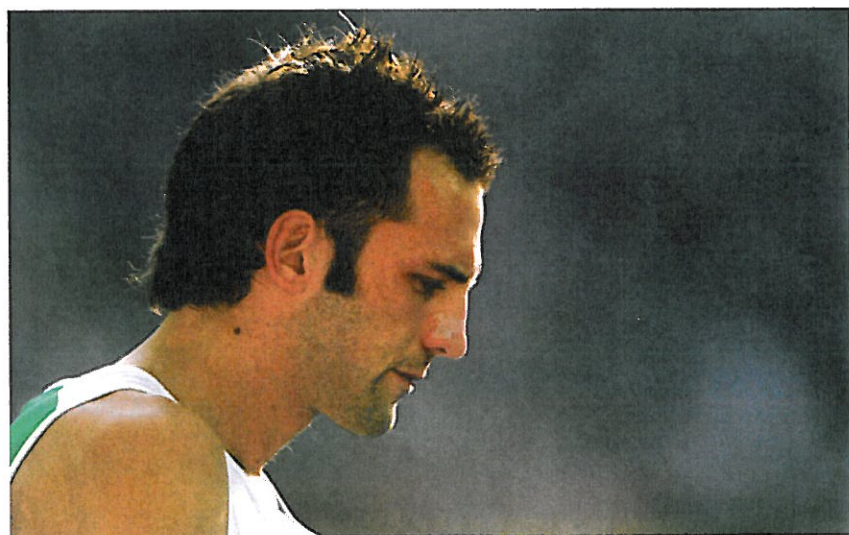




## Berlin blues

*Another major championship, another major disappointment: David O'Dwyer asks where it's going wrong for Irish middle distance running*

*Thomas Chamney failed to find his best form at the World Championships in Berlin and missed out on the 1500m final after finishing seventh in his heat*



BRENDAN MORAN - SPORTSFILE.COM

*The fact that no Irish athlete progressed from the heats is pretty discomfoting*

**The 'good old days' of the 1970s and '80s when Irish athletes competed at the top table during the golden era of middle distance running are often recalled wistfully in these pages. And while it's all too easy to look at the past through rose-tinted glasses, one irrefutable fact is that no athlete in the intervening period has come even close to Ray Flynn's record-breaking run at the Bislett Games in Oslo in 1982 when he set the current national record for the mile and 1500m in the same race.**

The grainy photographs and video clips of Ray Flynn on that fateful night will be the benchmark for some time to come if the performances at the World Championships in Berlin are an indication of the

and giving it a go.

The same goes for Mary Cullen who is certainly capable of being competitive at this level, but a stress fracture picked up earlier in the year has ruined her track season. Another athlete who may in the long run benefit from opting out of the championships is Fionnuala Britton who, along with her coach, felt that she wasn't quite ready.

If these athletes had been able to participate and put in decent performances, then it would certainly have been a different picture.

But allowing Thomas Chamney to run in both the 800m and 1,500m, despite only having the 'B' qualifying time for the 1,500m is surely a decision that must be questioned. This season saw Chamney make significant progress in both events, particularly the 800m, but still only making the 'B' standard qualifying time for the 800m.

The obvious question is would he not have been better off sticking to his specialist event? In hindsight, it looks as if it was too much to take on, despite his obvious improvement since Beijing last year.

Only he can answer that one. Looking at his British counterparts who fared much better in both events, no athlete doubled up with the 800m and 1,500m. Have the Irish management team a question to answer here also?

Unfortunately for Alistair Cragg and for Ireland, it appears that his immense talent is not going to bear fruit at major championships. Not on the track at any rate. His appearances to date at championship and Olympic level have been hampered by injury, a crisis of confidence and what appears to be a fragile temperament.

Despite some startling performances during his career, including beating Kenenisa Bekele and recording exceptional times from 1,500m up to and including 10,000m, he has not delivered when it matters at championship level. Cragg's Clonliffe Harriers club-mate and former marathoner of some repute, Jerry Kiernan has stated on more than one occasion that he feels that Alistair's best event will be the marathon. He believes that he is best suited to the classic distance and that one day he will turn his attention to the 26.2 miles. Perhaps that day has arrived.

It is all well and good reminiscing about the 'good old days', but the reality is that they are but a memory. There is probably a myriad of reasons why the Irish middle distance production line has stuttered in the past two decades, but stuttered it has save for a few exceptions.

