

Club Profile

EAST CORK'S RISING STARS

BY DICK HOOPER

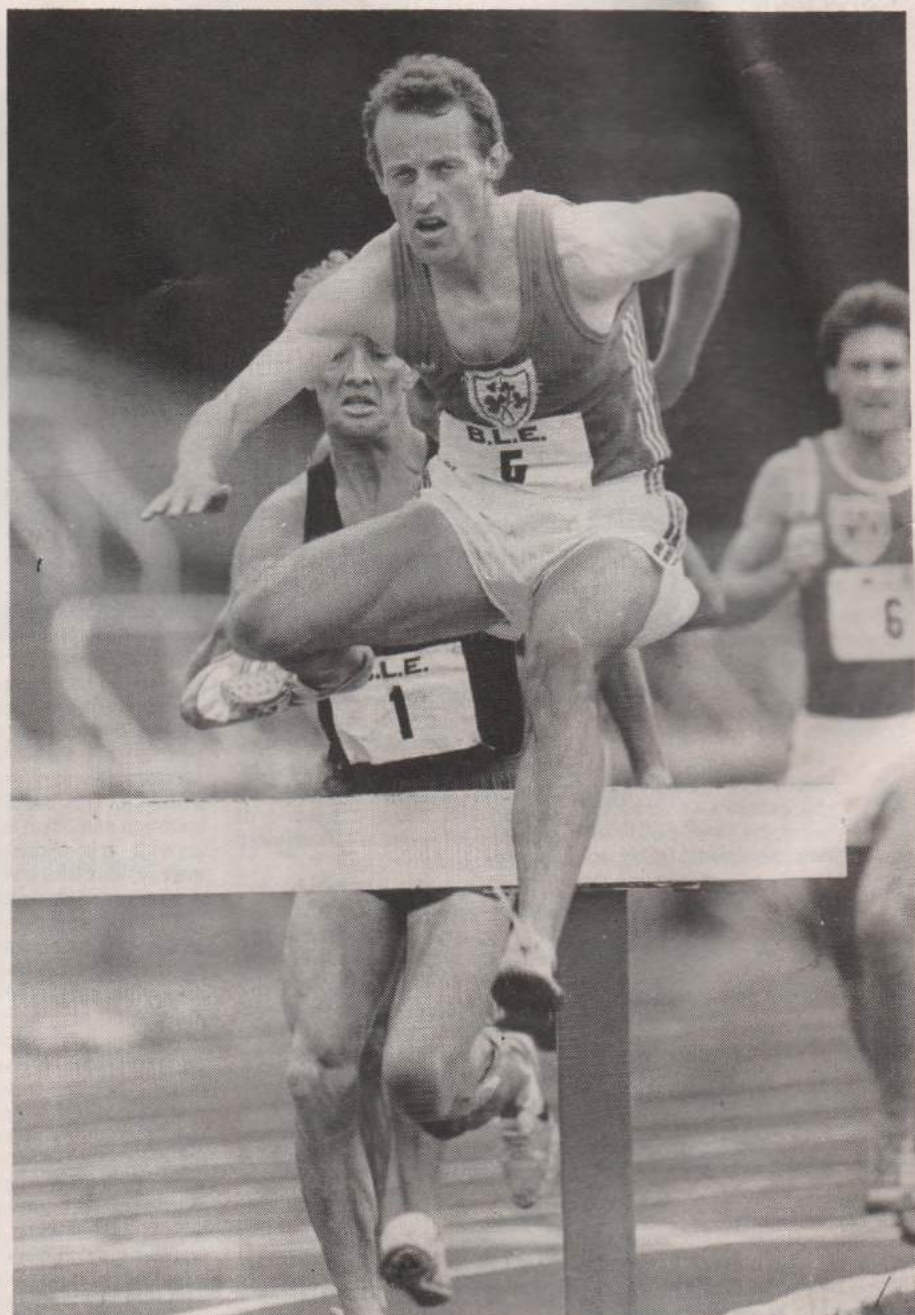
In the beginning there was a man and a boy and they were both named Liam. And God called the man Liam and asked him to follow Him and to be His minister for athletics in Ireland. And He gave him special responsibility for Cork. And so the man Liam answered God's call and became Rev. Fr. Liam and arrived as an enthusiastic missionary in a town called Midleton in the eastern part of the county called Cork.

