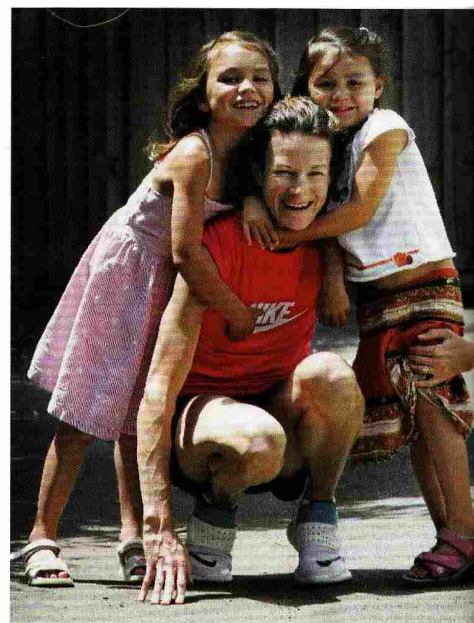


all in her Stride

BY DAVID YOUNG



Some dare to draw lines in the sands of athletics, beyond which champions supposedly ought not to go, but Sonia O'Sullivan is oblivious to the journalistic naysayers and their ramblings. Their rhetoric may as well be the idle toe-etchings of a child at the seaside. Travels and life abroad have insulated the Cobh woman.

"I don't think I'll ever retire. I'm too young to retire," she stubbornly scoffs at the notion of giving up any time soon. But, she tells me she's winding down. She's not so much lowering her sights, rather selecting her pursuits more carefully – without lamenting the lack of world-class company in her races these days. She's training hard, as she always has. When the country got in a flap about her supposed last race, the BUPA Great

Ireland Run in April this year, even An Taoiseach Bertie Ahern readied himself to offer his eulogy to her exceptional career. There was a media scramble – nothing like greatness by association. Sonia chuckled. No need to fence her in, just yet.

She's amazed when people can pick her out of a crowd. "I like to think of myself as a normal person and I don't ever think I should be treated any different to others around me," she says, to the bafflement of her interviewer. It's a typical response from a most bashful icon. Even after all these years, she just won't carry on with notions of grandeur. She'd be perfectly entitled to do so, but it's not in her DNA. She's beholden to no expectation and she equally defies the requisite in-your-face, sport star uniformity of personality.

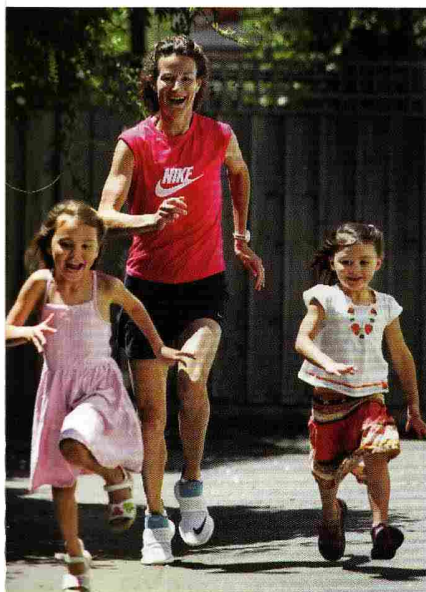
We forgave Mohammad Ali his magnificent ego. We almost wanted our queen of the track to talk the talk, while she walked the walk so bravely and gracefully. Certain media quarters couldn't quite accept the modesty; arrogance would've been more the norm, but it wasn't Sonia. She was her own person.

Twenty years have passed since Sonia packed her college bags and headed for Villanova University in the US to study accountancy. Ireland was different then. Charles J. Haughey was Taoiseach, social partnership was being forged, and belts were being winched tighter around the country's waist. If you had ambition, you flew far from the nest.

Marcus O'Sullivan and Frank O'Meara were still competing when Sonia emerged on the international scene. They pointed the raw talent in the right direction but credit notes thereafter are undersigned by her hand. She still has contacts with these gents of the track. They were, and still are, more like extended family.

"They showed me the ropes and they made life easier on the circuit. Marcus and Frank were friendly faces I could talk to – they helped me cope with intimidating times," she offers a reminder of the early days.

Zola Budd's barefooted approach caught her eye. It was the South African's singularity of mind and record-breaking calibre that inspired her. She too was something of a prodigy. "She was only a few years older



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than me and made me think I could do what she was achieving,” she recalls.

Her talent opened the portal to her first purple patch. Sonia didn't have to meticulously plot this stage of her career. It happened. Destiny was predetermined. She accepted the odyssey; and with the innocence and freedom of youth, took to the world stage, with a blush.

Memories of early TV interviews should be reviewed to remind us just how refreshingly naive she was. The sight of her hair blowing-a-top her head as God intended all Irish folks' locks to behave on windy days comes to mind.

“You think it's going to last forever, but it doesn't,” she candidly tells of learning the hard way about the fight to regain form and reassert herself. “I was trying too hard – pushing it in training but it was only when I took fresh advice did it return.” 1998 saw form gallop back and it was remarkable – winning the Cross Country championships in Marrakech, Morocco.

The inevitable resurfaces though – talent has to travel. Ireland's no longer the barren economic wasteland of the 80s. Sonia's impressed with what young athletes have available today. “I am most familiar with Limerick and the facilities are as good as any I have seen around the world,” she enthuses about the city's university.

“All athletes need an environment other than home to advance themselves. You have to get away from distractions. It's not Ireland. It's the same all over the world,” she says, quick to check any notion of escaping her native surroundings.

I wished I'd had a deck of cards (or a couple of conkers) to test the mile-wide spirited streak she cannot conceal. “I would say that I get competitive with something everyday, answering questions, getting the right answers, remembering things,” she says, untagging herself.

“Always taking the stairs, racing the people in the lift...not seriously competitive but I like to see the result all the same,” she admits, starting to make me wonder. Sonia O'Sullivan would be the person to take on a road trip. She owns up to being the type of traveller who

constantly guesses times and distances.

Her energy levels and focus were always naturally higher than her peers. She played camogie at school, but it seems almost incidentally. “I think I used to run around the school field while the team was practicing and then jump in when they played the game.”

Almost bizarrely, she's carried a few hurleys to the UK as reminders of home. “We often go the local park for a hit around. It starts in normal walk around clothes, but I always make an excuse to run home and put on some gear and runners so I can play better!” she says.

She cannot see herself hanging up her running shoes. The sheer physical draw to step out everyday is an undeniable, elemental force that cannot be calmed. When she stares into life's crystal ball, she eventually sees a day when she'll don her sports shoes once and not twice in the same 24 hours. It'll be no less fun.

Even if you never see her take another stride, Sonia will always be in the mind's eye of the nation – striding and smiling almost effortlessly down a track, back straight – an iconic image of Irish sports lore. Hers is a legacy that rests rightfully amidst the grainy images of Ronny Delaney breasting the tape for Gold in Melbourne in 1956 or the Sunday matinee Technicolor of a Roy Keane stare.

