

Britton perfectly primed to follow in O'Sullivan's and McKiernan's footsteps



Ian O'Riordan On Athletics

Successful distance running takes a lot of lonely, tedious effort but can be worth it at the finish line

On this date 20 years ago Sonia O'Sullivan felt rubbish and unmotivated. She started off with her usual warm-up around Richmond Park, close to her training base in London, before a hill session of 13 times 300 metres in an average of 51 seconds.

She did feel a little better by the end, and after a weights session in the gym that afternoon, she finished the day with another six-kilometre run. O'Sullivan trained twice a day, every day, for the rest of that week, running a total of 132 kilometres. Then, the week before Christmas, she upped it up to 170kms, including another hill session, where for the first half of the set, she increased the distance to 400m.

On Christmas Day she only trained once: 27kms, in one hour and 50 minutes. After another hill session, two days later, she ended the week with a five-mile cross-country race in Durham, on New Year's Eve, where she finished fourth. Her mileage total for that month, December 1994, came to 660kms.

It's perfectly normal for athletes to feel rubbish and unmotivated when they're averaging over 160kms a week of running in the depths of winter. O'Sullivan actually completed 53 training runs that month, including two races, without taking a single rest day.

Most of those runs were done alone, on cold frosty mornings or dark wet nights. Still, no matter how rubbish it got or how unmotivated she felt, O'Sullivan never once backed down – all of this carefully documented in her training diary from that month.

No recognition
Brendan Foster always said most distance runners feel tired all the time. They wake up tired, they go around all day tired, and they go to bed tired. It's all part of the hard and tiresome slog of the distance runner at this time of the year, when there is no recognition and reward for their efforts. But it's like putting money in the bank: it will always be there when the day comes to collect. Indeed O'Sullivan spent most of

the following summer collecting it. She was effectively unbeatable on the track in 1995, cleaning up on the old Grand Prix circuit, winning in Zurich, Oslo, Monaco and Berlin, running world-leading times in four separate distances, including a 3:58.85 for 1,500m – the only sub-four in the world that year – and not forgetting her World Championship gold medal over 5,000m in Gothenburg.

Of the 21 races she ran on the track that summer, O'Sullivan won 20 of them, and finished that 1995 season as the IAAF Athlete of the Year, the most consistent women's distance runner in the world. Those December days of feeling rubbish and unmotivated had become magnificently worthwhile.

On this date 20 years ago Catherine McKiernan arrived in Alnwick in the north of England for the first edition of the European Cross Country championships. She'd backed off a little on the hard and tiresome slog of her winter training, although not that much: Alnwick was the chance for some recognition and



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reward, but it was still only a stepping stone to the World Cross Country, the following March.

By then, McKiernan had won three World Cross Country silver medals in succession, and finished each of those seasons as the outright winner of the IAAF Grand Challenge, the most consistent women's

cross-country runner in the world. So McKiernan wasn't entirely motivated by the prospect of a European Cross Country title in December 1994, beyond the fact she knew she could win it.

As it turned out McKiernan was given a hard run all the way to the line by Spain's Julia Vaquero: in the end it took a couple of elbows to remind Vaquero that McKiernan wouldn't be beaten.

Mental strength

McKiernan had to hold onto the ropes of the finishing shoot to stop herself from collapsing, and always said she won that race on her mental strength more than anything else.

These are just little teasing reminders of that time, 20 years ago, when Ireland boasted two of the best women athletes in the world, in any sport, and that perhaps we didn't appreciate them at the time.

We may never see the likes of O'Sullivan and McKiernan again, and maybe distance running has moved on, in the global sense, although at least we still boast the

most consistent women's cross-country runner in Europe.

Because on Sunday in Borovets, a mountain resort in Bulgaria, Fionnuala Britton is looking to win a third European Cross Country title in four years. She finished a close fourth last year, in Belgrade, surrendering the back-to-back titles she won in Slovenia in 2011, and Hungary in 2012.

