

## On Athletics

## Ian O'Riordan



US Olympic trials are brutally unforgiving. And mostly brutally fair

Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean the US Olympic trials aren't out to get you. There are no excuses, no exceptions and usually no complaints. Although, sometimes even the best athletes are left thinking, why did it have to be me?

In the now 52 years since it was agreed the only right and equitable way of deciding who goes to the Olympics is the top three finishers in their category at the national championships (who also have the qualifying standard), the US system

has been accepted as brutally unforgiving. And mostly brutally fair. Such is the depth and quality of athletes born in the US that anything else would be mangled in the subjective or the politicking.

It's also ruthlessly simple, mirroring the very essence and occasion of the once-every-four-years Olympic spectacle. There is no audition. As old Baron de Coubertin might have preached, the most important thing about the US Olympic trials is not the winning or the taking part, it's finishing in the top three.

Only sometimes, fair is unfair. Ask Carl Lewis, or Dan O'Brien, or ask Athing Mu. Mu is the one of the biggest stars in US athletics right now, photographed in her Team USA kit on the cover of this month's Sports Illustrated, and unquestionably one of their most talented, all of which made the sight of her crashing out of the women's 800m final earlier this week so unfathomable. Recently turned 22, Mu was just 19 when three years ago, at the delayed Tokyo Olympics, she won the 800m gold medal in 1:55.21 – faster than the 1:55.28 which Caster Semenya ran to win in Rio 2016. That's how good she is.

After also winning the world title in 2022, Mu was looking to become the first woman in Olympic history to defend her 800m title in Paris next month, but that dream ended halfway around the first lap of Hayward Field in Eugene, Oregon, when, bunched in the middle of the nine-woman final, she clipped a fellow runner from behind and fell to the track. Games over.

Mu did get up and chase in vain, before finishing ninth in 2:19.69. If she somehow felt some paranoia around her event, that was understandable too. Three years ago, Nia Akins fell on the back straight, and so ended her dream of going to Tokyo. At the 2016 trials, Alycia Montano fell on the final turn, missing out on her Rio dream. In a simple twist of that fate, Akins won this time around, running a lifetime best of 1:57.36.

In Tokyo, Mu was also part of the US women's 4x400m relay which won gold,

but there will be no Olympic ticket this time. Just like Carl Lewis, who missed out on the 100m in Barcelona in 1992, despite being the reigning Olympic champion and world record holder, after he finished sixth in the trials. Just like Dan O'Brien, who also missed out in 1992, despite being the decathlon world champion – just weeks after signing a multimillion-dollar deal with Reebok, he failed to clear a height in the pole vault.

Athletes from most other countries don't always appreciate how good they have it when it comes to their Olympic selection. Even if there is that similar depth and quality in some events – think Jamaican sprinting, or Kenyan distance running – there is usually some way to facilitate the best athletes. It might be the top two finishers at their national championships, leaving the third spot open to a "wild card" of sorts, or in some cases even an Olympic preselection.

In the now 152 consecutive years of our National Championships (first staged on July 7th, 1873, at College Park in Trinity College Dublin), rarely has any Olympic selection been decided on who finishes first, second or third, although some do still stand out vividly.

Back in 1996, a few weeks before the Atlanta Olympics, the men's 10,000m turned out to be a winner-takes-all showdown between Noel Berkeley and Sean Dollman. At the time, Berkeley and Dollman had both run the Olympic B-standard, meaning only one of them could go to Atlanta, as the then selection



■ Eamonn Coghlan with Noel Carroll after limping out of the 5,000m at the National Championships in 1984

criteria allowed for. Affectionately known as the King of the Roads, Berkeley was at times equally dominant on the track, winning that national 10,000m title for three years in row, from 1993 to 1995. Berkeley would often arrive at the Morton Stadium on his racing motorcycle, psyching out many of his combatants by that process alone, and, having already run the Olympic 10,000m in Barcelona in 1992, he was marginally fancied to win.

