

**DANNY McDAID:**

# A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

*By Tom O'Riordan*

**D**EEP in some of Co. Donegal's most beautiful countryside, a man cuts the black turf of the Glenswilley valley, satisfied that the hot Summer sunshine will bake it into making a glorious winter fire in his neat detached bungalow down below in Fahykeen. With his sheep grazing happily on the fields nearby, a secure job with the local Post and Telegraphs, a devoted wife and family at home, that man of 41 years of age could well afford to take a little longer over that deliciously strong bog tea.

Particularly so since he had enjoyed a rewarding life which enabled him to see many parts of the world, make many friends and carve a little sporting niche for himself which made him the admiration of so many. Danny McDaid is that man.

But even on the evenings when he would return home tired and weary after spending a day in the bog Danny would still want to change into his running shorts and head off into the open roads for a 10 mile run. "On those occasions it would be very easy; nothing faster than about 70 minutes; I found it more relaxing than anything else. But I also wanted to do it; it was important for my mental preparations" explained the genial McDaid recently.

And what you might ask was so impor-

tant about the mental preparations of a 41 year old veteran. To win his country's National marathon Championship of course. That was a target which Danny had surprisingly set himself during the winter months when saving the turf gave way to tending his sheep across mountainy fields and having a few pints with some small farmers in the local pub two or three nights a week.

"The crack would be great and you would not miss a few hours flying by" smiles Danny. But he was a man who had become admired by all the locals. For after all he had run in the Olympic Games, European Championships, World Cross-Country Championships and competed in many other international events also.

However in the autumn of 1981, Danny, now 40 years of age, announced that he was going to retire from competing in all international competitions which had spanned a period of almost 14 years. To many it seemed, in essence, that Danny had virtually decided to bow out of competitive athletics except for a few local club events. For after all he had a very good innings and he appreciated that more than most.





But as Danny sat beside the glowing turf fire during the long winter nights he began to miss the excitement of man to man confrontation, either on the muddy fields of Co. Cork, the smooth roads of Amsterdam or the running circuit of some big stadium.

"The reason I retired from international competition was because I found the ever increasing pressure of travel just too much. Because when I had to run abroad it often meant considering whether I could get off work, then dash off to Dublin airport on a Friday afternoon and then when I arrived back on a Sunday night had to face a four hours drive to Letterkenny. It was a big strain and I wanted a break. Plus the fact that I wanted to spend more time with my children. That was important also and influenced my decision" he related with total honesty.

But as the summer of '82 dawned, the evenings stretched, the sheep sheared and the turf saved, Danny's longing for the open roads rekindled the old flame in his belly. Running was too much a part of his life just to cast it aside without a feeling of remorse. "In the back of my mind was this inclination to run well again. But having taken matters rather easy for several months, the state of my fitness deteriorated and I wondered if I could ever regain it again.

"In my heart I knew I wanted to get really fit again and I suppose I was inclined to look around for that inspiration which would give me the old sparkle. I used to run regularly but I suppose it was only out of loyalty. I had no targets, no ambitions, nothing to prove really, not even to myself. I was just a contented 40 year old who had sorted out a few priorities in my life".

#### Danny McDaid's fastest marathons:

- 2-13.06, Limerick, '76.
- 2-16.22, Amsterdam, '77.
- 2-17.06, New York, '76.
- 2-17.06, New York, '76.
- 2-17.40, Amsterdam '78.
- 2-17.10, Athlone '72.
- 2-19.02, Portlaoise '74.
- 2-19.08, Letterkenny, '83.
- 2-19.11, Helsinki, '71.

who had just sorted out a few priorities in my life".

Each day he went to Letterkenny Post Office and set out on his daily postal delivery duties, slipped home for a quick lunch and had his day's work finished by 4.00 in the afternoon. Having competed in two Olympic Games, European Championships, nine World cross-country championships and numerous other domestic and international events he was able to think with some degree of satisfaction about his past. He played with his two children, looked forward to the arrival of a third and frequently helped Kathleen with the house chores. But deep down he longed one day just to reach out for one more good hard competitive race, just like the old days. And boy he had many of them.

Then last year Letterkenny A.C. received news that they had been granted



*Danny, No. 137, competing in Limerick.*

the National marathon championship for '83. The club felt honoured and suddenly McDaid began to think differently on those evening 10 mile runs. They had been very gentle, almost without purpose, but as the news of the marathon sank in they took on a new significance for Danny, almost without he realising it. He was going to run in that marathon.

"I wanted to get back anyway" is how he puts it now, smiling with no little glee. By nature McDaid is not a man who likes to complain but instead get on with the job. But one had to listen sympathetically as he outlined the background to the pitfalls he encountered before he even got to the starting line on August 26.

"I planned on starting earlier but just as I was getting into shape I pulled a calf muscle. That was on St. Stephen's Day (he puts it down to too much bog water). Then as I nursed that and looked like getting back I fell and badly hurt my shoulder".

So he spent four weeks off work with his arm in a sling, and even the sheep were sick of the sight of him every day walking down the road as he attempted to keep his leg muscles in shape. "I missed the whole of January and February and I really thought I would not make it. Then after a slow build-up in March, I felt myself coming around about early April".

But he was already some 15 lbs over his proper running weight and this caused him a bit of a problem and it took him two months before he came down to 10 stone. "It was a question of knowing what to do" and for a man who had been experiencing the rigours of marathon running for almost 15 years there was hardly a man more well

#### World Cross-Country Championship appearances:

- 1969 – Glasgow.
- 1973 – Wagenham, Belg.
- 1974 – Monza.
- 1976 – Chepstow.
- 1977 – Dusseldorf.
- 1978 – Glasgow.
- 1979 – Limerick.
- 1980 – Madrid.
- 1981 – Rome.

versed in what was required.