There were plenty of days in the aftermath of Belgrade when the Britton felt rubbish and unmotivated, but she never once backed down.

So, since the start of September, the 30-year-old has been training twice a day, almost every day, and every bit as hard and consistently as O'Sullivan and McKiernan were in their prime. Most of those runs are done alone, on cold frosty mornings or dark wet nights, around her home in Wicklow town. She's now perfectly primed to win a medal in Borovets, quite possibly and ideally the gold medal, and with that at least gain some recognition and reward for her efforts, even if some people still don't appreciate it at the time.

Leinster club SFC Final

Rhode aiming to strike a blow against Dublin clubs' increasing dominance



Scán Moran GAA correspondent

But All-Ireland champions St Vincent's a huge task for Offaly side

St Vincent's (Dublin) v Rhode (Offaly)

Páirc Tailteann, Navan, 2.0 TG4

are an exceptional case.

"They've done something unique in the county – well, UCD did it but among the ordinary clubs. Not only did they win Dublin, Leinster and the All-Ireland but they've gone on to win Dublin again and get back to the provincial final. They're unbeaten since 2012. We were the last team to beat them – by a point and they were unlucky."

"The standard in Dublin has a bit to do with it as well and the structures. Division One is very, very competitive. You have 16 teams and they mightn't all be able to win the county title but if you're not right on the day they'll beat you so you have to be focused every time you go out."

Were relegated

"A couple of years ago Kilmacud won the All-Ireland and were relegated the next year; Brigids too. It's incredibly difficult to compete and I think it's a lot harder to win several titles than in some other counties, for instance Portlaoise in Laois, ST Brigids in Roscommon and Crossmaglen."

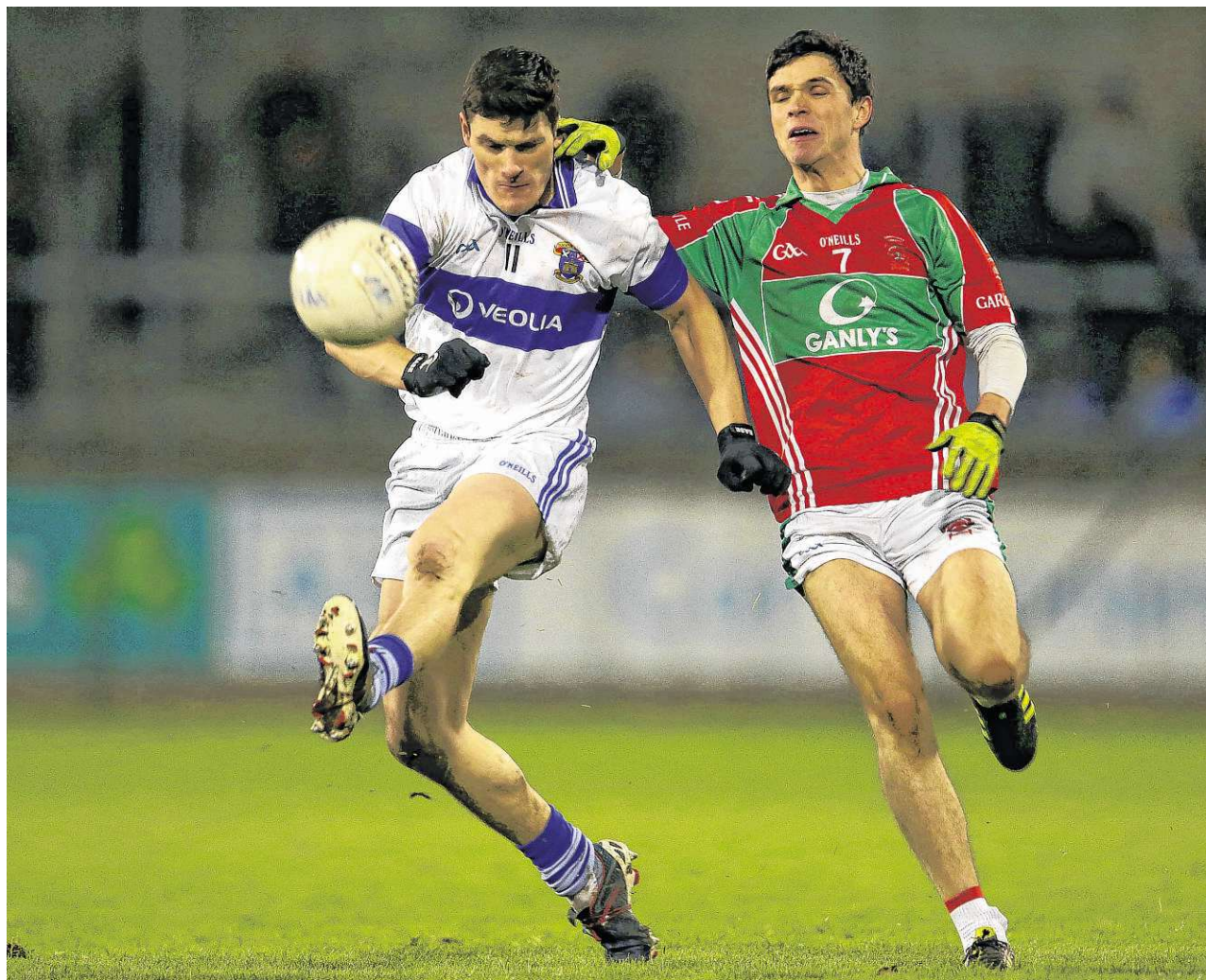
"That sets the bar high so a team like Ballymun can come out after 27 years and nearly go all the way."