Although he set the pace for most of the 25 laps, it was Dollman, the South African-born and American-based runner, who darted past when it mattered, winning the title and his second Olympic ticket. "I feel like I've been shot in the back," Berkeley said afterwards, although he did come back to win three more 10,000m titles in a row, from 1997-1999,

equalling the record six won by Cork's Donie Walsh in the 1960s and 1970s.

My earliest memory of an Irish athlete missing out on Olympic selection goes back to the 1984 National Championships in Santry, in advance of the LA Games, and that didn't come down to where Eamonn Coghlan finished in the 5,000m, but the fact that he didn't finish at all.

Having won the world championship title in Helsinki the previous year, and having finished fourth in the two previous Olympics, in 1976 and 1980, LA had been billed as Coghlan's opportunity at redemption, although his 1984 season had already been disrupted by injury on top of injury.

Still, the Olympic selectors gave him the chance to "prove his fitness", as it was generally politely put, and Coghlan lined up for the 5,000m in Santry that day knowing this was his last chance or bust. At some point, maybe about halfway, he dropped out, leaving John Treacy, already selected to run the marathon in LA despite having never raced the distance before (imagine that!), to win in 13:33.59.

I found a photograph this week of Coghlan limping off the track that day and being consoled by Noel Carroll, the two-time Olympian in the 800m and fellow graduate of Villanova. Coghlan's hurt and anguish is written all over his face, and his hand is resting on Carroll's shoulder. There is also a gentle smile on Carroll's face, as if to say such is sport, sometimes fair is unfair. Forty years on, that picture speaks louder than any words: Why did it have to be me?

## Olympic Games Paris 2024 countdown

## Lombard's story really was too good to be true



## Paul Howard

In a year, athlete went from being barely known outside of Cork to preparing for the 2004 Athens Olympics as the fastest non-African in the world over 10,000m

It's odd sometimes the things that stick in your mind. When I think back 20 years to the one and only time I met Cathal Lombard, what I remember most clearly is good biscuits. At the start of our interview, his mother walked into the living room carrying a serving tray and the biscuits were laid out on a plate, foil-wrapped and artfully presented, along with the good china cups and saucers.

The warmth of the welcome may have stayed with me because it was my first day back at work after my own mother died, and she always did the same thing for visitors. Mrs Lombard seemed so proud of her son. A year earlier, he was barely known outside of Cork. When I met him, he was heading to the Olympics in Athens as the fastest non-African in the world over 10,000m.

He knew that people were sceptical about him. But while we sipped tea and ate the good biscuits, he tried to explain how he'd managed to do it. It was one of the most incredible sporting stories I'd ever heard. The only problem was, it turned out, that none of it was true.

At that time – the late spring of 2004 – I'd fallen out of love with my job as a sports-writer for the former Sunday Tribune. Sport is supposed to stretch the limits of our credulity, but the experience of writing about Michelle de Bruin had taught me to doubt everything. Raining on other people's parades wasn't something that came naturally to me and the job was turning me into a misanthrope.

I stepped into Lombard's house, notebook in hand, like some hard-bitten, career detective. And I asked him straight out whether his sudden emergence as a world-class distance runner had anything to do with drugs. He looked me in the eye and said no – it was down to plyometrics, medicine ball work and a running regime based on lower but better quality mileage. I wrote it all down.

After the interview, as he walked me back to my car, I asked him about his plans for the summer. He said he was going to St Moritz in Switzerland for altitude training, and he might take in a Grand Prix race – possibly Rome. Then he'd find a quiet corner of Italy to prepare himself mentally before flying into Athens a day or two before the 10,000m final. He was going to skip the opening ceremony, which struck me as odd for a first-time Olympian.

"When it's over," he explained, "then I can enjoy the experience of being at the Olympics."

A cousin was with me that day. He was on work experience with the newspaper,

and was surprised by the line of questioning. He asked whether I thought he was telling the truth. I said I didn't feel like I'd spent an hour with a man who was telling lies. I liked Lombard. He seemed open. He had an answer for every question. There was the proud mother. The Viscount biscuits. But still there were elements of the story he told me that stretched belief to breaking point.