And when the young priest looked out on the congregation of youth before him he set eyes on the boy Liam with the severe haircut. And the man Liam blessed the boy Liam and having looked after his spiritual needs encouraged him to run. And the two Liams became friends.

And it came to pass in the early 1970s that Fr. Liam (Kelleher) had built up the best juvenile athletic club in Ireland, with huge numbers competing and winning under the name of Midleton A.C. And many times Fr. Liam spoke to the boy Liam (O'Brien) of his dream and it was this . . . 'that all the clubs in Eastern Cork unite to form one strong club that could compete on an even footing with the larger clubs in Ireland.'

And the boy Liam listened and always remembered it. But he too had his dreams . . . he wanted to become a great runner and compete in the Olympic Games. And so it came to pass that his dream became reality and he became one of Cork's finest ever running sons, broke the Irish Steeplechase record, ran several times for his country and competed in the Olympic Games and World Championships. But he never forgot Fr. Liam's dream and the passage of time gave the idea further urgency and meaning.

And as is the way of his religion Fr. Liam was called again by God and asked to say goodbye to his friends in Midleton, and the base he had built there, and go to pastures new. And, as was his style, Fr. Liam put little-known places on the map by means of the twin tools of sport and persuasion. And when superstars like John Walker and Steve Ovett looked at their itinerary they found that their next date after Oslo and Stockholm was a mile race in Tullylease. (And the



• Liam O'Brien clears the hurdle first on his way to another All Ireland title.

people of Dromina found themselves witness to Jerry Kiernan dashing 10 miles around their locality in 46 minutes odd, not once, but twice. But we digress from the East Cork story).

ONE BANNER

The emergence of East Cork Athletic Club in national athletics has been a story of inexorable progress. The basic concept of the club was for the nine senior clubs in the area to amalgamate at senior level under the one banner. The juvenile sections of the existing clubs would then act as feeders for East Cork A.C., continuing in existence. The club, by the very nature of the county, (Cork is the largest county in Ireland) draws its members from a huge radius. From Youghal in the East perimeter to Carrignavar is a distance of roughly 45 miles with a north to south range stretching from Watergrasshill to Cobh.



• National Relay Champions.

Standing left to right: J. Walsh, D. O'Mathuna G. Wallace, L. Mc Carthy, L. O'Brien, B. Meade, Fr. L. O'Brien.

Front Row Left to Right:

P. Mullholland, Jim Curtin, T. Cashman, E. Meade, J. Walsh, B. Moran.

Liam O'Brien was not alone in holding the view which Fr. Kelleher so vehemently expounded all those years ago that none of the clubs in East Cork would ever be strong enough, individually, to challenge for the bigger spoils. The evidence was utterly convincing. From the foundation of BLE in 1967 until 1985 only two clubs - Leevale and St. Finbarr's, had ever won the Cork Senior Cross Country Championship. The view from the city was that the county clubs were a soft touch.

Tony O'Leary, the enduring image of Leevale A.C., welcomes the emergence of East Cork and the gauntlet they have thrown down. He argues that the shock defeats by East Cork in 1985 and 1986 catapulted Leevale to muster their resources and regain

'their' property again in 1987. Competition is the great elixir.

O'Leary, monitoring the pulse of the county, points to East Cork as being the only growth area in Cork athletics. Certainly the decline in the once great Leevale's fortunes is quite alarming.

