

Hurdling the hard questions

Athletes like Tobi Amusan make it increasingly difficult for serious journalists to cover their sport

Cathal Dennehy



Do I look like I'm angry?" asks Tobi Amusan, looking increasingly angry. It's Tuesday night in Budapest, midway through the World Championships, and the fastest female hurdler in history is narrowing her gaze, leaning forward, making sure she hears the question as it's repeated.

"The fact there was a charge," I say. "How do you feel about that now? Do you carry some anger about that?"

"What anger?" she says. "If I don't look like the question you just asked, then there's no point for it."

In steps Robert Johnson of *LetsRun.com*, one of the few outlets in athletics with objective coverage: "Well, some people will think, even though you were cleared, there had to be something there."

Amusan stares at him. "Are you some people?"

"No, but there are people out there..."

Amusan cuts him off. "You can't speak for people then," she says, walking away. Seconds later, she stops for a cluster of Nigerian journalists, one of whom calls her "our Tobi express", asking what message she has for fans.

"Just on the point of your fans," I add when she's finished, "I guess a lot of them are wondering what led to the charge. Would you be able to clarify the reasons behind that?"

Her smile turns to stone. "I'm talking about my fans here, you're talking about charges. What charges?"

"I'm asking [about] the charge, about the whereabouts violations, because a lot of your fans and a lot of the athletics public..."

She leans in, studying my accreditation. "Mr Cathal, I am done answering your questions. You ask the same questions like five times now."

But that's not true. "That's the first time I asked that question."

She stares back, unimpressed. "Thank you," she says, shaking her head.

A few hours earlier, the heads of

the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU), which runs the sport's anti-doping programme, sat in a room close to where Amusan was speaking and explained how, in the coming weeks, they'll order a review of the decision that saw the world record holder cleared of charges that she'd committed three anti-doping whereabouts violations — essentially making herself available for drug tests — in a 12-month period. They will then decide whether to appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

"We have some concern it might set a precedent which will be difficult for future cases," said its chair, David Howman. "We will ask [the World Anti-Doping Agency] what they're going to do about it. We're concerned at the impact the decision will take."

The fine details of her case have yet to emerge, but they will soon. Amusan, who transformed herself from a very good athlete to an all-time great last year, smashing the world record with 12.12 in Oregon, certainly wasn't keen to discuss them. Not here. Not now. Maybe not ever. The 26-year-old is a national hero in Nigeria, and after the video went online of our exchange, it wasn't long before Twitter carried a river of revulsion.

"You will get what you are looking for. Just wait."

"You are pathetic human and deserves everything bad come your way."

"Useless piece of shit. I wish her manager was there to smack the taste into your tasteless sewage of a mouth."

"You worthless slime."

"You low life degenerate journalist"

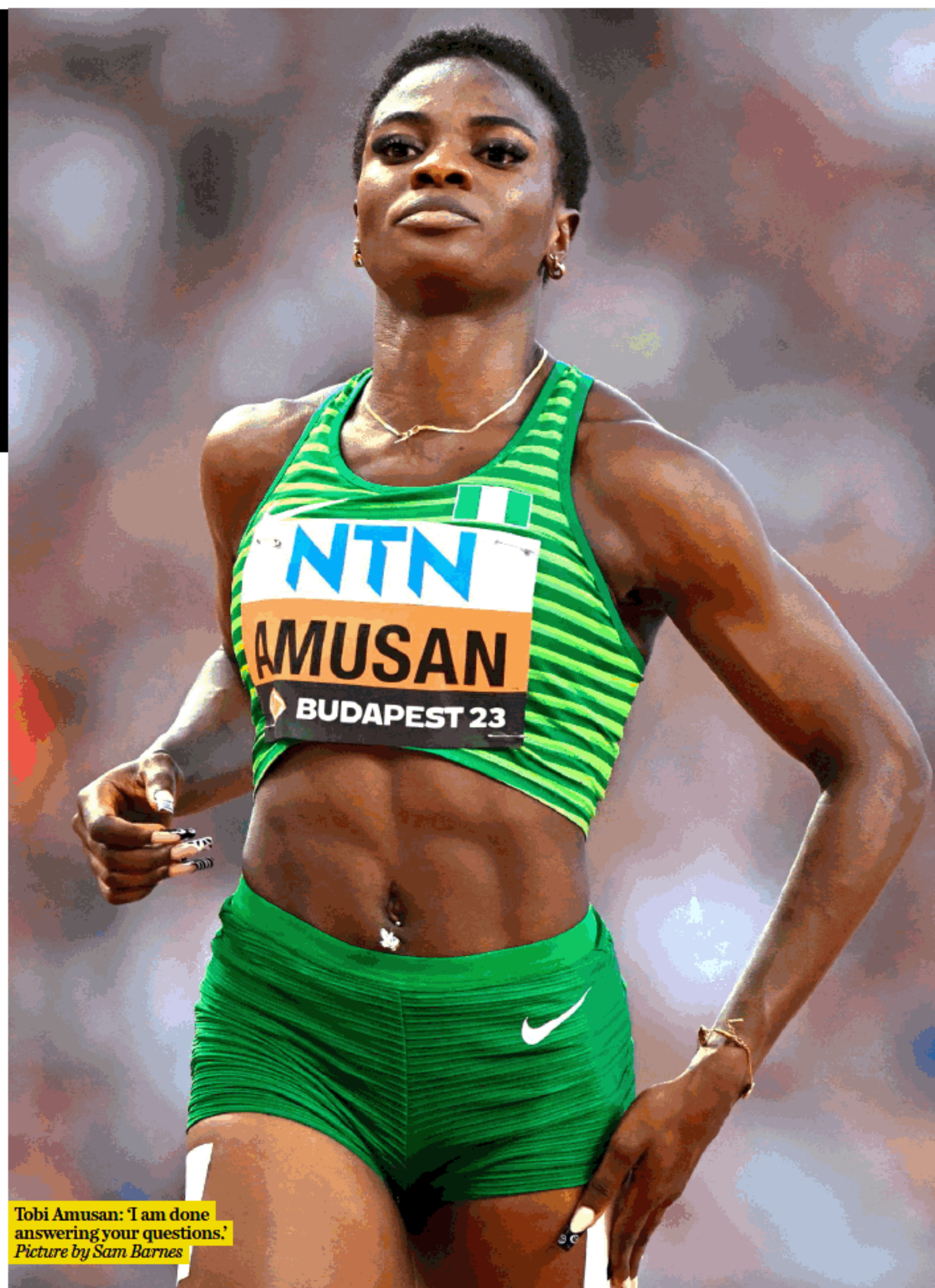
"F**king idiot"