Lombard had been a decent track and cross-country runner, and most top Irish athletes had never heard of him before his dramatic breakthrough the previous year. He claimed he was too busy pursuing his law degree and his career as a solicitor to commit himself fully to running. That changed when he watched the 20km walker, Robert Heffernan – a friend of his brother, Fiachra – compete at the Sydney Olympics in 2000 and decided to give athletics his all.

In the autumn of 2001, he spent his life savings on a trip to Kenya to train at high altitude. But when he returned to Ireland a month later, he was no faster on his feet than when he left. He considered chucking it in, but then a friend put in a word for him with Joe Doonan, former coach to Catherina McKiernan. Lombard rented a car and drove to Cavan to see him. Doonan explained that he'd finished with athletics, but he was impressed by the young man's earnestness, and agreed to coach him.

## Floored

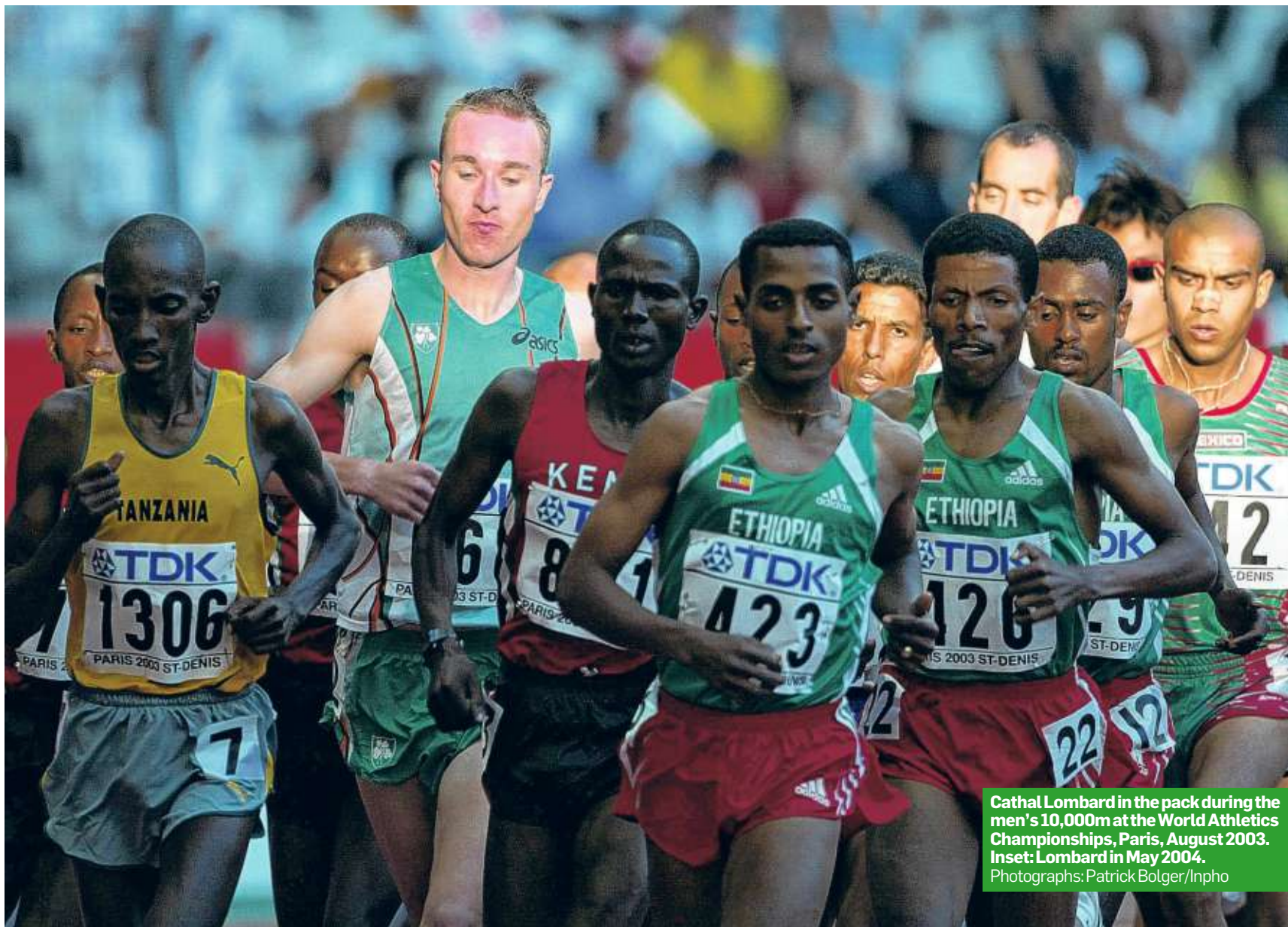
It was six months later, in August of 2003, that people first sat up and took notice of Lombard after he ran a 5,000m race in Heusden, Belgium, in 13:19.22. Mark Carroll, a fellow Corkman, and the fastest Irishman over the distance at the time, remembered being floored when he heard. "I'd [usually] run the 5,000m at the National Championships in around 13:50," he told me later, "which wouldn't be world class by any stretch of the imagination. Cathal would be back in 14:20 or something. I'd never for one minute have considered him a serious challenger."