It is time to move on and to get the current athletes to up the required standard or at least racing to the peak of their abilities. ■

current state of middle distance running in Ireland. Along with Flynn, some of the more recognisable faces of the time were Eamonn Coghlan and Marcus O'Sullivan. These guys were not just also-rans on the world stage during this golden era; they were real contenders competing at the business end of top races and championship finals.

Fast forward to Berlin, August 2009 and both Thomas Chamney and Alistair Cragg failed to progress from their heats; Deirdre Byrne and Roisin McGettigan had similar experiences.

Any evaluation of our middle distance performances in Berlin will deliver the same verdict: the fact that no Irish athlete progressed from the heats is pretty discomfoting.

Success, however you define it, is determined by performances and injury prevented three of our best middle distance performers from competing in Berlin. Martin Fagan may not have lived with the pace of the Africans in the 10,000m, but it would have been interesting to see him there





## Too much too young?

*Conventional wisdom about the marathon is being turned on its head by a new generation of Kenyan and Ethiopians, writes David O'Dwyer*

**Last October, nineteen-year-old Feyisa Lilesa from Ethiopia became the youngest ever Dublin Marathon winner, yet somehow the fact that he was still a teenager seemed to get little media attention.**

Conventional wisdom used to be that top class marathoners didn't reach their peak until their mid or possibly even late 30's. The theory was that years of training and accumulating 'miles in the legs' would only bear fruit in the final years of an athlete's career. There is some evidence to support this theory with Carlos Lopez winning the Olympic Marathon in 1984 at the age of 38, the same age as Tomescu Dita of Romania who won the Women's Olympic Marathon in Beijing in 2008.

In recent years, though, major marathon winners have been getting younger and younger, not to mention faster and faster.

This year's London and Chicago Marathons were won by 22-year-old Sammy Wanjiru from Kenya in 2:05:10 and 2:05:41 respectively. The third place finisher in Chicago was 21-year-old Vincent Kipruto, also from Kenya, who won the Paris Marathon in a course record of 2:05:47. The second runner home in Paris was 20-year-old Ethiopian Bazu Worku, who clocked 2:06:15 on his marathon debut.

The times being set by these athletes are quite breathtaking. If they are capable of running these

times in their early 20s, what can we expect when they reach what has traditionally been viewed as the prime for marathon runners?

The current world record is 2:03:58 is held by Haile Gebreselassie who followed the more conventional route by waiting until his 30s before tackling the marathon. The big question is when will the two-hour barrier be broken, or are we reaching the limits of human capacity over the distance? Can the new generation of marathon winners clock the mile splits required to break two hours?

And as the elite marathon winners get younger and younger, will we see the current marathon entry age limits challenged? The IMMMA (International Marathon Medical Directors Association) has published a paper asking 'How young is too young?', and states: 'Marathon running should be reserved only for those individuals who have reached their eighteenth birthday.' This advice is generally accepted as gospel and most events have a minimum entry age level of 18.

But many under-18s have completed marathons. There are quite a few stories about kids younger than 18 completing the distance without any serious repercussions, physical or otherwise, and in pretty decent times too.

The ARRS (Association of Road Running Stats) website contains some staggering marathon times for kids as young as five. This reputable website states that the youngest recorded male and female marathoners are Bucky Cox, aged five years 358 days, and Jennifer Amyx, aged five years 261 days.

