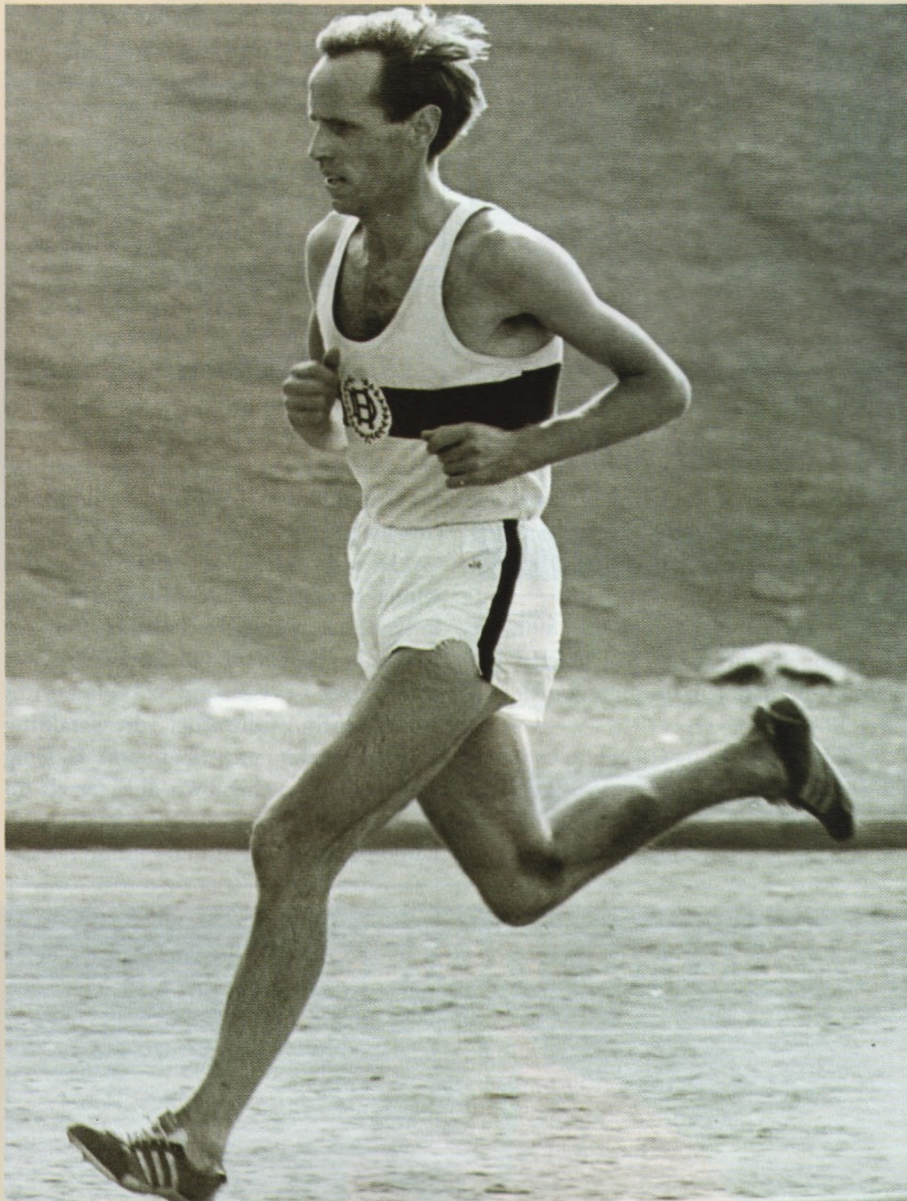




Independent spirit

Tom O’Riordan is a legend in athletics and athletics journalism — Frank Greally catches up with him as he passes one of many milestones in his life



ON JULY 12, the day he turned 65, Tom O’Riordan filed his last story as a staff journalist with the *Irish Independent* at his office in Dublin’s Middle Abbey Street, then quietly rose from his desk, waved to a few colleagues across the room and left the building by the back door.

The man known for 38 years to his newspaper colleagues as ‘The Runner’ walked through Dublin’s bustling streets for a while, holding his emotions in check, before getting into his car and heading home for a meal with his wife, Barbara,

and family — the bedrock of his life.

It came as no surprise to hear that Tom O’Riordan had retired without fanfare. Humility always marked his long and illustrious career, both in athletics and in journalism.

A few nights after he retired, family and friends and *Independent* colleagues feted him in the Palace Bar.

Many of them spoke about the Kerryman’s energy, passion, integrity, and loyalty — and of the esteem in which he was held by generations of athletes and

GAA stars.

As a runner, Tom O’Riordan was one of the sweetest movers on track, road or country. His record (see panel) was outstanding, and listening to him talk about the highlights of his career is a moving experience.

He recalls the early days when at 17 he took up running in his native village of Ardfert and progressed to win an Irish schools mile title and carve out a wonderful career that took him to Idaho State University on scholarship in 1957 and later to the Tokyo Olympics to run the 5,000m.