He could recall the days when he was among Dublin's flatland dwellers' and often ran 160 miles a week but not always reaping the rewards. "And that was in between working 50 hours a week, cooking for yourself and also trying to get the proper rest". It's no wonder he now shakes his head and smiles ruefully.

But since returning to home in Letterkenny life had taken on a new and fresh outlook again. Training became easier and with very little of the "side attractions" he became almost addicted to it.

So now as the body responded again to the regular training runs so too did its state of fitness. "I felt no great pressure and with the weekend's to myself could plan the schedule to fit into my work, along with spending the odd few days in the bog.

Then on May 1 he set out on a 20 mile run which was his first over the distance in three years. "I was not afraid of it but more concerned about how my body would respond afterwards. I was very happy and at that time I felt I would make it".



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But then one morning while in Dublin for the National track Championships he woke up with a severe pain in his back. "I just tried to jog for a mile or two but gave up and decided just to walk for two hours. I had physiotherapy in Letterkenny and was back running within four or five days. I fact I felt so advanced in my fitness that I even had to cut back. I suppose that was the value of experience".

Before the marathon he took two week's holidays, watched the World Championships from Helsinki and became so inspired that one morning he hopped out of bed and ran the hardest 10 miles that he had experienced for three years. "I ran around 54 minutes and was delighted with myself".

Unfortunately most of the top runners decided against running the National marathon at Letterkenny but this did not diminish McDaid's resolve. "I was looking forward to having a few of the top men but I also thought there were sufficient in the field to make it hard for me in the extreme", he told me.

Danny himself had picked out the course - who else was better qualified - and measured it also. "I really did not know what to expect. I suppose I felt I could run about 2 hrs. 20 mins. but this was no easy course". The general consensus among the locals was that McDaid would not be running unless he reckoned he could win. But Danny would not altogether agree with them.

"I felt I did not have to go out and prove myself and was running more to create some local interest and at the same time giving me the incentive to get back into top shape again". A realistic view you will agree!

But there was one more hitch before Danny drove the four miles into Letterkenny fully togged out for the race. "For some reason best known to myself I decided to sleep in the spare room the night before the race, but it ended up being a bit of a nightmare" affording himself a broad smile as he related how he was unable to get to sleep until well after midnight and then waking up at 6.30 a.m. the next morning. "Five hours sleep was hardly the best way to prepare for a marathon but I soon put it out of my mind and started to concentrate on the event itself".

The race started in the middle of Letterkenny and then covered a four mile circuit before heading out into the countryside. "I dictated the pace from the start" says Danny, as bold as you like. "Perhaps it was the elation of running around the town but I felt totally relaxed through the first mile (5 mins. 20 secs.). I fact I was prepared to run as hard as I could for as long as I could".

The second mile took 5 mins. 10 secs

and Danny was still in front as the others waited for a hint of anxiety from the old warrior. But they could have been there since and they would not have sensed a weakening from the old master.

The 10 mile marker came up and Danny had reason to feel elated. "I was running so comfortable that I could not believe it took us only 53 mins. 14 secs. because I felt I had been running so much harder for 54 mins. in training".

McDaid was always a great competitor and this great train often stood square behind him when the going became tough. But it was his opponents who were asked that searching question that afternoon in Letterkenny except they were unable to answer. So at 18 miles Danny, without ever making any special effort, eased away from the last of the survivors and now his 4th National marathon title was virtually in the palm of his hand.

But it is an indication of the man's vast reservoir of natural strength that he should virtually pick up the pace still further over the second 10 miles, covering that stretch in 52.36. "I just enjoyed the rest of it, running comfortable and waving to a few friends along the way".

And he could well afford to wave as he drew further away from his gasping rivals. "I could have run at least a minute faster and lost another 30 secs. when a T.V. car stopped right in front of me about 400 yards from the finish but that was not important. What was important was that I could come back and round myself into shape again and that win over a difficult course has given me a fresh zest for running.

"I do not want to sound as if I'm being over ambitious because I know I've done it all before but I will see how it goes over the coming month's before deciding on any future international competition".

## National Marathon Championships

1969 - 3rd. 1970 - 1st. 1971 - 2nd  
1972 - 3rd. 1974 - 1st. 1976 - 1st.  
1980 - 6th. 1983 - 1st.

So Danny McDaid came home alone into his native town of Letterkenny the winner in 2 hrs. 19 mins. 8 secs. "I believe that on a more reasonable course that would be worth 2-17 but even if the top men were here they would have had to run that far anyway to win". Fighting words indeed.

So now Danny has his sights set on the Dublin City marathon. "I think I can run about 2 hrs. 15 mins. At least that is what I'm aiming for but you never know what can happen on the day. I doubt if I would be seen upon the heels of Kiernan or Cusack, at least not for the first 10 miles but I've always valued my strength in the later stages of a marathon and that is the way I'll be looking at it for Dublin".

And then he disclosed that, depending on subsequent developments, he would be back challenging for a place on the Irish team for the Olympics in Los Angeles next year. "That is something which is on my mind. I have to be honest about that but at the same time I do not want to attempt something unless I can be reasonably sure of making a reasonable attempt at making it.

"When you compete in the Olympics it gives you a great appreciation of your sport and with the exception of Kiernan, Cusack, Kenny and Hooper there are not too many around capable of breaking 2 hrs. 14 mins. So if all goes well, I would like to have a go in '84". It seems the ideal target to make those long runs in the dark wintery nights around Letterkenny all the more enjoyable and fulfilling. If that is possible!

*Danny the family man.*

