

RUNNING IS A PART OF MY LIFE

By Jackie O'Connell

Running has been an important part of my life, almost from the beginning. I can say that a focus on keeping fit from my earliest youth spawned and maintained over the many years my love of running which, despite the challenges involved, has given and continues to provide me with a mixture of sheer enjoyment and a sense of achievement. A huge bonus has been the acquisition of many good friends in running circles over the decades.

As I will outline, training for and participating seriously in distance running demands an enormous amount of time and dedication. In this regard I must, at the outset, acknowledge the tremendous support and encouragement that has always been provided to me by my wife, Frances, as well as by my children, Deirdre and Andrew, both of whom I am pleased to say are interested in fitness, including running. Wider family members were supportive too.

My running years can be roughly divided into three phases. The first phase was the period of my early youth up to my early or mid-thirties. This was a time during which I was an active participant in Gaelic games, soccer and running to maintain fitness.

The second phase was the period around my mid-thirties to mid to late forties, during which time, I ran thirteen Dublin Marathons as well as many shorter distance races.

The third phase was the time since I ceased to run marathons to the present day. Over this period, I have continued to run to maintain fitness as well as running in various events.

Though, in competitive racing, marathon or otherwise, I always strove to run as fast as I could, I was never one for focusing too much on times achieved. Therefore, I do not intend to go into detail on individual times that I achieved in the many marathons and shorter races. Suffice to say, in my very first marathon in 1983, I ran a time well under four hours, and I improved on that time over subsequent marathons. In one of these, I ran a sub-three-hour time. That was in the same year that the great athlete, Neil Cusack, won the Dublin Marathon in a time of two hours and eleven minutes.

In the early days, in order to keep fit, I ran eight laps of the local Hartigan farm – a run that was over six miles, which I did several times each week. I ran forty to fifty miles a week. I didn't know a lot then about proper running shoes that are so essential for safe running and the avoidance of injuries to hips, knees and the overall skeletal/muscular system. In those years, I ran on my own as I hadn't running partners.

As I progressed from Hartigan's farm and more local running, I began running from Grange to Bunratty, a distance of twenty-one miles, which took me about two and a half hours. My children were young at the time, and they travelled by car with Frances, who would meet me at a few points on the run so that I could take water. The route took me from Grange to Limerick City, through John's Street, by King John's Castle, by Thomond Park, on the back road to Cratloe, on to the main Limerick-Ennis road at Setright's Cross and finally to Bunratty, where Frances and the children met me with a flask of tea and biscuits, which were most welcome before the car journey home or elsewhere.

Special training for the Dublin Marathon commenced in July. It was necessary to come to July with a high level of fitness already built up on a continuous basis. Training from July onwards involved a road run on Sunday of twenty miles; Monday involved about ten miles on grass; Tuesday involved about eight miles of speed work on grass; on Wednesday it was road work over ten to fourteen miles; Thursday involved about eight miles on grass; Friday called for more road work and, most likely, there would be a ten-mile race somewhere on Saturday. It was back to a twenty-mile road run on Sunday followed by the weekly routine. My regime involved running sixty to seventy miles a week right up to a fortnight before a marathon race in October. During the said fortnight, preparatory running would taper down in the hope that everything would come together on marathon day.

Running a marathon is akin to climbing Mount Everest. It is all about detailed and proper preparation. Another analogy is an academic examination – if adequate preparation hasn't been done, then failure is almost inevitable. So, while one doesn't run a marathon by way of preparing for a marathon, the quality of preparation determines success or failure on the big day. Having said all that, I should also say that despite the proper preparation, there is no guarantee that everything will go smoothly on race day. After ten miles running you could feel on top of your game, but after eighteen miles you could be 'gone' with 'nothing left in the tank'. Thankfully, I finished all of my thirteen marathons. The first one, though, I found incredibly tough, and I was not in good condition at the end; however, I learned a lot from that experience. On one occasion, I ran, but with hindsight I shouldn't have. One of my children, Andrew, had just come home from the hospital, and his health and wellbeing were on my mind. As well, Frances and family were unable to come to Dublin with me (the only time), and, as a result, my mental state was not what

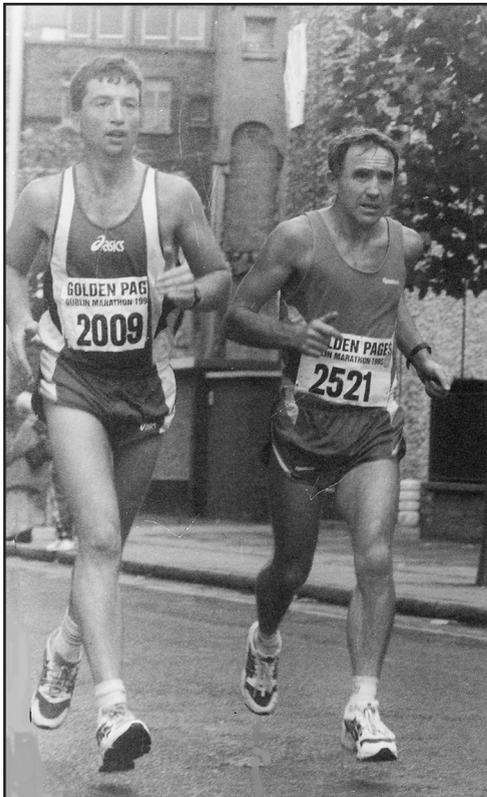
it should have been to take on a marathon. This illustrates the point that while it is necessary to be physically prepared for a marathon run, equally, the mind should be clear and focused on the job ahead.

