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Deirdre Nagle, back at the top

By Jim Dowling

AT THIRTY three years of age, with a husband and two young children to look after and fifteen years of splendid achievement in athletics behind her, Deirdre Nagle (D.C.H.) could be forgiven for showing signs of strain or seeking a respite from competition. But not a bit of it. Instead she is preparing for what will be one of the highpoints of her distinguished career when she represents Ireland in the Marathon at the World Championships in Helsinki in August.

Since she took up running at the age of eighteen, Deirdre has emerged as one of the greats of Irish womens long distance running. She has been national champion at the three middle distances, national cross country champion three times, English cross country champion and British A.A.A. 3,000m champion. She has made numerous representative appearances for Ireland and helped her club Dublin City Harriers to become the most formidable ladies athletic club in Ireland and one of the finest in Europe, sporting a host of International athletes among its members. She has also contributed to the tremendous improvement in standards among Ireland's female marathon runners.

In the short space of three years the best time for an Irish woman has improved from well above the three hour mark to Carey May's world fastest for an all ladies race of 2 hrs. 29 mins. 23 secs. Deirdre Nagle is now the third fastest Irish woman with 2 hrs. 37 mins. 42 secs., to Carey and Regina Joyce (2 hrs. 32 mins), and remarkably the aggregate time of the three – all of whom represent Ireland in the Helsinki Marathon – makes a faster total than that of the three British representatives, Joyce Smith, Glynis Penny and Kathryn Binns. In the space of only eighteen months and only four marathons, Deirdre has improved her best time for the distance by twelve minutes.

Deirdre Nagle, née Foreman, is married to Dermot Nagle and the couple live in Blackhorse Avenue with the Phoenix Park literally a stone's throw from their front door. During the early seventies, Dermot was one of the best club 800m men around Dublin and since cutting down on his active interest in running, he has become well-known as a coach and official of Dublin City Harriers. He is also a very busy member of the Dublin County Board. The couple have two children, Lorcan aged five and Damhan aged two. It is fair to say that their whole life revolves around the world of athletics and their enthusiasm and fervour for the sport are immediately apparent to anyone who comes in contact with them.



Pic: Brian Tansey

Over the years the Nagles have accumulated a wealth of practical knowledge about every aspect of athletics and there is no doubt that the prominent position of Dublin City Harriers in Irish athletics is not a little due to their guidance and their inspiration.

To many people Dermot Nagle is a rather shy man whose sense of humour can have a sharp edge to it at times. Deirdre Nagle exudes that air of relaxation and confidence common to almost every leading female athlete that I have encountered. Truly, as the American rock singer, Linda Ronstadt is in the habit of suggesting, running does wonders for the inward spirit.

Indeed the qualities of alertness and practicality that Deirdre Nagle clearly displays as an athlete are immediately apparent in conversation with her.

How does she manage to housekeep and cater for her family and still maintain such a high level of fitness?

Deirdre says: "The main obstacle is getting someone to look after the children. Once that problem is solved the rest is easy. As a full time mother I work flexi-hours. Housework can be done at any time, but it can be a problem getting children looked after. When Lorcan was a baby, I had a baby minder. Nowadays he is at school and Damhan goes to playschool in the morning. My mother comes over three afternoons a week and not only minds the boys but does some housework for me as well. The problem arises when there is no school or mother is not available. Then I have to call on old friends and relatives."

Many people would be of the opinion that when a married person becomes an active athlete the only way the stability of the home can be maintained is for the non-athletic partner to assume some of the domestic duties done by the athletic partner. This suggestion provoked much amusement in Deirdre.

"In our case Dermot is more involved in athletics as an official than I am as an athlete, so I have had to take over some of his duties such as painting, decorating and gardening. In any event my running comes first because Dermot is my coach".

So does she find that running, in addition to keeping her fit keeps her looking young or is good for the complexion, etc?

"Did you ever see a more haggard bunch of people than athletes lining up for a race? What it boils down to for me is not just that running keeps you young or more energetic but the mental break it gives you. If a woman is a working mother, her job gives her a break from her domestic and motherly duties and vice versa. As anyone with children knows, when you have children around you, you can hardly hear yourself think. For full time mothers who are home all day running provides a change of scene. For me it is the time of day I can think for myself, mentally compose letters and form opinions. As an athlete you are seen as an individual in yourself and not an extension of your husband and children. I enjoy being a wife and mother but there is more to me than that".