"He is a pure racist."

"The Irish potato."

This, of course, was expected. It's not like the Irish public had a better response, back in 1996, when US swimmer Janet Evans cast doubt on Michelle Smith at the Atlanta Olympics. But what you don't expect, in this sport with its poisoned history, is the backlash from colleagues.

A British reporter, Lillian Okolie, retweeted the clip, writing: "This is disgusting. What is actually wrong with you lot?" She claimed the questions were "STUPID & RUDE", adding: "This is what I was saying about



Tobi Amusan: 'I am done answering your questions.'
Picture by Sam Barnes

White Media." She had done an interview of her own with Amusan, which she closed by saying: "God's got you, and you know I'm rooting for you."

A Nigerian journalist, Christopher Maduewesi, wrote: "Get off your high horse. You are not relevant!" He later added: "You carried your racist agenda into the mixed zone to try and mess with her mind."

Maduewesi was probably unaware that at the 2019 World Championships in Doha, I put similar questions to Craig Engels following the four-year ban handed to his coach, Alberto Salazar, and at the Chicago Marathon in 2017, I spent 15 minutes asking Galen Rupp in a one-to-one interview about the accusations against him and Salazar.

But when all you have is a fanboy hammer, every sceptic starts to look like a nail.

On Thursday night, shortly after the hurdles final, Amusan is back in the mixed zone, smiling and joking with the horde of friendly fans who

secured media accreditation. The love-in is interrupted by Jonathan Gault of *LetsRun*, who witnessed the exchange two days earlier and who has decided the question needs to be put to Amusan again.

"Through this whole AIU process, you've maintained your innocence. I'm just wondering: why did they charge you in the first place?"

Amusan is not amused. "Why you always wondering when there's a good interview going on?"



Amusan is smiling and joking with the horde of friendly fans who secured media accreditation.

"Because I don't get the chance to ask these questions otherwise," says Gault.

"I'm sorry I can't answer your question," says Amusan, before looking away.

Monday night, the press conference for the women's 100m final. Sha'Carri Richardson, a 23-year-old from Texas with a spiky personality and an undoubted star quality, has just won gold in 10.65 seconds, making her the fifth-fastest woman in history alongside Jamaica's Shericka Jackson and disgraced drug cheat Marion Jones.

Richardson is coached by Dennis Mitchell, a former sprinter who was banned for two years due to unusually high testosterone levels, which he claimed was due to drinking five beers and having sex with his wife four times. "It was her birthday," he said. "The lady deserved a treat."

Mitchell later testified that Trevor Graham — former coach to Marion

Jones and Justin Gatlin — had injected him with human growth hormone. After hanging up his spikes, Mitchell moved into coaching and in 2017, the year he guided Gatlin to the world 100m title, he told an undercover reporter he could get him steroids.