My preparation for a marathon included additional water intake during the preceding days. From three days before, I loaded up with water, not glasses at a time, just regular sipping. I took water before a race and then again between ten to fifteen miles into the race. I had no further water intake during the remainder of the race. During my first marathon, I lost half a stone weight.

Fortunately, I never met the so-called 'wall' that can devastatingly occur after about twenty miles. I knew that I had enough carbohydrates taken to carry me the first twenty-three miles and that I would rely on body fats for the remaining miles. Mental powers became critical over the final race stage. That is not to say that I

didn't suffer – in fact – I did. However, my training including the 2,500 miles clocked each year and mental strength permitted me to cope. In fact, the more difficult it became, the more I liked it, and I drew from my mental reserves. In a moment of weakness, I would look at the spectators along a route, observing how comfortable and laid back they appeared and asked myself, *what am I doing here?* That was negative thinking that I had to dispel immediately and return to a positive state of mind. After a race, I craved tea and 'Custard Cream' biscuits, and I usually had both – a whole packet of those biscuits was not unusual for me to consume.

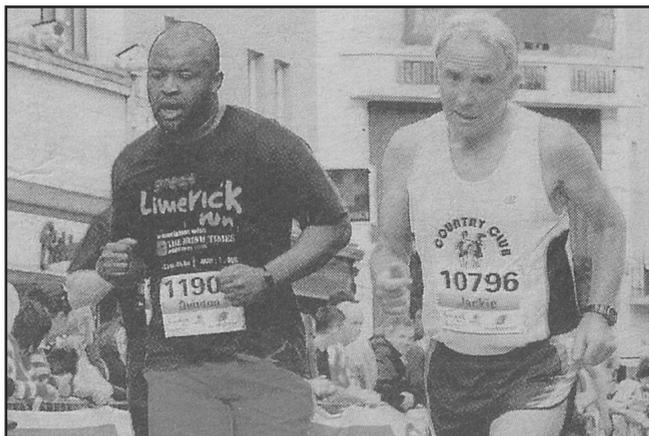
As I said earlier, I ran on my own for several years. I then had the fortune to meet John Carew of Knockderk, a fellow runner. John and I became good friends, and we ran a number of



John Carew and Jackie O'Connell.

Dublin Marathons together as well as many shorter races. We trained together with others, and that was mutually beneficial.

Over the years, I ran in numerous shorter distance events around the country with many of my fellow runners; we had great camaraderie amongst us. Ballycotton in Cork was a regular venue. In one such ten mile race, Deirdre and Andrew ran with



Over the line in the Great Limerick Run: Quinton Masawi and Jackie O'Connell finish.

me and finished the race. Andrew, who has a black belt in *Kung-Fu*, runs a lot on wild trails and mountains, including in New Zealand. While in New Zealand, I did a lot of mountain and trail running with Andrew and his friends. Deirdre runs outdoors too as well as doing a lot of treadmill running.

I have run also in West Cork, Connemara, The Burren in Clare (Easter Sunday race), Waterford, Galway and at other Irish locations, too numerous to mention. I have a preference for running the 'wilds' as distinct from footpaths and such in urban areas. A favourite event of mine has been the annual Limerick Championship, run over ten miles on St Stephen's Day. I won this competition in my age category six times – five times in the 'Over 40' category and once in the 'Over 45' category.

We did a share of mountain running around the country, Mount Brandon and others. One day we set out from Anglesboro to run Galtee Mór. It was a tough climb – at times you had to haul yourself up by holding onto the grass, and then when reaching a plateau, it was possible to drive on, running as fast as you could. At a stage in the ascent, the clouds came down, and we became totally lost. There is a crucifix near the summit, and we passed it three times while attempting to find our bearings. Thankfully, we eventually descended safely.

Frances and I have been privileged to visit many countries on a number of continents and to have seen many magnificent places of historical and other significance. On preparing for such excursions, two sets of my running gear were always the first items to be placed in a suitcase by Frances. Knowing my form, she knew that upon arrival at our destination, it would not be too long before I was out and running. We planned our activities well so that neither of us was inconvenienced. On such holidays, Frances did not get away totally from 'washing' as she cleaned my gear after each run.

In Europe, I ran in several countries including England, Italy, Spain and Holland. Farther afield, I clocked up many running miles in America, South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, Japan, Egypt (by the Dead Sea), China, the Philippines, Canada and New Zealand. In those countries and several cities within some of them, I ran as hard as I could, often at very high temperatures. I like running in the heat, perspiring until my running gear becomes soaked.

