

The sun shone on the World Vets at Gateshead, and a large Irish team hogged a good share of the light, reports Bernie Kavanagh

GATESHEAD GOLD



L to R: Bobby King (gold medalist) with Irish team bronze medalists, John Lennon and Bernie O'Callaghan

Warm sunshine meant bright smiles and eager involvement for the many competitors who converged on Northern England for what is in everything but name the Vets Olympics.

Despite the unquenchable desire for medals, the competitive atmosphere for the long week (29 July - 8 August) was like the weather - pleasant and bright; the overriding ethos of these games is camaraderie and encouragement.

The three tracks used at Gateshead - including the main one known to TV audiences - are up to 20 miles apart.

Monkton was used for preliminary rounds and Durham for the longer distances, cross-country, throws, and jumps. That made it difficult to get to various events, but the bus service was a credit to the organisers. At times, though, you would have loved for everyone to be competing and staying together.

Ireland sent almost 150 athletes and many more partners, friends, and supporters. Team Manager Sean Cooney did a wonderful job. Vets International Secretary Martin Kelly could not stay for the entire Championships, but he had put tremendous work into organising the

record number of entries. In Martin's absence, Kevin Carey acted as team captain.

The first day started with cross-country - and here, despite the heat and humidity that left several athletes exhausted and dehydrated, the Irish won a bag of medals.

Anne Keenan Buckley took gold in the W35 10k in 35.30 (later in the week, she would set the stadium alight when taking 1,500m gold in 4.30). She took the opposition on from the start and finished like a true champion.

Anne also ran the 5,000m - her hardest and probably her best race - and posted 16.58 to take her third gold.

Kay Byrne and Eleanor Threadgold combined with Anne to take cross-country team silver.

The heat was too much for Joan Hough (W40) from Cork - she collapsed, dehydrated, just metres from the finish. Evelyn McNelis, Ann McGreal, and Margo McCreary (W45) took another team silver (Margo, who was also celebrating her birthday, is even rumoured to have had a drink later that night).

Vets President Mags Greenan, though dogged by injury, gutted herself to take W40 silver in 37.52. Mary Jennings, who would return at the end of the week for the marathon, and Anne Kavanagh (Laois) combined with Mags for team silver.

Among the men, the great Jerry Kiernan won M45 bronze (32.45), while Michael Hassett (32.06), Eugene Coppinger, and Tommy Payne combined brilliantly for M40 team bronze.

In the stadium, Danae Herron (Derry) did us proud when taking silver in the W40 heptathlon (4783 points). Not satisfied, she went on to take triple jump bronze



PHOTOS: TOMMY O'NEILL

Brendan O'Connor, Brendan Sherlock and John McCormack

(10.07m) and high jump silver and broke five Irish records throughout the week.

The M55 800m was a great race. Jimmy O'Neill (Crusaders) looked entering the final straight like he would take bronze. He clocked a brilliant 2.07.23 but was pipped for the medal. Trevor Alderdice (Belfast) posted 2.14.

The field events brought more Irish medals. The great Ed Healy (Donore) took silver in the M45 hammer (55m) and the weights pentathlon.

New vet Dermot Kerr (Armagh) took silver in a fantastic M40 steeplechase and posted fifth in the 5,000m.

Medal prospect Patricia Amond unfortunately pulled a calf muscle during the W35 200m. Her colleagues from Carlow consoled her by taking her shopping and carrying the bags.

Then there was the wonderful Paddy Whelan running the M85 400m. The man from Walkinstown is surely one of the greatest characters in this or any sport.

Bobby King took 5k walk gold and sang all the way home. Bernie Callaghan and John Lennon backed him up for team

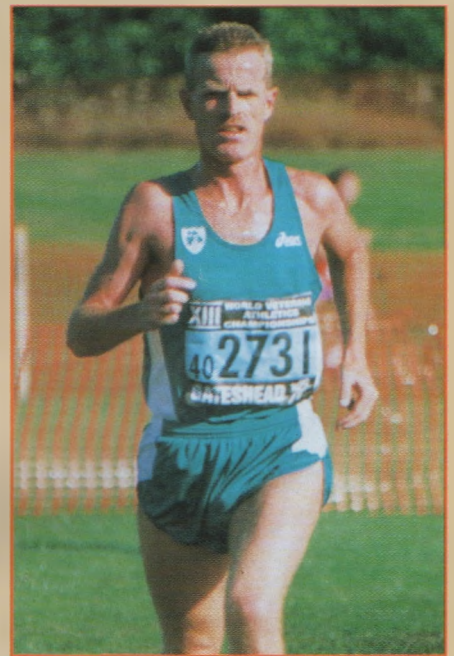
bronze.

Most of the Irish team went on to compete at the National Vets in Tullamore the following Saturday. Athletes from Australia, the USA, New Zealand, Britain, and South Africa also detoured from Gateshead to Tullamore and were delighted with the commemorative medals

presented to them by BLE.

Later, in Tullamore's Bridge Restaurant, everyone gathered to chat about the 2001 World Championships in Brisbane. The Aussies have two tracks side by side, which will eliminate much commuting. And seemingly the cross-country course is on a riverbank, which is incredibly beautiful. All vets should be making plans now.

Meanwhile, next July 6-16, the European Veteran Championships take place at Fyuskyla, Finland. International Secretary Martin Kelly has information on flights and accommodation. Phone 01-2352700.



Eugene Coppinger in action



Sportsworld crew: Sheila Champion, Michael Jordan, Tommy O'Neill, Myles Nugent, Jack Tyrell and Emily Dowling