Vincent's are treading an uncertain path in one respect. Only Crossmaglen Rangers (twice) and UCD (40 years ago) have managed to put All-Ireland titles back to back.

The perception that Rhode's potential may have seen better days is disputed by the man who saw them close up in last month's semi-finals.

Luke Dempsey has managed three county teams, Westmeath, Carlow and Longford, and had charge of Kildare's Moorefield side, who were favourites to win even after a number of injuries to key players.

"Rhode were very good against us," says Dempsey, "and also against St Pat's and O'Mahonys in the previous



matches. They've brought in newer players like the McPadden brothers and Glenn O'Connell but they have experience with Alan McNamee, who was outstanding against us at midfield, and Niall McNamee and Anton O'Sullivan up front, who are incredibly dangerous."

"They also play a clever style of football and try to get the ball up to them as quickly as possible. They're a parish team and they epitomise everything that's great about the club championship. There'll be a great atmosphere."

He also feels concerns about the domination of the city clubs are premature.

"If Vincent's do win by a big margin it does beg the question about Dublin domination at inter-county level in Leinster extending to the club championship. There are a lot of players from other counties working

Paths to final

St Vincent's

Quarter-final: beat Portlaoise (Laois) 3-11 to 0-10
Semi-final: beat Garrycastle (Westmeath) 3-9 to 1-10

Rhode

First round: beat St Patrick's (Louth) 2-9 to 0-10
Quarter-final: beat Navan O'Mahony's (Meath) 4-10 to 0-13
Semi-final: beat Moorefield (Kildare) 1-15 to 2-4

and living in Dublin and playing for clubs there.

"But it's a bit early to get panicky about that. Over the past 12 months Garrycastle and Portlaoise have both been competitive against Vincent's."

Trump card

The Dublin champions' own attack is their trump card according to Curran, who thinks that Vincent's' collective success in this area has been overshadowed

by the presence of footballer of the year candidate Diarmuid Connolly.

"They're a very good team and probably aren't getting the credit, bounding along winning matches. Coming out of Parnell Park you can hear people saying, 'ah, Diarmuid Connolly and Mossy Quinn didn't play that well'. But that means that they've been getting by without their biggest players playing to their maximum."

Dermot Connolly of St Vincent's in action against Garrycastle's Gary McCallon during the Leinster club semi-final. PHOTOGRAPH: MORGAN TREACY/INPHO

"One of their big strengths is that the other four forwards are doing it even if the opposition are watching Connolly and Quinn all the time. That's difficult to beat. They create space for each other."