The members of East Cork are sensitive to accusations that they are a club of convenience - a club devoid of identity. Where is the clubhouse? Where is the focal point? As with any club that draws from a large hinterland, identity is a problem. Middleton CBS is technically the club's headquarters. It is here that the athletes meet and train and the officials hold their meetings.

HOLDING THEIR OWN

Barry Moran, a club official and athlete, is adamant that 'the club do not want to be seen as an elitist club.' He points to the range of standards in the club. Certainly the

story of his first marathon - (Cork, 1981) - will strike a familiar chord with many. Barry approached what he thought was the finish line - it was actually the 26 mile mark and he was so disgusted to find that he was not quite finished that he just sat down on the road for half an hour before trudging the final 385 yards.

Without doubt the spirit of those involved in the club is infectious and it is on this that the club is building its future. Ironically, yet another Liam O'Brien is the club chairman - Father Liam O'Brien. If Liam O'Brien the athlete is the Pied Piper among the athletes it is Fr. Liam O'Brien who is the driving force administratively in the club.

The club has a social outing of some sort every month and this is viewed as vital for

THE LIAM O'BRIEN FACT FILE

Date of Birth: 11th October, 1954.
Height: 1.78m - **Weight:** 147 lbs.
Club: East Cork A.C.
Job: Secondary School Teacher.
Self Coached.

PERSONAL BESTS

Track	Road
400m: 50.5	10k: 29.20
800m: 1.50.5	10 miles: 47.57
1,500m: 3.44.6	Half Marathon: 67.22.
3,000m: 7.58	15 miles: 77.38.
5,000m: 13.36.	
Mile: 4.00.8.	
3,000m steeplechase: 8.27.24.	
400m Hurdles: 57.3.	

- Irish international at track, road and cross country.
- Winner of a record 8 Irish Steeplechase titles.
- Competed in 1984 Olympic Games and was a semi-finalist there.
- Competed in 1987 World Championships.
- Won first ever BLOE U.16 steeplechase title.
- Since formation of BLE/BLOE in 1967 has won a National medal of some sort (team or individual) every year including 1988.
- Has won Cork titles at every distance from 400m to 5,000m including 400m hurdles and steeplechase.

Record in BLE National 3,000m Steeplechase

1974:	1975:
1976:	1977:
1978: 1st	1979: 1st
1980: 1st	1981: 1st
1982: 3rd. 1st B. Quinn. 2nd G. Barry.	
1983: 1st	1984: 1st
1985: 2nd 1st B. Quinn	1986: 1st
1987: 1st	

Typical Week's Training in Winter (January - April)

Monday: a.m. 4 miles p.m. 2 hour run (16 - 18 miles)

Tuesday a.m. 4 miles p.m. 43 minute hill session

Wednesday a.m. 4 miles p.m. 13 miles

Thursday a.m. 4 miles p.m. 5 x 1,000m with 2 minutes recovery

Friday a.m. 4 miles p.m. 13 miles

Saturday a.m. 42 minutes Hill session p.m. 4 miles

Sunday: Race or orienteering.

• For summer training replaces Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday session with track workouts.

• Takes two weeks off completely in September and 'ticks over' until end of December.

• Dislikes training and does not keep a diary.

• Hates front running, preferring to use his finishing kick. Ambition in every race is 'to win by the least possible margin' . . . 'Would prefer to win a mile in 4.10 than finish 4th in 3.55.'

• Does not do any specific steeplechase training.



• The two Liams, Kelleher and O'Brien

club spirit. Amazingly, among the 60 or so members of the club there is only one member who takes a drink. But sure everybody knows that chairmen have to be able to hold their own in any company . . . It's part of the job. There is also a regular club newsletter, with news items ranging from race results and fixtures to Barry Moran's heroic efforts to recruit athletes for the club prior to his clobbering the wall in the Dublin City Marathon.