Of those overseas ventures, I will mention three. Our trip to the Philippines was memorable. Firstly, I took part in a jungle run of five miles – it was necessary to cover up entirely, even though I was vaccinated. With a backpack on my back in temperatures in the 40s centigrade, I exceeded my expectations and conquered the course. However, I paid for my enjoyment after returning to our hotel.

After returning and a rest, I went to the restaurant for a snack and after that took the lift to the ninth floor where our room was located. At a stage when the lift was nearing its destination, it broke down, and I was left in utter darkness with little or no ventilation. The heat was overpowering, and eventually I lay on the lift floor trying not to panic. I shouted and I roared for help, all to no avail. I called reception on the lift telephone, but all I heard was ‘gibberish’. Despite trying to remain calm, I was becoming increasingly stressed and worried because breathing was difficult. Two hours later, Frances, on her way back to our room after a spell of shopping, heard a familiar voice shouting, “*Anyone there?*” and “*Hello! Hello!*” Frances found help, and a number of people arrived on the scene with her. Eventually, the doors were prised open a little, but not wide enough to permit me to escape. To make matters worse, the lift slipped downwards, settling between two floors. I knew that I had to get out. I forced the doors a bit wider, and I climbed outside, wedging myself using the lift shaft wall. I managed to climb upwards and out on to the corridor, on the ninth floor. I was rattled, shaken and stressed. As far as the hotel personnel was concerned, it appeared to have been an event of no significance. I was not surprised because I had noticed that a hotel opposite ours, which was under construction, had scaffolding made of bamboo, which appeared dangerous to my eyes. I wondered about health and safety issues.

The second adventure to mention is my run on the Great Wall of China. On the wall, you could run three or four miles between obstacles – the Wall Viewing Posts from the early times of the Great Wall. At a post, it was necessary to take a diversion to get on the next continuous strip of wall. On the wall, the stepping stones were very irregular and uneven; therefore, it was difficult to establish a running rhythm.

The third memorable experience to mention was our trip to Ketchikan in Alaska, where both Frances and I climbed the mountain through several feet of snow with the assistance of a guide. We wore crampons and suitable clothing.

When overseas, I ran at every opportunity, and while out on a run I was mentally planning the next. In retrospect, probably more than one run was inadvisable in terms of localities traversed and ethnic sensitivities regarding attire. Thankfully, I never came to any harm. I missed out on running while in Australia and Peru, but a man can’t hope for everything in life!

Over the decades, I was fortunate to avoid serious injury. However, at one stage, I suffered an Achilles tendon injury that kept me out of action for a time. I

was in plaster for a few months, and so my training and fitness suffered a setback. As a result, I was unable to run the Dublin Marathon that year.

This reminds me of a time when I had my appendix removed. By coincidence, John Carew underwent the same operation about a month previously. I was lying on my bed in the hospital, inclined to sleep a lot. A student nurse came to the bedside and checked my heart-rate. She ran away shouting, seeking the attention of a senior nurse, as my heart rate was forty or forty-one – she would have expected it to read at about eighty. Another nurse arrived with great concern. At that stage, I was awake, and I repeatedly said, “What’s wrong”, “Your heart”, she said. “What’s the matter with it”, I asked. “It’s very low, are you feeling alright”, she asked. “I never felt better”, I said. “Are you a runner”, she asked. “I am”, said I. After that, doctors arrived to ensure that I wasn’t about to depart this world. My heart rate is low, owing to my high level of cardiovascular fitness. Even after strenuous running, my heart-rate seldom exceeds sixty to seventy.

I must pay tribute to a kind lady who took a great interest in Limerick runners, providing us with necessary running gear and also organising much of our training. She was Siobhan McCormack of the Limerick Sports Store, William St, Limerick. We are greatly indebted to Siobhan.

I am now at a stage in my life, being in my mid-sixties, and I no longer run as much as when I was in my prime. I maintain a high fitness level and the only time that my legs grumble is when Frances brings me to a shopping centre. For some reason, my legs go weak in those places – Frances attributes this reaction to boredom! I am a great believer in cod liver oil which I have taken daily for many years. I am not talking about the capsule form – I take it raw from the bottle, two good spoons or indeed directly from bottle to mouth at times. I have to pick my dosage times as Frances has an aversion to the cod liver oil odour.

I still run six days each week, and I enjoy doing so thoroughly. A run that I favour at present is a route that takes me in the Weekes passage, past their house and down by the old farmhouse (*The Farm by Lough Gur*) on to the lake roadside (by the Heritage building) and around the lake perimeter to Ash Point, at which stage, I turn around and run the route in reverse, back home. This is a lovely run of some five miles with a varying underfoot surface, not to mention serenity and magnificent landscape and scenery. I avoid road running as much as possible, especially in the hours of darkness, as nowadays safety is a big issue, and I had too many close encounters. I now like to walk as well as run, and I exercise by bicycle as well. However, in terms of sheer enjoyment and buzz, not to mention challenge, running will always remain ‘king’ for me. I hope that Frances and I will make many more trips abroad, and if we do, I know that she will have packed two sets of running gear. Thank you, Frances!