

## BALLYCOTTON ROAD RACES

John Walshe

In the formative years of BLE, road running, as we know it today, was practically non-existent in the Cork area. In the early to mid 'seventies a few races took place, such as the Youghal round-the-houses New Year's Eve event, plus a handful of summer races held in conjunction with festivals at such places as Skibbereen and Ballymore.

The main fixtures for road runners were held in the early spring, when Midleton AC staged their ambitious programme of events for all age groups. St. Finbarrs also attracted the various age groups to their popular relays around The Lough. The only real distance race, however, was the 15 mile run from Cork to Cobh. This promotion often served as the National Championship at the distance, and, as a consequence, attracted some of the country's finest long distance exponents.

In August of 1977 a five mile race was held in Ballycotton, with 34 runners taking part. A ten mile event was planned for the following March, as at that time there was no annual race at this distance in the country. Early March was deemed a suitable date, coming at the end of the cross-country season and before the track commenced. And so, on March 12th 1978 the Ballycotton '10' was born when 31 runners, all Cork based, finished the ten mile distance, each receiving a certificate showing their time & position on the day. A number of trophies and plaques were presented as prizes. The entry fee was 30p per runner, and the total expenditure on the race amounted to £70.10p.

By 1980 the numbers had grown to over 150, which was considered a huge amount for a road race at the time. In October of that year the first Dublin City Marathon took place - ushering in the 'running boom' in this country. Over the next few years almost every town and village had a race or 'mini-marathon' of some description. The Ballycotton race benefited from this interest and indeed, near 'mania' in road running and jogging, and by 1984 the Ballycotton '10' had a total of 848 finishers. The five mile events, which started with just the one race, had at this stage developed into a four race Summer Series, with promotions in Balyandreen, Shanagarry, Churchtown South, as well as Ballycotton itself, with each race attracting in excess of 200 competitors.

As with all 'booms', a recession had to set in, and towards the end of the decade a lot of the races that had appeared on the scene fizzled out, due to lack of interest, or sponsorship, or both. Numbers in the Ballycotton '10' levelled off at around the 700 mark, still quite a sizable amount. However, in the last couple of years, figures in all the Ballycotton events have shown a dramatic increase. The Summer Series of 1992 had record fields in all four races, with an average of 250 in each. This year (1993) the Ballycotton '10' exceed all expectations, with the total of entries (1257) and finishers (1088) up 25% on the previous best. This significant increase was also reflected in the high standard, with 200 runners

finishing under the one hour barrier. The race is now almost as well known in the UK as in Ireland, with up to 100 making the trip each year. It is also a huge community involvement, and a major boost to the local economy at what is a quite time of year.

The early races in the Ballycotton area were organised with the help of Midleton AC, along with the Cork County Board, and also of course the local juvenile club which was in existence for a few years. In 1981 Ballycotton Running Promotions was formed, which is probably the only club of its kind in the country, dealing solely with the organisation of races. Their efficiency and expertise have played a significant role in the development of road racing, not alone in their own area, but in the country as a whole, where the Ballycotton races are now taken as the yardstick for many other promotions.



(above left) leaders in the 1990 Ballycotton '10'; from left, Sean Harte, John Scanlon, John Griffin and James McGee. (above) John Walshe, for many the 'face' of the Ballycotton series.

(left) Ballycotton, 1980 - Dan Kennedy, left, and Mick Joyce, relieved to be at the finish!