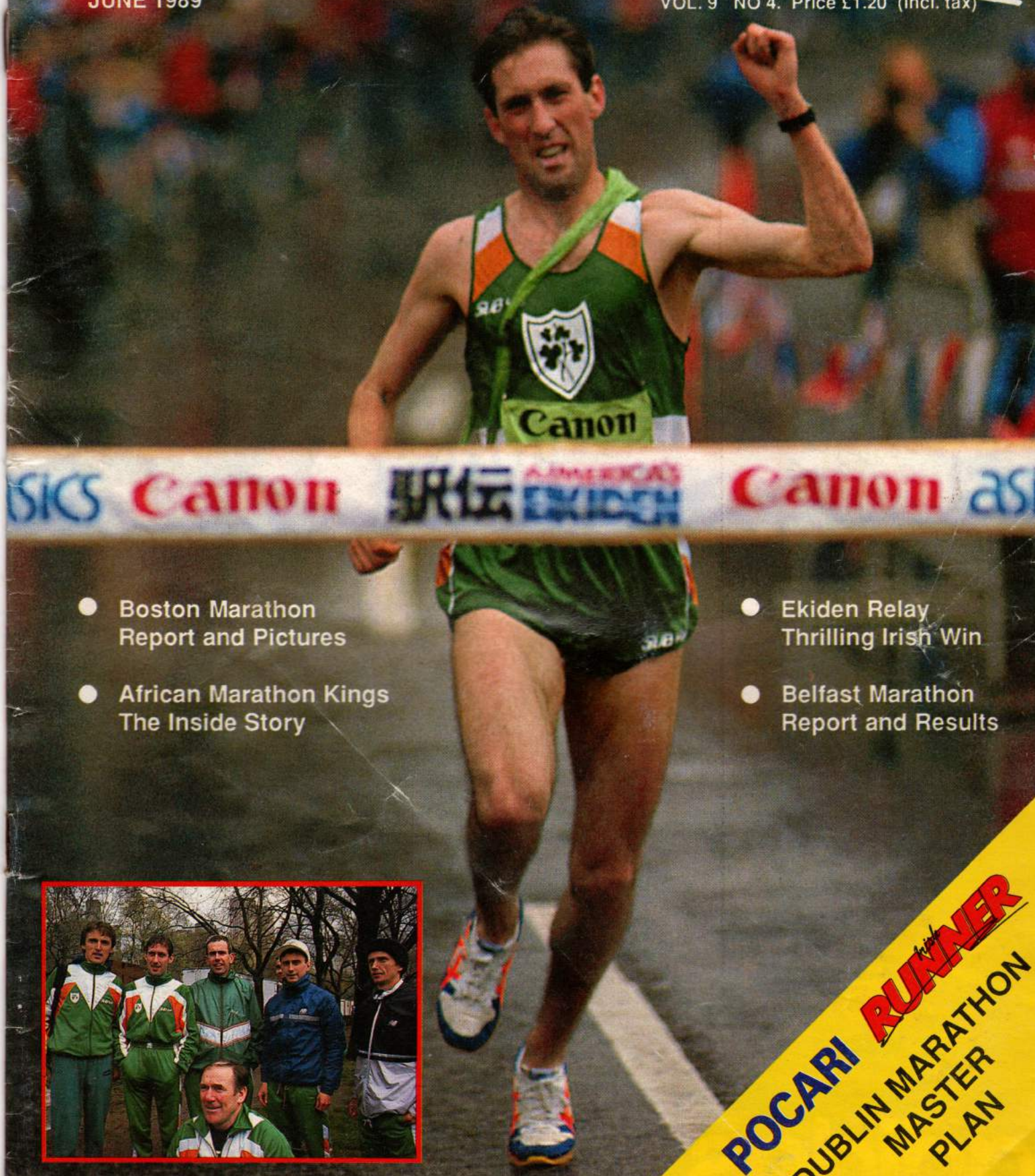


Irish **RUNNER**

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IRISH SNATCH VICTORY IN EKIDEN

The Irish victory in the Ekiden Relay In New York In April must rank as one of the finest ever performances by an Irish team. Mark WILL-WEBER brings us his eyewitness report.

The pictures are courtesy of Gerry Curtis.

If you believe in omens, then please note that the sashes for America's second Ekiden were green. So were the racing vests and silks of the winning team, of course, as Ireland swept to its second straight victory and a world record in this "pass-the-sash" five leg event of marathon distance.

Modelled after the ancient courier system of feudal Japan and rapidly drawing positive attention as well as financial sponsorship, the 1989 race on April 9 brought out stiff competition bent on dethroning the defending champions from the Emerald Isle. At stake was a \$20,000 first place prize to be split among the five members of the winning international team, plus \$4,000 to any runner who posted the fastest time for an individual leg.

The weather in New York's Central Park dawned in a chilling drizzle — not a delight for any of the runners, but certainly more a shock to, say, the Kenyan and Mexican teams. Irish weather, someone suggested to leadoff man Marcus O'Sullivan. "Yeah, but I've been over here too long and I'm a bit spoiled."

"Spoiled", however, is what the Irish team of O'Sullivan, John Treacy, Gerry Curtis, Frank O'Mara, and John Doherty did to the ambitions of the host Americans and a serious British unit.

The Mexicans, Japanese, Kenyans,

Soviets and Italians were relegated to also-ran status midway through the second stage, as the second Ekiden became a three-way scramble. (The internationals were chased by 52 US state and city teams!)