In deference to the wishes of the originators of the East Cork concept, the senior clubs from which they wish to draw members, Middleton, Carrignavar, St. Conans and the rest all continue to exist. A lot of athletes have opted to stay with their home parish club rather than join East Cork, Sonia O'Sullivan's decision to stay with Ballymoe, Cobh being the most obvious. It is a soul-searching decision.

ROAD RELAY TRIUMPH

From another perspective, the fact of many athletes leaving the local Eastern clubs and joining East Cork has further weakened them and rendered team competition against the might of East Cork in that area virtually meaningless. (Hopefully any ill feeling that may exist will subside and individuals will at least feel free to join whichever club they like).

This year in Loughrea an East Cork team comprising of Brian Meade, Donncha O'Mahony, Jerry Wallace, Liam O'Brien, Laurence McCarthy and Tom Walsh won the National Road Relay, an unprecedented and magnificent achievement. It marked the culmination of the clubs rise. This is good for the sport. It re-invigorates it and breaks the Donore - Clonliffe monopoly.

Liam O'Brien, the athlete, holds the view that in many areas of the country clubs should be regionalised to promote competi-

tion and help improve standards. He has a point and it is worthy of the most meaningful debate.

And, seemingly to improve the already good wine, the Lord has intervened again and directed Fr. Liam Kelleher back to East Cork, to the parish of Inch. What effect is this going to have? A very significant one if the past is any indication. After all, one dream has already matured. As we drove back from Cork on a beautiful Sunday evening we wondered if Said Aouita and Steve Cram were yet aware that they would be clashing in the mile in the Inch Sports at the opening of the local Tartan track next year . . .

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JOHN WALSH — Race Organiser and Part-Time Farmer

IT IS DIFFICULT to evaluate what motivates a race organiser. What class of vocation is this that persuades a man to tolerate the work-load and sheer hassle of getting on a foot race on tarmacadam. Ballycotton's John Walshe is no ordinary race promoter. He is arguably the best in the country. At home, John Walshe is a farmer. He was born into the land and he loves its moods and murmurings. He is, one suspects, an eccentric farmer - his eccentricity being that he also finds time to be a dedicated long-distance runner. He is a good one too. He has run 19 marathons and is the owner of a 2.36.31 P.B. He has also, one further suspects, an insatiable appetite for reading. At least two rooms in his house resemble an athletics library. Yet it is the front room that most attracts the eye. What are a photocopier, a results printer, stacks of entry forms, mementoes and prizes doing in the front of an East Cork farmer's house. This, (oh! ye of little understanding), is the 'office' of Ballycotton Running Promotions. The ordered nature of the room parallels the superb organisation at Ballycotton races. Walshe can put his hand readily on any piece of equipment or reference sought. Any praise and he is quick to lavish praise on his 'staff' . . . the races themselves do the best talking. The Ballycotton '10' held every year in early March is the biggest and best 'Ten' in the country. It preceded the running boom by a couple of years and will long outlive it. This race is John Walshe's baby. He has guided expertly its growth and development. Less known nationally but equally popular with southern runners is the Ballycotton '5' mile series - a package of 4 races held on the fourth Thursday of each month from May to August, in Ballyandreen, Shanagarry, Churchtown South and Ballycotton. Since the inception of the series there have been 38 races. Some chap called Liam O'Brien has won 28 of these from 32 starts and hasn't been beaten since August 1981. Who provided us with the statistics? — some chap called John Walshe — seems to know a thing or two about roadraces. A lot of John Walshe's success as a race promoter has been his ability (and confidence) to delegate responsibility. Gather the right cabinet around him. How many race promoters compete in their own events — Walshe does. Nothing sums it up better than the quotation in this year's Ballycotton '10' programme . . . *A STORY OF FOUR PEOPLE . . . (Not members of Ballycotton Running Promotions) This is a story of four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody and Nobody. There was an important job to be done and Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought Anybody could do it but Nobody realised that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when actually Nobody accused Anybody.*