"Scoring forwards is the big thing they're going for them. Even on the bench they've scoring power. They're also a brilliant centre back in Ger Brennan, who knows how to dictate the pace of a game – when to slow it down and when to pick it up. Behind all of that they have tradition. They've won the All-Ireland three times. "They believe."

Briefs

Rugby

Tierney appointed as Ireland women's head coach

Former Ireland scrumhalf Tom Tierney has been appointed head coach of the senior women's team by the IRFU.

Tierney, who played eight times for Ireland, is a "level five accredited coach" with experience working with Garryowen and Cork Constitution. He takes over from Philip Doyle and will work under Anthony Eddy, the former general manager of Sevens rugby with the Australian Rugby Union, who has also been confirmed as the IRFU director of both men's and women's Sevens and the women's XV rugby programmes.

In the third "full-time" appointment announced on

Friday, Marian Earls has been named head of strength and conditioning for Sevens and women's rugby as the IRFU looks to amalgamate both codes. "A review of the existing women's rugby representative structures revealed a need for greater integration of both the 15-a-side and Sevens programmes from both a coaching and player support perspective," said IRFU performance director David Nucifora.

Tierney, who coached the club international squad to victories over England and Scotland last season, will begin his role with the Ireland Women's team ahead of the Six Nations.

Athletics

Journalist to reveal more on Russian doping

The German journalist whose documentary revealed claims of systematic doping in Russian athletics said he is prepared to make a follow-up after receiving more evidence.

Hajo Seppelt, whose three documentaries alleged systematic doping and a cover-up involving IAAF officials, said the undercover documentary had led others to come forward with evidence.

"People are sending us more and more evidence to back the claim there is systematic doping in Russian sport," Seppelt said. "Therefore, I do not want to categorically rule out such a move. If it is needed, we will film a second part."

Rugby

Castrogiovanni and Armitage to face disciplinary committee

Toulon players Martin Castrogiovanni and Delon Armitage have received misconduct complaints for their behaviour during last Sunday's Champions Cup defeat by Leicester.

European Professional Club Rugby launched an investigation into the events at Welford Road and has decided the pair must face a three-man independent disciplinary committee in London on Wednesday.

Castrogiovanni sought out journalists after the match and directed an expletive-ridden tirade at Leicester director of rugby Richard Cockerill, who had claimed the former Italy prop swapped the Tigers for



■ Martin Castrogiovanni to face three-man committee

Toulon in 2013 for financial reasons. Armitage, Toulon's English fullback who has a chequered disciplinary history, is alleged to have used offensive language at spectators at Welford Road.

Castrogiovanni has been left out of the return fixture on Saturday but Armitage has been named on the wing.

Boxing

Ward earns emphatic win in Bulgaria

Irish light-heavy Joe Ward outclassed Serge Mitchell to record his second AIBA Pro Boxing (APB) victory in Sofia, Bulgaria on Friday night.

The 2011 European Elite champion earned a 60-54 unanimous decision over the German fighter after six rounds in the Bulgaria capital.

Ward, a three-time AIBA World Elite, Youth and Junior medalist, has now won two and lost one of his APB bouts since October. Ward will be between the ropes in APB again next month against an opponent to be confirmed.

Gaelic Games News

Brennan move raises concern in Leitrim

Defender's transfer to Bundoran means he will be eligible to line out for Donegal

EAMON DONOGHUE

Donegal's ageing defence could be bolstered by the fresh legs of young Leitrim defender Paul Brennan for the 2015 championship.

The Melvin Gaels and Leitrim half back had his transfer to Donegal club Bundoran approved on Thursday and has been told he will get his chance to stake a claim for the 2012 All-Ireland champions' squad.

Last year just nine defenders featured for Donegal in the championship, with the average age of their six starting defenders in the All-Ireland final defeat, all of whom also started the final two years previous, being 28.