Sonia O'Sullivan's husband, Nic Bideau, was coaching another athlete in the race, the Australian Craig Mottram. "Nic rang me and said some Irish guy ran 13:19," she recalled. "He said the name. I'd never heard of him. Then I heard Joe was coaching him and I thought it made sense because Joe was a great coach who knew what he was doing."

What Doonan didn't know was that, at some point in his journey towards Athens, Lombard had sat down in front of a computer, typed the letters "EPO" into a search engine, and discovered that the drug du jour among distance athletes seeking an illegal advantage was available to buy via mail order.

The Olympic year dawned. Carroll was at a training camp in Florida when Lombard rang out of the blue, asking if he could train with him. "At that stage, I had huge suspicions about him based on what he ran the year before," Carroll said later. "But he was on his way down to Puerto Rico for a race, so I said yes. We trained together for 12 days. I couldn't believe the kind of times he said he was going to run [that year]. Totally unrealistic. I just thought he was dreaming."

By the end of April, it was Carroll who thought he was dreaming. Lombard had targeted a meet at Stanford University, California, to try to achieve the Olympic qualifying standard for the 10,000m. Sitting with Keith Kelly, the Irish cross-country runner from Drogheda, Carroll followed the race on an athletics website that offered live, lap-by-lap updates.



Cathal Lombard in the pack during the men's 10,000m at the World Athletics Championships, Paris, August 2003. Inset: Lombard in May 2004. Photographs: Patrick Bolger/Inpho

## The Greatest Irish Olympic Stories Never Told



28 days to go

"The leaders were flashing up every minute or so," he remembered. "It's Mebrahtom Keflezighi. Then it's Bob Kennedy. Then it's Thomas Kiplit. So after 22 laps of a very fast, 25-lap race, it suddenly says that there's an unknown athlete in third place. I looked at Keith and I said, 'That's Cathal,' and he said, 'It couldn't be,' I said, 'Wait and see,' and it was. I was blown away when I saw the finishing time. Baffled would be a better word."

## Three letters

Lombard finished third. In doing so, he lopped a massive 13 seconds off Carroll's Irish record of 27:46.82. Carroll had set the time in his only 10,000m race, but he'd



When the announcement of his positive test was revealed at the start of August, he immediately admitted his guilt, claiming that drugs were a fact of life in modern athletics and that he'd taken EPO simply to 'get on the playing field'. Unsurprisingly, his sport turned on him

been a world-class athlete over 5,000m for five years before he had a crack at it. John Treacy's previous mark had stood for 19 years. Lombard broke Carroll's record off the back of 16 months of serious training. "I'm sick," Carroll remembered texting a team-mate. "I have three letters and you know what they are."

It was two weeks later that I met Lombard in the family home and he insisted that drugs had played no part in his progress. Had he known at that point that customs officers had already intercepted at least one package addressed to him containing EPO? Had he received a notice that the package had been passed on to the Irish Medicines Board for analysis?

