

Walkers set the pace

Pierce O'Callaghan's dream of competing in Sydney was dashed by illness – but he is still happy to explain how Irish walking has progressed in the past decade



PHOTOS: SPORTSFILE

Left to right: Olive Loughnane, Gillian O'Sullivan, Robert and Jamie Costin

Right up to the late eighties, distance running was widely accepted as the strong middle plank of Irish athletics. Then, however, the picture began to change. The 1988 Seoul Olympics saw Irish athletes reveal new strengths in hurdles, javelin, and race-walking.

TJ Kearns set new standards in the high hurdles. Terry McHugh was making the first of four summer Olympic appearances. And Jimmy McDonald made his Olympic debut in the 20k walk. It is noteworthy that all three were sent to Seoul on B qualifying standards.

Although the present National Race Walks Coach, Bernie O'Callaghan (yes, the dad), had in Edinburgh in 1981 become

the first Irish walker to win an international race, the seeds were already being sown of what is now a walking boom.

In the year preceding Seoul, the Irish record for 20k was 93:45. The women's 10k record was over 55 minutes.

Last year, Robert Heffernan was ranked number three in Ireland over 20k with 1.26.45, and Gillian O'Sullivan had walked 20k at just over 48 minutes for each 10k.

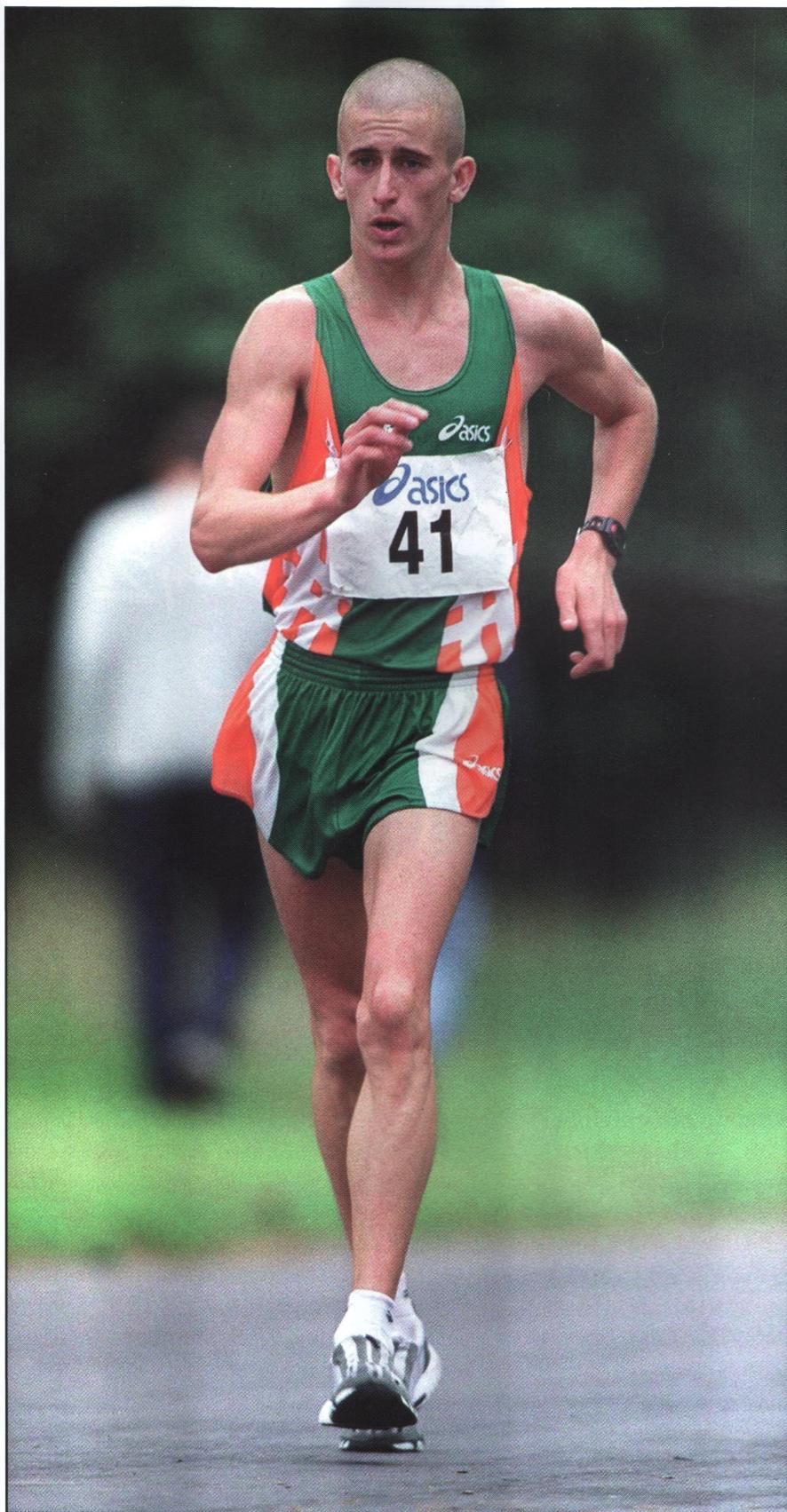
Eight years after Jimmy McDonald finished a brilliant sixth in the Barcelona Olympics, Ireland will this month be represented by four young walkers in Sydney: Jamie Costin (23) from Waterford, Robert Heffernan (22) from Cork, Gillian O'Sullivan (24) from Kerry, and Olive