During the press conference with Richardson, a reporter from the US got the mic. “I want to be able to speak some life into you. I just want you to know I’m so proud of you. I’m just so proud of the way you have handled yourself, the way you have grown over the years from LSU to now to be able to come out with a World Championship medal. For everybody who doubted you, on social media, because I know it can get real ruthless, for all your competition that didn’t believe in you, for the moments you probably didn’t believe in yourself, I’m just glad you came out here and did what you are destined to do because, girl, I truly believe you are anointed by God because you have been through so much, but here you go, on top, and it is your time and I’m so happy for you.”

And breathe. She went on to ask Richardson how she plans to transcend the sport.

Athletics is changing, that much is clear. So is journalism. The fans with typewriters that David Walsh alluded to during Lance Armstrong’s era are now, by and large, fans with smartphones, showering athletes with love when they step off the track, avoiding any question that might irk them. The result is athletes grow so used to praise that a minor meltdown occurs if they face basic questioning.

On Friday night, Jamaica’s Shericka Jackson ran the second quickest female time in history for 200m, her 21.41 behind only Florence Griffith-Joyner’s world record of 21.34. Given the widespread allegations of doping against Flo-Jo — among them from a former training partner — a reporter asked Jackson: “As old journalists, we know that women’s world records from the ‘90s, ‘80s, can’t really be trusted. Don’t you just feel that you are the world record holder?”

Jackson was asked something similar after winning the world title last year, which she said was “rude”, but this time she was more diplomatic. “I am not one of those athletes that questions anybody’s world record. If a person hasn’t failed a test, I cannot comment on any world record. It is the world record.”

Flo-Jo, who died in her sleep at the age of 38, was joint-coached to that 200m record by Bobby Kersee, who also coached her in her time at UCLA. In 1989, a Canadian inquiry into doping in sport, initiated after the Ben Johnson scandal at the Seoul Olympics, saw Angela Bailey claim that she left Kersee’s group because he was unable to coach athletes who did not use drugs.

These days, Kersee has two of the biggest stars of the sport under his guidance: Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone, who withdrew from these championships with a knee injury, and Athing Mu, who will square off with Britain’s Keely Hodgkinson in tonight’s 800m final.

The way things are in the mixed zone, no one will bring up the past. Best to just live in the moment, and churn out that sweet, sweet content. Best to enjoy the show.

‘Rhasidat Adeleke is just about to turn 21. At her age in life the future looks infinite.’
Picture by Hannah Peters



The unbearable fourthness of being fourth may haunt two Irish athletes

Tommy Conlon



Never mind first or second: come third in a worlds or Olympics and you’ll be carrying garlands around your name for all eternity.

Come fourth and you’ll be carrying a cross forever and a day. You might be immensely proud of reaching fourth best in the whole, entire universe, but you’ll be saddled with a cross whether you want it or not. You will be remembered with a sigh of pity and regret.

It is not done out of badness; in fact it’s done for the best of reasons. The people are hoping and praying and wishing you into bronze, silver or gold. We want you to have your moment of moments. Of course, we are wanting it for ourselves too: a return on our emotional investment, the flex of a patriotic spasm, a moment of gladness for us as well as our heroine. There’s plenty of cheer to go round when a citizen of the country does everyone proud.

And truly it is a moment that lasts a lifetime. If the medal is draped around your neck, it stays around your neck, no matter that people can’t see it. There’s Ciara Mageean, she won a bronze at the World Athletics Championships in 2023; there’s Rhasidat Adeleke, she won a bronze at the World Athletics Championships in 2023. It can never be taken away. It is indeed a monument more lasting than bronze, irrespective of the colour.

Ah, but fourth. The unbearable pathos of coming fourth. A fraction of a second separated Mageean from third in the 1500m final on Tuesday night; a fraction of a second separated Adeleke from third in the 400m final on Wednesday night. But it is

the difference between waving and drowning, the chasm between all or nothing, the canyon between the haves and the have-nots. A fraction of a second better and you’re in the VIP lounge of the public memory forever. Otherwise you’re in the waiting room, with tea and sympathy for your trouble.

The clock is ultimately the master of everyone; but for athletes it is the tyrant without mercy. That missing fraction of a second becomes the missing limb that you can feel but never get back; it becomes the empty drawer where the medal in the box should be; it is the permanent void in the time-space continuum of your life. What is a fraction of a second in anyone’s story, in anyone’s dreams? It is less than nothing. But coming down the home straight in the race of your life, it is everything.

The matter of time and distance is a strictly empirical business for the working practitioners of track and field. So in strictly empirical terms, Mageean had achieved a landmark moment in her working life: a new Irish record, a new personal best. But of course a world championship final is about the prize, not the time. The prize transcends the numbers; the gold or silver or bronze radiate an aura more permanent than stats; they are mythical symbols more potent than the merely empirical.