All that Olympic summer, Lombard was the talk of Irish athletics. People said there was an aloofness about him that made it difficult to make conversation with him. At the end of May, O'Sullivan met him for the first time when they competed in the Great Manchester Run. She remembered that he vanished immediately after the race, but then she bumped into him when she stopped at a Starbucks on the way out of Manchester.

"I was standing talking to him," she told me later, "just asking the usual questions, what training was he doing, where he was racing next. I turned my back to pay for my coffee and when I turned around again, he was gone, no goodbye or anything."

He may have been looking over his shoulder for the testers. He withdrew from a number of meets that summer, including Gateshead and Crystal Palace. Carroll and O'Sullivan ran into each other at the Irish

Track and Field Championships in Santry that July and O'Sullivan asked Carroll why Lombard wasn't competing.

"An injury," said Carroll. "What kind of injury?" asked O'Sullivan. "A pretend injury," came the reply.

There was perhaps only one man who understood as well as Carroll did that it took a lifetime's slog for a top athlete to do what Lombard had done in little more than a year. That man was John Treacy, the only other Irishman who had run anywhere close to the time Lombard ran in Stanford. It just so happened that part of Treacy's remit as chief executive of the Irish Sports Council was to catch doping cheats.

## Dramatic improvements

On the basis of his dramatic improvements over 5,000m and 10,000m, an order was given to target Lombard for out-of-competition testing, looking specifically for evidence of EPO use. Five such tests had been ordered on him since the start of the year, which may have explained the edginess that O'Sullivan and several others detected in him.

Then, in early July, a second package containing EPO, mailed to him from a supplier in Brazil, was intercepted by customs and sent to the Irish Medicines Board for analysis. Someone recognised his name and tipped off the Irish Sports Council, which decided to perform one more out-of-competition test on him before Athens. His athlete location form revealed that he was in St Moritz, making his final Olympic preparations. On Sunday, July

11th, just after 7am, two testers called on him at his address in the Albula Alps to request a sample of his urine.

If Lombard knew he'd been caught in the act, he showed no evidence of it, according to Carroll, who was also completing his training in St Moritz.

"The funny thing is, I had come full circle at that point," he remembered later. "I didn't want to have anything to do with him in Switzerland, but we both ended up training at the same place. I saw first-hand the way he trained and prepared. He was so meticulous he'd make you feel like an amateur. I started thinking that maybe I called this thing wrong."

It would be fascinating to know what Lombard was thinking in the days and weeks that followed. Twenty years on, he's not inclined to say. But it seemed he decided to carry on as if nothing had happened. He travelled to Tirenna, near Pisa, the quiet corner of Italy he'd told me about, where he was planning to sit out the start of the Olympics, and where presumably he now waited for the call to tell him that the game was up.

## Positive test

When the announcement of his positive test was revealed at the start of August, he immediately admitted his guilt, claiming that drugs were a fact of life in modern athletics and that he'd taken EPO simply to "get on the playing field".

Unsurprisingly, his sport turned on him. Doonan said he was sickened by what he described as Lombard's betrayal of his trust. Carroll said he felt maligned by the suggestion that athletes needed to dope in order to go to the Olympics, while O'Sullivan said the claim was a slur on every Irish athlete who had qualified for Athens.

Lombard, who now owns his own solicitor's practice in Mallow, never spoke publicly about what happened again. Recently, I asked him whether he'd be prepared to meet up, 20 years after our last interview, perhaps to offer a fresh insight into why he did what he did. He didn't return my emails or calls.

I heard from him only once after the day when we shared a plate of biscuits in his mother's living room. It was a text out of nowhere shortly after those Olympics ended. He reminded me that I'd asked him if he'd ever taken drugs and he lied to my face – and for that he wanted to say he was truly sorry.

■ This story is part of a series, The Greatest Irish Olympic Stories Never Told, which will run every Saturday in The Irish Times up to the beginning of the 2024 Olympic Games, on Friday, July 26th