As he talks in his office at his South Dublin home, the memories flood back. On the wall, near the computer on which he now files freelance copy for several national and international papers, is a picture of the legendary Emil Zatopek, one of Tom’s heroes.

There are also a few mementos of his own great career — some black and white photos and some trophies.

And when he gets to talking about his experience under the legendary coach Mihaly Igloi in San Jose, California, in the early 60s, you are carried back with him to a time of his life that obviously brought great personal fulfilment as well as important lessons that he would later draw on in a life that has been well lived.

‘When I graduated from Idaho State in 1961, I still had not made any big breakthrough in real running terms,’ he says.

‘It was then I went out to California and became involved in the Santa Clara Track Club, where Mihaly Igloi coached. He coached some of the legendary Hungarians such as [Laszlo] Tabori and [Istvan] Rozsavolgyi to world records, all during the 50s.

‘He was an outstanding coach — he taught me what real coaching, and real training, was. I had never until then experienced training with a group of ten guys where each one was as tough and competitive and resilient as the next. You were thrown in and you had no option but either get out or hurt.

‘We started off slowly, doing 440 yard repeats with short intervals — maybe doing 12, then 14 and so on.

‘I remember once doing 20 by 440 with only a minute’s rest and every fourth interval was really fast — about 62 seconds.

‘This was an incredible breakthrough for me and I learned more there in three months than I learned in my entire life as regards coaching.

‘Bob Schul, who later won the Olympic 5,000m, was part of the group as well as Jim Beatty and Tabori. It was an incredible



experience to be training with those athletes.'

Igloi was a stern disciplinarian, and O'Riordan thrived on his tough regime.

'You had unbelievable faith in him,' he says. 'You knew that what he told you to do was the right thing. You knew that when he said something he meant it.'

'When he told you to run hard, you had better believe that was what he wanted you to do. You had to learn how to hurt — to embrace the pain and never give in to it.'

'I remember on one occasion when Igloi sprung a three-quarter mile race on us at training and I ran three minutes flat for the first time. I knew then I was learning to embrace the pain — it was like winning the Olympics.'

Without doubt that period spent in San Jose was Tom O'Riordan's proving ground. He often rose at 5am for his first session before going to work in a local foundry.

'I stayed there six months — from June to November 1961 — and later when Michael Igloi and his group transferred to Los Angeles I often made the five-hour trip to LA at weekends just to get in a few sessions.'

'Speed was the essence of Igloi's training theory. I was a slow runner but he taught me how to train for speed.'

'I remember when I came back to live in Dublin and trained with Donore I would go to the Phoenix Park and do those 20 by 400-yard intervals on my own. I learned how to train hard on my own — that's what Igloi taught me.'

Tom O'Riordan feels today that 75 percent of Irish distance runners go through life without ever pushing themselves to the limit.

'It's making the breakthrough that is the point,' he says.

'It took me three good years to make my own breakthrough — I think the day I ran that three minutes for three-quarters of a mile was the magic moment.'

'There was another night when I was in San Jose with only Jim Beatty for company and I mentioned my ambition to break nine minutes for two miles.'

"Come on then," he said, "let's do it!"

'He paced me for a mile-and-a-half and I ran 8:56. That again was a milestone. The time was never officially recorded of course, but I knew I had done it and that was what mattered.'

When he returned to Ireland, O'Riordan joined Donore, then a powerhouse of distance running.

'I was very determined and singleminded then and I arrived at a club that had likeminded individuals. You had to fight

for your place on the team — there was no quarter given in any training session.'

At Donore, O'Riordan was coached by the legendary Eddie Hogan.

'Eddie was a great coach and a true friend — a wonderful man for the quiet word in good times or bad,' he recalls.

'There was incredible talent in Donore in those days — Bertie Messitt, Jim McNamara, Mick Connolly and the Dunne brothers. The training sessions are legendary and you had to be tough to survive there.'

Today, O'Riordan feels club athletes have largely abandoned 'pure athletics' — mile and 5,000m track races and the likes — and he blames the ubiquitous road-race.

'Many talented runners have opted for the roads and failed to explore their potential on the track — the real proving

ground,' he says.

'If I had my way I'd get rid of those road races for a few years and get more guys concentrating on the track. That's where every runner is judged — not on his record in road races.'

'There needs to be a revival of real club athletics and athletes need to be fully committed to hard training — like Sonia O'Sullivan, Mark Carroll and a few others.'

O'Riordan can feel proud of his own track record (see panel) — though he feels he might have broken a world record.

'I think I was capable of breaking a world record because in 1964 when I ran 13:18.4 for three miles in the Irish Championships the world record was 13:12.'

'That particular day in Santry, I would have stayed with the pace however fast it



Family day out - Karen O'Riordan's wedding on March 28th 2002. Front row: Barbara O'Riordan, Paul McCarthy, Karen O'Riordan, Tom O'Riordan. Back row: Donal O'Riordan, Ian O'Riordan, Angus O'Riordan.