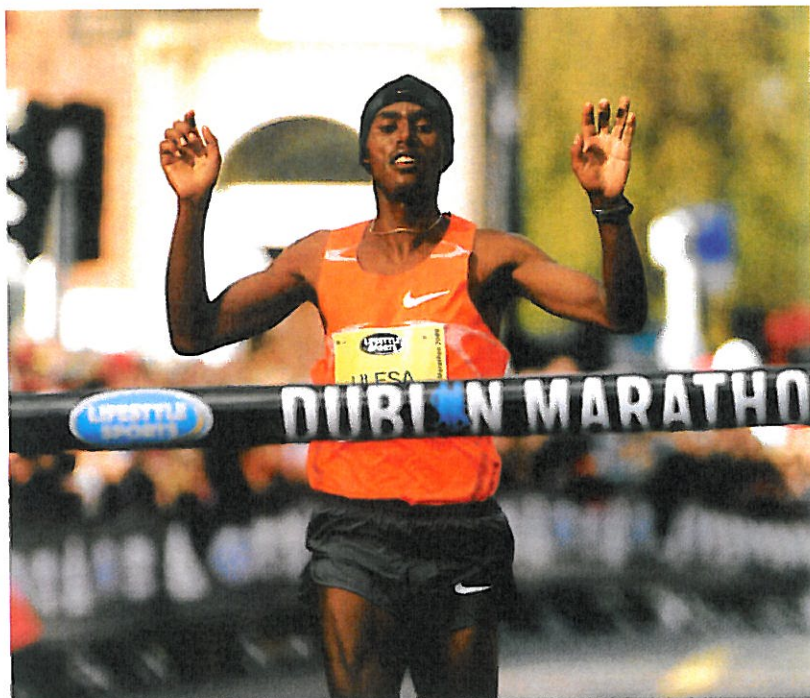
Bucky Cox clocked 5:25:09 in the Junction City Marathon in 1978 and followed up with a 4:07:27 in the Glass City Marathon in Toledo, Ohio the following year aged six years, 341 days. Jennifer Amyx's record run of 4:56:36 was in Johnstown PA in 1978. She bettered that the following year in the same race with a time of 4:00:36.

At the time there was widespread debate about allowing children so young to compete in a Marathon. The running boom in the US was reaching its peak in the late 1970s and while Cox and Amyx became cult heroes, many questions were also raised about the impact marathon running would have on their future physical development.

For the record, Cox retired in 1983 at the ripe old age of 11 having clocked 12,000 miles. Amyx, who was training up to 100 miles per week by the time she was 12, was later forced to cut back on her training due to a heart complaint discovered in her late teens that she claims was not running related. Neither suffered any significant ill-effects from their exploits and went on to lead normal lives enjoying running at a more recreational level. ■

*Major marathon winners have been getting younger and younger, not to mention faster and faster*

*Feyisa Lilesa clocked 2:09:12 to win this year's Dublin Marathon. The 19-year-old Ethiopian is the youngest ever winner in the race's 30-year history*



STEPHEN MCCARTHY - SPORTSFILE.COM





# Running but not racing

**The big Irish road races such as the Ballycotton 10 are booming, but at what cost to quality? David O'Dwyer goes in search of answers.**

**M**uch has been written about the Ballycotton 10 and why it is such a popular race, but Ballycotton and other races like it throughout the country are in danger of becoming victims of their own success.

There is a decline in the quality of times being recorded in almost all road races nationwide and this decline is probably even more striking in Ballycotton than in other less popular races.

And while road racing is enjoying a welcome renaissance that is often compared with the running boom of the 1980s, nationally the times are getting slower right across the whole spectrum of participants, from the winners downwards.

Let's take the hour mark as the yardstick for the Ballycotton 10 mile race. Why 60 minutes rather than 70 or 80? It's a fair question and the simple answer is that running under a 6-minute mile pace for 10 miles will not be achieved without a reasonable level of training over a prolonged period.

This is not 'elite' in the true sense of the word as it won't put you in the frame for winning the race, but it means that you are at least racing, as opposed to just running or jogging around the course. There is also a very good chance that you will make the top 100 and receive one of the much-coveted 'Top 100 Finisher' t-shirts.

The Ballycotton 10 was first run in 1978 when 31 runners started and 24 finished under 60 minutes. For the next six years the number of finishers steadily increased up to 848 and so too did the number achieving the magic hour mark, peaking at 143 in 1984. In 1985 there was a dip back down to 646 finishers with 101 under 60 minutes. Then there was another

steady increase until 1989 when there were 755 finishers with 129 under 60 minutes.

Fast forward to 1999 and 1,173 runners completed the race, but a mere 88 finished under the hour mark – the first time since 1983 that less than 100 finishers failed to break 60 minutes.

Things seemed to get back on track in 2000 with a new record of 1,222 completing the race and 108 finishing under 60 minutes. 2001 is best ignored because the figures were skewed by the Foot And Mouth crisis. For the next five years the number of finishers again increased year on year, reaching 2,813 in 2006 but the number finishing under the hour only passed the 100 mark in 2004.

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**Too many runners remain permanently stuck at the beginner stage and many seem happy just to complete the distance. The concept of racing seems alien to some**

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In 2007 there were 1,943 finishers, but only 65 of these were under 60 minutes. This is the lowest number of finishers breaking the hour mark since the 1979 race. And the figures for 2008 were only slightly better, with 2,203 finishing and 73 finishing under the hour.