Barring an initial "get together" with the Leitrim panel in October, Brennan had not been seen at any session since the training ban was lifted for the Connacht team in early November and has since confirmed he will not be committing for 2015. It's believed he has not relocated.

Major move

Nearly three years after then Kildare manager Kieran McGeeney controversially announced the imminent transfer of Cavan footballer Seanie Johnston to the county, new Leitrim manager Shane Ward has his concerns over the impact this type of transfer will have on the GAA.

"This is a major move after the Seanie Johnson episode and it could set a new precedent for just changing counties. It would have been common knowledge in Donegal that this was happening and I know that because I'm from there."

"I can confirm that this had

been mooted between Paul and Bundoran and with Donegal from early on after Leitrim's exit from last summer's championship."

Leitrim have already lost main score-getter Emlyn Mulligan this summer as he opted to travel for the year.

"I would have been aware of the situation with Emlyn from very early and he was upfront and honest about travelling for the year," said Ward.

"I knew from quite early on what was happening with Paul



■ Paul Brennan: has left Melvin Gaels and joined Bundoran

but had tried to persuade him of otherwise, but there was no swaying him after a number of attempts. I contacted him on numerous occasions and we had a number of different meetings."

"It is frustrating – Emlyn I understand and I look forward to his return but with Paul I am very disappointed. I see it as a huge danger to our game in general, and it's a real negative for football in Leitrim."

Donegal GAA chairman Seán Dunne has said that while the county have no existing policy on selecting players from outside of the county, they would not rule out the option. He denied he was aware of any assurances to Brennan.

Donegal's manager Rory Gallagher, a Fermanagh native himself who transferred to Cavan for a spell during his own playing years for the Erneiders, would not comment on the recent developments.

Sunday's GAA previews

Scán Moran

All-Ireland club SFC quarter-final

Tír Chonaill Gaels (London) v Corofin (Galway), Ruislip, 1.0 (deferred coverage, Irish TV on Sky 191, 6.0) – The London champions have a feisty history at this stage of the All-Ireland, most famously 24 years ago taking eventual champions Lavey to extra-time but also proving competitive in the years since. The clubs played each other previously six years ago with the Galway side running out comfortable winners, 2-7 to 0-6.

Former Leitrim manager Barney Breen is in charge of the London club who have won two of the last three local championships. It will be their 15th crack at an All-Ireland quarter-final and they still await their first win.

They also have experienced players, including Mark Gottsche, from Galway, who last year became the first London player to win a Footballer of the Month award.

The problem this weekend is that Corofin are increasingly being seen as front runners for the All-Ireland after a barnstorming campaign in Galway and Connacht. They have experience in the likes of Gary Sice and Kieran Fitzgerald and a cutting edge that surprised highly-fancied Mayo champions Ballymullinber.

Hard not to see them progress to a possible, box-office semi-final with champions St Vincent's, who contest this weekend's Leinster final.

Galway SHC final

Portumna v Gort, Kenny Park, Athenry, 1.30 – After what feels like an eternity, the Galway final takes place. Held up for virtually eight months by Turloughmore's challenges to their expulsion for fielding an ineligible player, the long-awaited match sees All-Ireland champions Portumna and the 2011 champions Gort.

Portumna have been more disadvantaged than their opponents, who got to play their semi-final a couple of weeks ago but the holders have so much experience with four All-Ireland titles in nine years that having to wait nine weeks since beating Craughwell shouldn't be a crippling blow.

Gort have quality players if not as high-wattage as serial All Stars, Joe and Ollie Canning and Damien Hayes. Richie Cummins looked like becoming a real presence on the county team a couple of years ago but injury played a role in stalling his intercounty career.

Their manager is Matt Murphy, until retirement this year the perennial man in charge of Galway's successful minors and six-time All-Ireland winner.

Portumna mightn't be at their peak any longer but as last season's campaign demonstrated they're prepared at making the most of what comes their way and it's hard to see Gort breaking their duck from four championship meetings against them tomorrow.