

WOMEN OF

BY DICK HOOPER

At first glance Cornafean, Co. Cavan and Villierstown, Co. Waterford would appear to have little in common. Pockets of rural Ireland north and south. Yet the emergence to world-class of Catherina McKiernan begins to make comparisons between Cornafean and Villierstown irresistible.

Back in 1974 the people were treated to the rising talent of one John Treacy of Villierstown, Co. Waterford. Journalists romanced us with tales of Treacy running to and from school in nearby Cappoquin. Skinny Treacy, even at 17, had the build of a 13 year old. Gawky, spectacles, long hair and sloppy T-shirt, annihilating fields everywhere. In the tradition of Irish athletes of the past Treacy was a cash-starved government's propagandist card. If the talent was there, then facilities mattered little. When the gun fires, the cream will rise to the top.

America may have honed John Treacy but Villierstown bred him. He was a winner long before he went west.

If unheralded Villierstown has produced our greatest long distance runner of recent years then a townland in Cavan, a county like Waterford, where the GAA is king, is responding with a female whose development is so akin to Treacy's it begs comparison.

Catherina McKiernan from Cornafean, a townland in Cavan, a Treacy lookalike

in build and ability, is a story of a developing talent that puts the theory books and all their logic firmly in their place and makes tartan tracks, altitude training, blood-doping and anabolic steroids seem like complex clues in a child's crossword puzzle.

" Sonia O'Sullivan is a winner. She thinks like one, performs like one and has the 'presence' of a star. "

Right now the two biggest stars in Irish athletics are women. Catherina McKiernan and Sonia O'Sullivan have been sent down from heaven and given to BLE as gifts. Interest-free loans bequeathed to our national association whose conduct and treatment of them will be monitored over the next decade. The fact that they have arrived, give or take a few races, in the public consciousness simultaneously has provided Irish athletics with a breath of fresh air. A golden opportunity to shake off the doom and gloom of recent years.

Sonia O'Sullivan is a winner. She thinks like one, performs like one and has the 'presence' of a star. Pleasant, personable, confident in her own ability. Charming persona, ruthless determination. A pocketful of NCAA titles, World

Student Games Gold and Silver, World Indoor record, multi Irish records. All have come almost ahead of schedule. Before the public had started to demand. She's good. She knows it and the nation knows it.

The manner in which O'Sullivan momentarily raised the pulse of the country in the European Championships in Split 1990 when she charged into the lead with 800m remaining in the 3000m final has provided the armchair aficionado with the appetiser. He knows the best wine is yet to come.

This winter Catherina McKiernan has dominated Irish athletics coverage, seized the initiative from the sports politicians and elevated it once more to priority material on the sports pages. Her feats on the Grand Prix circuit have re-kindled the passions of the country's established athletics correspondents after a few years sabbatical from covering the sport, when every story seemed dominated by boardroom battles and infighting.

Quality feature writers, Liam Hayes, Paul Kimmage, David Walsh and their ilk, have warmed to the stories of O'Sullivan and McKiernan.

They will become even more interested as the O'Sullivan/McKiernan era gathers momentum and folklore over the coming years. As the emancipation of women's sport and the pace of its fight for equality quickens, the face of Irish



• Ready for blast off: Catherina McKiernan at Mallusk.

Photography Steven Humphreys

SUBSTANCE

athletics has already changed. It is not long since such luminaries as Deirdre Nagle, Louise McGrillen and Catherine Rooney would sigh ruefully that their race would be lucky to garner the last few lines in a report. Or a 10 second flash on *Saturday Sport*. Token National Champions. Token competitors. How times change. Is nothing sacred?

Now reports of events where Sonia or Catherina compete carry the ladies race as the main feature. In Mallusk recently the big money shelled out to import Kenyan runners and Eamonn Martin was not rewarded with the media interest the expenditure was intended to buy. Instead the clash and presence of McKiernan and O'Sullivan absorbed the media and spectators and had little children dashing to catch a glimpse of these green golden girls. As they continue their inexorable climb to the top, McKiernan and O'Sullivan are on the verge of becoming the first real Irish women sporting superstars. Visions of world championships, Olympic medals and open-topped bus rides come into view.

The fact that they have arrived together makes it more exciting. More intoxicating. More parochial. Totally authentic. Totally Irish. Good enough to be a world beater one day yet vulnerable to another Irish woman the next.

Historically, Irish athletics has tended to be dominated in pairs. The '70s and

early '80s belonged to Treacy and Coghlan, the latter half of the eighties saw the rise of Marcus O'Sullivan and Frank O'Mara. Sadly and particularly in the case of O'Mara and O'Sullivan, lack of initiative and parochial politics never saw their excellence and the potential of their combat capitalised upon. The iron was let cool without ever an effort to strike.

BLE's gift is there for all to see. Two beautiful, talented girls have landed in their laps. Their marketability is mind-boggling. Work should have already commenced on organising a series of clashes between the two over various distances. Sonia should be exhorting us on television advertisements to use "Run and Go" shampoo and victory smiles could be improved by brushing with Bionic toothpaste. Catherina's face should be staring down from billboards nationwide telling us about the advisability of consuming dairy products or how she uses Apricot computers to log her training sessions.

The fact of the matter is that if BLE took the opportunity and marketed both women they could earn considerable revenue not alone for the two achievers themselves, but more importantly for the Association. More pertinently, if BLE fail to grasp the nettle on this issue no doubt some agent will get sole rights on one or both women.

Both women are thus far free of public

squabbles with the national association and McKiernan in particular has close links with many of the BLE hierarchy. On past experience BLE's ability to show initiative on issues like this has never impressed. A burst of entrepreneurial professionalism now could do enormous good not only for O'Sullivan and McKiernan but also for athletics in Ireland.

Column inches betray a lot about the condition of a sport. Sean Kelly and Stephen Roche's brilliance and the attention and publicity surrounding it give a totally inflated picture of the state of Irish cycling. Norway in recent years has experienced something similar in women's athletics. The dominance and achievements of Grete Waitz and Ingrid Kristiansen have elevated the public's perception of the state of Norwegian athletics way above what exists in reality. The truth is their back-up material is no better than our own. Yet the feeling persists that Oslo is the place to go to learn about excellence.

Ireland has always produced good runners. Tradition. Chance. The hungry fighter syndrome. It has always been that way and will keep happening. Witness the recent exodus and athletic development of such as Niall Bruton and Mark Carroll. But there have been fewer world-class women. In Sonia O'Sullivan and Catherina McKiernan we have two jewels. Watch them sparkle.



• Presence of a star: Sonia O'Sullivan shows her versatility.