What is the reason for this decline in racing standards? In Ballycotton, one explanation is

that there are fewer elite and mid-level runners taking part. This is an easy answer, but doesn't tell the whole story.

The real reason is the increase in the number of fun runners and joggers taking part in many races in the past number of years. This is, of course, to be welcomed as it increases the overall popularity and profile of the sport. The sport of athletics will always struggle in the popularity stakes in this country and anything that increases its popular appeal is a good thing.

For many of those new to the running scene, the Ballycotton 10 is seen as a must do race. Most people who complete the race feel that bit better for it. Is the problem, though, that too many of these runners remain permanently stuck at the beginner stage? Many seem happy just to complete the distance and aren't too concerned with their times. The concept of racing seems alien to some. I don't necessarily mean competing at the top end with a view to winning races, but competing against ones peers and of course against the clock.

People run for a multitude of reasons; it just appears that racing is no longer the main one. Long-term, the decline in racing standards will impact on a race's reputation and status. In 2002, the Ballycotton 10 was voted the 12th most popular race by readers of Runners World magazine in the UK. Where would it stand today in such a poll?

Anyone who has completed the race will know that there hasn't been a fall-off in the quality of the organisation or the race set-up. The fall-off is in the quality of the times being recorded. Is this being unkind or unfair to the masses? Maybe so, but surely it's time to put the quality back into Ballycotton and its ilk. They are races after all.



# Running in the shadows

**Domestic athletics is getting a raw deal from the national media, argues David O'Dwyer.**

IF YOU are not a regular reader of this magazine, then it may well have escaped your attention that the AAI National Road Relays and the National 10k Road Championships took place in recent months. Coverage of these events by the national media was practically non-existent. The results may have been included in the small print of the results' section, but that was about the height of it.

On the eve of the Ballycotton 10 Road Race last March, the legendary Ron Hill gave a talk on his career and he was asked his opinion on why there has been such a drop in the standards of times being recorded by the average club runner today compared to when he was competing at his peak. His considered response was that it was down to a number of reasons including the lack of coverage of domestic athletic events by the media.

He recalled that in his heyday, prior to say a cross-country championship race in the north of England, there would be a substantial preview and report of the race. Coverage of the domestic athletics scene was similarly reported in this country not so long ago, but has all but disappeared save for perhaps the Dublin Marathon or one of the heavily promoted road races that take place around the country.

It seems that athletics is slipping further down the pecking order when it comes to sports coverage, particularly in our daily newspapers. In the past few months there has been extensive coverage in the sports pages on the non-participation of sportspeople. We have been swamped with coverage of the Cork hurling strike, Andy Reid's non-selection and Stephen Ireland's self-imposed exile from the national soccer team.

These are all newsworthy items and deserve mention but how about some coverage of the domestic athletics scene? It isn't as if it doesn't exist, in fact it is in a very healthy state. It is from here that the likes of Jerry Kiernan and Dick Hooper, to name just two, provided plenty of column inches in the 1980's and '90's. These guys were based in Ireland and became household names because of their performances on the domestic scene en route to making it to four Olympic Games between them.

Sports editors may claim that they are covering what the public want. Has it escaped their attention that we are in the middle of a running boom?

Record numbers are competing in road races right across the country and yet the coverage of the sport remains risible. This summer will see the World Championships in Berlin. Presumably there will be plenty of cov-

James Crowley (Tallaght AC) celebrates at National Relays in Raheny.



erage of these championships and in the event of Ireland not returning with any medals the usual questions will be asked. Why do we bother? How much did it cost? Would the money not be better spent elsewhere?

It isn't as if we haven't heard it all before. Would it not be a better idea to start giving domestic athletics some decent coverage? Any athlete will tell you that they get a boost from seeing their name or picture in the paper. Athletics will never command the level of coverage that the GAA, soccer and rugby receive, but it does receive more than its fair share of

coverage when there is a bad news story. Sports editors appear to be interested only in the controversial and negative aspects of sport and less so in the Corinthian ideal of participation.

No doubt there will be ample coverage if an athlete fails a drugs' test, but what about the athlete who doesn't fail the drugs' test and is trying against the odds to make it in increasingly challenging times. If the benefits of the last running boom are anything to go by, then we could be in for an interesting few years so why not report on it?