Deirdre receives her trophy for first lady in Liberties Race from Frank Feeley.

Pic: Dave Doody

Deirdre will of course be competing in the Brooks/Evening Press 10k race, the largest field of female runners and fun joggers ever assembled for one race. She is very much in favour of it all.

"Most of those taking part will have done a reasonable preparation and I do not agree with the suggestion that it is encouraging non-competitive running. Most people who run a distance easy the first time will run it competitively the next time and each is entitled to compete against her own level of achievement".

It is not hard to see from these answers why Deirdre Nagle is such a figure of inspiration to her sister athletes, but let us focus for a while on her deeds and not her words. I first saw her in action in the 1500m at the Guinness Sports of '71. Having made the running she was passed in the finishing straight by Anne Cummins but came back to snatch a memorable victory right on the line. From that night onwards Deirdre knew she could compete against the best and win and so she has done these past twelve years. That same night on the same track Mary Purcell ran her first ever competitive race and within months emerged as a major star of Irish athletics.

Both Mary and Deirdre grabbed the headlines for most of the seventies with Vera Duffy and Siobhan Treacy lending great support, while towards the end of the seventies, Carol Megan, Fionnuala Morrish and Carey May emerged to challenge them. This resulted in a tremendous race for the 1980 B.L.E. Cross Country Championship in which Mary Purcell conquered the precocious young Meagan with Deirdre third, Fionnuala fourth, Siobhan fifth, Vera sixth and Carey seventh.

Since then standards have declined. Vera Duffy and the immensely talented Carol Meagan have disappeared from the scene, Fionnuala Morrish has lost form through injury and Siobhan Treacy's physiotherapy practice has left her with less time

to train. The change of allegiance to Ireland by the Joyce sisters has improved Irish records and Aisling Mulloy of Longford is emerging as a star of the future but the '81/'82 Cross Country season was one of the worst ever (D.C.H.'s second in the European club championship notwithstanding), and the Brooks/Evening Press event does not look like providing a significant race for first place.

However in one regard, great strides have been made. A huge leap forward has been made in the marathon. Deirdre Nagle has been very much part of this wonderful success story.

Her first marathon was the second Dublin City Marathon of '81 in which she was the second woman to finish (Emily Dowling being the first) in 2 hrs. 49 mins. 40 secs. She describes this run as "A trial and error experiment done on track training and six weeks of mileage with seventy two miles my highest total of weekly mileage and twenty three miles my longest run".

Deirdre's second marathon was the '82 B.L.E. marathon in Limerick. Here she set out to break 2 hrs. 45 mins but ran 2 hrs. 48 mins. 53 secs. For this year she averaged seventy miles per week regularly and got up to eighty miles on at least two weeks. Her third marathon was the third Dublin City Marathon, where over a much harder course than Limerick she clocked 2 hrs. 42 mins. 8 secs. finishing second woman to the American Debbie Mueller. This was accomplished after doing eighty miles per week regularly and fulfilling a hefty programme of track races and road races.

After the Dublin City Marathon Deirdre had a most successful cross country season finishing second in the Dublin, Inter Counties and National Cross Country Championships as well as being first counter for Ireland in the Home Countries and World Cross Country Championships. All the



Deirdre relaxes at home with husband Dermot and children.

Pic: Jim Dowling

while in the month after Christmas she was working up to the London marathon. She averaged ninety miles, regularly doing nine sessions per week that included a searching time trial over ten miles on grass. The result was 2hrs. 37mins. 42secs in London with one British athlete ahead of her. However, there was one British athlete not in the field who is a great source of inspiration to Deirdre. "When I started running there was the general attitude that there was no life left after the late twenties yet Joyce Smith was in her thirties then and setting records. Now I am in my thirties and she is forty five and still the fastest woman in Britain at the marathon. She is a great encouragement to me and others to keep going.

So how does Deirdre feel about competing in the World Championships and does marathon running give her more satisfaction than running the shorter distances?

"Certainly, getting selected for Helsinki is one of my best achievements as the qualifying standards are higher for the World Championships than for the Olympics. However I don't think the marathon has exclusive rights to feelings of satisfaction and well-being". We are back to words again and in athletics words are no substitute for actions. Deirdre Nagle knows that. With her husband Dermot and her sons Lorcan and Damhan to encourage her and all her clubmates in Dublin City Harriers to support her, on the track, cross country and in the protracted heady heat of the marathon, she still has a great deal more to say.

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