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Fame at her feet

Gillian O'Sullivan performed brilliantly in the World Championships in Paris and won the silver medal for her heroic efforts in the 20km race walk, Frank Greally reports.



Photos: Brendan Moran, Sportsfile

Gillian O'Sullivan showed an abundance of class, clear thinking and raw courage in Paris, where she lived up to all expectations in becoming only the third Irish athlete in history to win a World Championship medal, with a brilliant silver medal performance in the 20 kilometre race walk.

O'Sullivan made it to the podium exactly 14 years to the day that she won the Girls Under 13 600m race walk at the National Community Games in Mosney.

Since that day in Mosney back in 1989, O'Sullivan has been a model of consistent progression. She served a long apprenticeship to her chosen sport and was lucky at age 16 to come in contact with her coach, Michael Lane from Mullingar. Lane is a meticulous planner and for many years now has guided O'Sullivan to national and international success.

O'Sullivan made her World Championships debut in Seville in 1999, finishing in what was considered a respectable 32nd. In the intervening four years, she has improved her 20km time by nearly 10 minutes.

At 27, she was the youngest of the three medallists in Paris, a full decade younger than race winner Yelena Nikolayeva of Russia.

It was her brilliant 10th placing in the 20km at the Sydney Olympics that really propelled O'Sullivan on to the world stage in her event. That performance convinced her that it was time to give full, undivided attention to her sport. She had taught History

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and Geography at Scoil Barra in Ballincollig, Cork before Sydney, but after the Olympic experience O'Sullivan decided to become a full time professional athlete.

That decision to go full time paid off handsomely in Paris, where while delighted

with her silver medal, O'Sullivan could not hide a slight sense of disappointment at narrowly missing out on the gold. "I came here wanting to win, but it was not to be and I'm happy with my silver medal", she said. "Hopefully, I can stay healthy for the next year and aim for gold in Athens".

O'Sullivan and Michael Lane are already thinking well ahead to Athens. All the advance preparations for altitude and warm weather training and competition are in place. Gillian would dearly love to have the undivided coaching attention of Michael Lane in the final six months build-up to Athens; this is something that the Athletic Association of Ireland and the Irish Sports Council will need to address.

"It would be really beneficial to have Michael coaching me full-time in the final six months leading up to Athens," O'Sullivan said. "Michael has been a huge help to me right through from the time when I was competing in the World and European Junior Championships. He is hugely knowledgeable and in addition, he is a Technical IAAF Race Walking Judge. He is in tune with what the judges are looking for."



Race walking is indeed a hugely demanding technical event, where total concentration is paramount to success. "The judges must see that you maintain ground contact with one foot and keep the knee straight at all times," O'Sullivan explains. "It's all about concentration and good technique and you have to work hard at both - especially when you are getting tired at the end of a race."

O'Sullivan and Michael Lane leave nothing to chance in the planning department. Michael Lane would have studied every inch of the Paris 20km course and along with O'Sullivan set prearranged time splits that she would target. The Mullingar man enjoyed his own highly successful race walking career and over the past several years he has spearheaded a great forward drive for the sport in Ireland.

Lane has been instrumental in getting the Irish race walkers to work co-operatively. Gillian O'Sullivan now lives in Cork City and regularly trains with the hugely talented Robert Heffernan. Lane was also thrilled to see another top Irish race walker, Olive Loughnane, finish in an excellent 12th position in Paris. The future of Irish race walking looks extremely bright and much credit for this must go to Michael Lane, who has put an excellent coaching system in place.

Gillian O'Sullivan struck it rich too in Paris, as she won a total of \$60,000 for her second placing and her overall victory in the IAAF 2003 Race Walking Challenge - a

series of international Grand Prix events. She receives good support too from the Irish Sports Council, with an annual grant of €19,000.

But fame and monetary gain rest easily on the slim shoulders of the 27-year-old Kerry woman whose home is in the townland of Minish, about four kilometres from Killarney.

Minish is a townland comprising about 25 households and on the evening she arrived back from Paris every member of that small community came out to give O'Sullivan a

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special welcome. The bonfires blazed and Gillian was delighted to be back to her roots. The Kerry County Board of the AAI also treated Gillian royally, as to loud acclaim she was ferried through the town in a vintage car for a special homecoming ceremony. "I was overwhelmed with the reception I received in my homeplace and in Killarney," O'Sullivan said.

There was a rousing reception too and huge appreciation for the World

Championships silver medallist when she visited three schools in her native Kerry: Lissivigeen National School, Presentation Convent in Killarney and Glenflesk College on the Cork road - along which Gillian often trains.

Gillian's parents, Pat and Alice, were in Paris to witness their daughter's success. Her sister Maria was there too, as well as her brother Thomas and his wife Noreen and another brother Paul and his girlfriend, Shirley Mulvany. "It was a real family affair and a number of my college friends also came over to support me, which was really brilliant," Gillian said.

In 2002 Gillian O'Sullivan took Irish race walking to a fresh high when she finished 4th in Munich in the European Championships. She had the bronze medal snatched from her by the Italian Erica Alfrieda with the finish almost in sight.

In Paris O'Sullivan was determined to make it into the medals and she delivered on that promise.

Back in 1992 Gillian O'Sullivan was greatly impressed by Jimmy McDonald's brilliant sixth placing in the Barcelona Olympics 20km race walk. "I was only 15 at the time, but Jimmy's brave performance in Barcelona was something that really inspired me," she said. "It was good to visit the schools around Killarney after my success in Paris and I hope that I too can inspire some of the kids that I meet".

Roll on Athens 2004.