It would not have mattered one jot if Adeleke and Mageean had won medals in slow races. There is a time for records and splits and numbers, and there is a time to reap the reward, because metal is the universal imprimatur of your talent, your character, your vocation. The medal, this superficial token, has the mystique that validates everything.

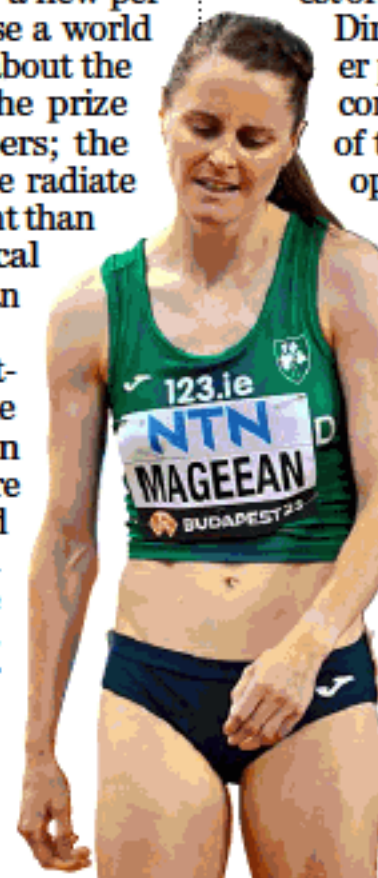
It is a savage game, elite distance running. In full flight these humans are machines, devouring the ground at rates of speed and endurance that most of us cannot hope to understand or appreciate. Their locomotive power is an awesome sight to behold, bordering on the scary. They are displaying a capacity that is right at the outer limit of what the species can physically achieve; they are putting the body’s organs under a pounding stress. And when the body starts to crack under the strain, they will override the flashing red lights with their mental machinery, their willpower and ambition and competitive ferocity.

And when the best in the world are assembled in the one place on the one night, the inherent savagery of what they do becomes, if anything, more cruel because they have to inflict the maximum punishment on each other in the race for survival.

Mageean came to this showdown in Budapest well armed for the ordeal. She was in the form of her life. But as if there wasn’t enough cruelty already, it just so happened that she would have to slug it out in what the experts reckoned was the strongest field ever assembled for a women’s 1500m final.

Out of Africa they came, Faith Kipyegon of Kenya, considered the greatest of all time over this distance; Diribe Welteji, just 21, another prodigy off the Ethiopian conveyor belt; Sifan Hassan of the Netherlands via Ethiopia, winner of gold medals at 5,000m and 10,000m in the Tokyo Olympics. First, second and third respectively.

Meanwhile the star of the County Down, hanging tough to the final stride, beating the best of the rest from Kenya, Britain, Australia, Ethiopia, the USA and Italy. Hers was a monumental performance. Hassan took the bronze in 3:56.00.



Ciara Mageean

“A national record for Ciara Mageean,” declared the commentator on Eurosport after it was over, “3:56.61, that’s the consolation for fourth place, the ‘chocolate medal’ as the Spaniards call it.” The chocolate medal. The unbearable fourthness of being fourth. From Eamonn Coghlan in Montreal and Moscow, to Sonia O’Sullivan in Barcelona and Thomas Barr in Rio — all fourths in Olympic finals — they have known this purgatory, this glimpse of paradise before the gates are closed in front of their eyes.

Mageean now knows it too. At 31, you’d hope and wish that this most endearing of athletes will sail onto the Paris Olympics next year in even better fettle than she was this season. But, who knows, maybe last Tuesday was her one window in time. The running game is too fucking cruel.

Adeleke, on the other hand, met the media afterwards with the innocence of someone who believes the world is her oyster and that there will be many more chances like this. And why wouldn’t she? The Dubliner is just about to turn 21. At her age in life the future looks infinite. So, she was suitably blasé about being squeezed out of the medals in the last 70 metres. She was “happy” to come fourth; she’d had “so much fun with the whole experience”.

Evidently, she wouldn’t be taking a scar home with her on this occasion. But in her business the dark night of the soul comes for virtually everyone, through the torments of injury and lost form and battered confidence and various other mishaps. She too is bound for Paris with hope in her heart. But if there is such a thing as a free shot at global level, Rhasidat had her free shot in Budapest. She will feel the weight of expectation next season, not least from herself.

Both athletes were outstanding last week. Outstanding wasn’t quite good enough on the night. They took on the world, they were fourth in the world, elite among the elite — but denied admission to the club of the chosen few.

Three is the magic number, apparently. No one has a good word to say about four, especially in the running game.