O'Sullivan, admittedly somewhat leg-tired after a long indoor season that climaxed with his world 1500m title, gutted his way to third place over 5,000m of a puddle-splashing opening leg. Up ahead, US miler Steve Scott — stage winner at 13.35 — and British cross-country ace Tim Hutchings sash-passed just a second apart, while the plucky O'Sullivan scrambled in 12 ticks back at the first stage exchange at the United Nations.

Said O'Sullivan: "I stayed with Steve (Scott) early in the race, because I felt like he was running smart, but after 3K I began to despair when Steve went after Tim (Hutchings) — felt badly that I couldn't keep John closer."

Still smarting from Treacy's devastating 15K (42.48) leg in the inaugural Ekiden, the Yanks and Brits were well aware they'd need a cushion to limit the damage over the 10.8K leg down New York's East River FDR Drive. Mexico's Salvador Garcia and Japan's Kenji Ide made the mistake of trying to go with Treacy's building charge and, for their efforts, soon staggered out the back door for a more mortal match

between themselves.

Treacy, teeth clenched in his patented expression that flutters somewhere between pain and a smile, arrived on the heels of Steve Spence and Steve Binns just around 8K. Spence (30.39 for the 6.7-mile stint) responded with a spirited surge, which Treacy (leg-winning 30.28) went with. Binns (30.42) fell several precious seconds off the pace. As the runners kicked in to the Stage Three exchange zone in south Manhattan near the Twin Towers, the Irish were just one second back.

A relative unknown, Gerry Curtis took over for the Irish, trading surges with American Ed Eyestone all the way up 57th Street, bound for Central Park. The footing was certainly faster than a slogging through the mud at Killenaule, where Curtis won his Irish cross-country crown in February, and as Roy Dooney (team alternate for '89) had in Ekiden '88 — he responded with an outstanding leg.

Frank Shorter, two-time Olympic marathon medallist, referred to Curtis as the Irish team's apparent "weak link" while doing television commentary, but the results would prove otherwise: Curtis (26.17 for his 9.3K leg) muscled by Eyestone (26.22) in the final sprint and provided Frank O'Mara with a small lead. (Some "weak link"!)

The British, meanwhile, fell out of



● Gerry Curtis ran a blinder to contribute to the Irish victory.

THRILLER



● The winning Irish team with agent Kim McDonald

contention and would eventually finish third overall in 1:59.04.

O'Mara took over for a two-loop (each 2.2-miles) course in the park, as Keith Brantly — performing well of late on the US road circuit — gave chase for the Americans. Brantly (19.49 leg winner) caught and passed O'Mara (20.00), but the Irish still felt guardedly optimistic with John Doherty manning the 10K anchor leg.

Doherty, his quick-shuffle strides contrasting to the high-knee lifting style of Pat Porter's, took off in pursuit with a seven second deficit.

Meanwhile, Treacy and O'Sullivan arrived at the press tent, watching the race progress on television monitors, Doherty, a picture of concentration, zeroed in on Porter just 4K into the final leg.

The Irish felt their stock rising, as Doherty and Porter battled for 2K over the rolling inclines of Central Park. O'Sullivan, in particular, began to feel better as Doherty controlled the pace, later stating: "I'd have had confidence in John even had he started 20 seconds behind."

At 6K Doherty unleashed a surge that Porter was unable to answer, and the Irish anchor man zoomed to an unthreatened victory. The numbers reflected what all suspected: Doherty ran a fantastic leg (27.50 for 10K, the

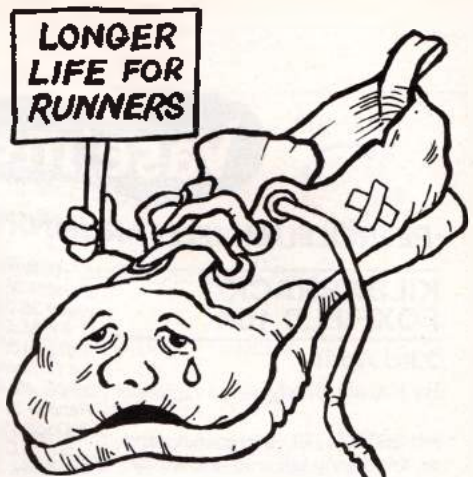
fastest of Stage Five) and the Irish were the proud new owners of a world-record for the Ekiden in 1:58.20.

The announced split time raised even Doherty's eyebrows, but he remained gracious in triumph: "It was difficult for him (Porter) in the lead because I could see where he was and he couldn't see me. But I felt confident that if I ran hard, then I could win."

The victory touched off celebration in the Irish camp. Veteran Treacy noted: "We all have our different goals, but we all come together to this. Anytime you run for Ireland and race in the Big Apple, you want to do well."

The loss, meanwhile, had the US team shaking their heads. Like a wary prizefighter looking all match for his opponent's famous right hand wallop — in this case, John Treacy — the US was caught off balance by a left-handed knockout blow at the bell in the form of Doherty. Said Porter (28.20), who brought the US home second in 1:58.44: "I felt like I ran a good leg, but John just ran a very superior one."

All of which goes to show that a "good" effort only gets a runner close in this battle royale known as Ekiden. When the international teams return for Ekiden '90 — with the Irish out to prove that "good things come in threes", heaven help the runners who only race well.



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