Loughnane (24) from Galway – a huge breakthrough.

And yet the boom could possibly have started even earlier. In 1962 Clare-born Paul Nihill, who emigrated to England in his teens and won 27 British titles through his career, wrote to the Olympic Council of Ireland requesting that he be considered for Olympic selection for the country of his birth.

Nihill's letter was ignored. He was persuaded to walk for Britain at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. He won the silver medal in the 50k.

Irish race-walking is fortunate to have a number of excellent coaches – the above-mentioned Bernie (Donegal) and Michael Lane (Westmeath) are largely



Robert Heffernan – set for

responsible for the rapidly rising standards.

Also strategically placed around the country are John Lennon (Kilkenny), PJ Brennan (Carlow), Patricia Griffin (Leitrim), Con Hearty (Dublin), Jimmy Costin

(Waterford), and Ray Flynn (Sligo), all great believers in promoting the sport among youngsters.

Add in the strong competitive environment in Ireland, which we perhaps

sometimes take for granted, and you have the main reasons for the burgeoning interest in the sport.

Jamie Costin began his race-walking career by winning the under-13 BLOE title in 1990. Robert Heffernan started his career by finishing out of the medals at intermediate schools level.

Gillian O'Sullivan first came to prominence when winning the under-13 walk at the National Community Games in 1989. And Olive Loughnane made her competitive debut at the Irish Universities Championships in 1994.

As with the marathon, there are many imponderables in long-distance walking that make future performances difficult to predict.

Jamie Costin (50k), who will be the youngest competitor by some four years in his event in Sydney, will gain vital experience for Athens 2004. He recorded 'negative splits' in a race in Berlin (faster in the second half than in the first), an art that takes most walkers years to master. He will be hoping for an Irish record in Sydney.

Robert Heffernan (20k) has ambitions similar to Jamie's. Robert is an aggressive racer – expect to see him up with the leaders for a fair stretch of the race in Sydney.

Gillian O'Sullivan (20k) is considered the most likely of the Irish walkers to finish top ten in her race. She will be very strong in the second half.

Olive Loughnane (20k), in her first major championship, will learn a great deal in Sydney. If she walks to form she can make the top 30.

To understand just how fast these athletes travel, consider this: when Jamie Costin knocked seven minutes off the Irish 50k record at the European Cup in Berlin last June (his 3.:59:02 was 58 seconds inside the Olympic A standard), he went through 26.2 miles (a marathon) in 3:15 – and still had five miles to go.

As for Gillian O'Sullivan, her 45.29 for 10k is a time many runners would be stretched to achieve.

The fact that four Irish walkers are racing in Sydney says much about how well the sport is being developed. It is also of course a reward for the dedication and talent of the four themselves.