

On Athletics

Ian O'Riordan



Lavin's circle of belief that her chance will come around again

There is a photograph of a frighteningly young and slightly heavier me running around the old Belfield track alongside Eamonn Coghlan. God knows how these things work but it showed up on one of those timeline things on my phone this week, a veritably ancient blast from the past.

The clue as to when exactly it was lies on the logo of my T-shirt, a small gift from my father brought home from the first World Indoor Athletics Championships, staged in the Hoosier Dome in downtown Indianapolis, in March of 1987.

Which meant this was probably a few months later, early that summer, and if memory serves me well Coghlan was in Belfield for a sponsor photoshoot with Avia (remember them?) and politely agreed to let me tag along for a few 70-second quarters towards the end. At age 16, versus Coghlan at age 34, it was a brief and everlasting running lesson.

The photograph had been forwarded on again a few years ago, and part of the wonder in looking back at it now is if Coghlan took any note of my T-shirt, given his own experience at those World Indoor Championships.

What might have been

This, by way of reminder, was one of the smallest and arguably most successful Irish athletics teams of all time. It consisted of Coghlan and Marcus O'Sullivan, both in the 1,500m, and Frank O'Mara and Paul Donovan, both in the 3,000m: four athletes, two events, and in the end they came away with two gold medals, one silver, and a still nagging question of what might have been.

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There are some fresh echoes of that question too after the 10-strong Irish team which competed at last weekend's World Indoor Championships in Glasgow, where despite two impressive fifth-place finishes, one national record, and Sharlene Mawdsley's widely considered harsh disqualification after qualifying for the 400m final, in truth no Irish medal hope came close to materialising.

Every nagging question of what might have been is often tempered by the notion these chances will come around again, as if some sort of eternal circle, only that doesn't always ring true.

Chairman of the Boards

By March of 1987, Coghlan was already renowned as The Chairman of the Boards, by then winning 52 indoor mile or 1,500m races since his college days in Villanova, and unquestionably the gold-medal favourite. Just a few weeks before Indianapolis he won a record-equalling seventh Wanamaker Mile, running 3:55.91 and outkicking O'Sullivan on the final lap.

Making the final should have been the least of Coghlan's worries, only in his Friday morning heat, he tripped and tumbled on to the track – after clipping, it seemed, the leg of the lanky German Dieter Baumann (remember him?)

Though regaining his stride and moving back into third

Coghlan then eased up on the line, allowing Baumann to pass again, plus the Canadian David Campbell, and Coghlan ended up fifth – one place outside qualifying for the final.

Despite an initially successful appeal to the track judge, the IAAF jury of appeal then overturned that decision, so Coghlan was out – part of the wonder there being we'll never know how he would have fared against O'Sullivan, who went on to win gold.

The next day O'Mara and Donovan went better again to win gold and silver in the 3,000m, and that team wasn't done yet. O'Sullivan defended his title twice, in 1989 and 1993, and in between O'Mara won a second World Indoor gold in 1991.

But Coghlan, for a variety of different reasons and mainly injury, never got another shot at a World Indoor title. There is no guarantee these chances come around again, in any sport, but after her experience in Glasgow last weekend, Sarah Lavin is even more steadfast in her belief that hers eventually will.

Lifetime best

Lavin's chances of winning a medal in Glasgow weren't helped by the fact it turned out to be the fastest race in the history of women's indoor sprint hurdles, after Devynne Charlton from the Bahamas broke her own world record world to win gold in 7.65 seconds.

After twice running a lifetime best of 7.90 seconds when progressing through the heats and semi-finals, Lavin was just outside that mark in fifth, clocking 7.91, and still that promise there is always more to come is exactly what's driving her on towards the European Championships in Rome in June, then Paris Olympics in July.

With Lavin there is always hope and positivity and never a dour moment, and there's also been some sense of destiny about her chosen event, given the many life hurdles she's also overcome along the way, including the tragic loss of her then boyfriend, the Waterford rally driver Craig Breen, who sustained fatal injuries during a practice run in Croatia last April.

This week, Lavin was enjoying some brief time away from training, and took the chance to visit her old primary school near Lisnagry in Limerick, as part of the Dare to Believe programme organised by the Olympic Federation of Ireland.

"I know I made the World final two years ago, but I was shocked to do it and I think I ran 8.07 in that final," she said. "Now it's totally different, I've run 7.90, 7.90, .91 twice, .92, .93."

"Generally when you have that time consistency you get a drop. I didn't quite get to nail that, and I think I know why. So I guess it's a really good learning thing to go into the outdoor season. But I think it's going to take 12.49 to make that Olympic final which is massive."

Fastest woman

Last summer, Lavin became Ireland's undisputed fastest woman over the 100m flat and the 100m hurdles, improving that flat mark to 11.27, having taken down Derval O'Rourke's 13-year-old Irish record in the 100m hurdles at the World Championships in Budapest, running 12.62.

Lavin turns 30 in May, and there's another reason why she believes her chance will come around again.

"From 2014 to 2021, I didn't make a senior championship; I made one in 2014 at 19 and that was it. So, I don't take any of it for granted. Of course, you are left with wanting more, and that's what makes you a good athlete. Patience, though, is not something that sprinters have in abundance."

Only in Lavin's case there is that abundance of belief her time will again.

Racing Women jockeys



‘We’ve progressed, but where are the girls coming through?’



Denis Walsh

Rachael Blackmore's success has been hailed as game-changing but is there really equal opportunity for women jockeys?

Before Christmas, Betfair released a short, atmospheric film celebrating Rachael Blackmore, one of their brand ambassadors. For Blackmore, talking about herself and her glory is an ongoing source of awkwardness and deflection, resistant to any amount of practice, so to disarm her bashfulness they used other voices.

Made for a series called Serial Winners, her episode is called Game Changer. Sounds right. Doesn't it? But what does that mean exactly? Has the game changed? If so, how? Was it in the power of one superstar to wipe away decades of unchallenged prejudice? All of a sudden?

In 2021, about a month after Blackmore was crowned leading jockey at Cheltenham Festival, and a few days after she became the first woman rider to win the Grand National, Clare Balding, the broadcaster and former amateur jockey, offered an interesting perspective in the Racing Post.

"Everyone says [Blackmore's success] proves it's a meritocracy, but it doesn't," said Balding. "It proves she's outstanding and, given the opportunity, she's better than everyone else. The next step is can you just be given the opportunity to be allowed to be mid-divinity? That's equality. It's the median. When you look down the [jockey] standings, in both flat and jumps, it is still striking how few women are getting that consistency of opportunity."

Took the plunge

Blackmore was in her mid-20s when she made the decision to turn professional, early in 2015. No woman jump rider had turned professional in Ireland since Maria Cullen in the 1980s, not even Nina Carberry and Katie Walsh, despite their talent and their triumphs and their connections and their refusal to be limited by gender in a male-dominated sport. There was a good living to be made in the amateur ranks. It wasn't worth their while.

Shortly after Blackmore took the plunge, and long before she was a sensation, Katie O'Farrell turned professional too. Her story had a different arc.

"I would say I have a very unpopular opinion," says O'Farrell now. "I'm very tired of people using a name like Rachael Blackmore and saying, 'Racing has changed,' because it hasn't. Racing is lucky to have someone as good as Rachael where they can say, 'Ah look, there's one. If you're good enough you'll make it.' And I don't believe that's true."

"I know I was good enough. It was the hardest thing I ever did and I was no stran-

ger to hard work. I knew exactly what I was facing when I turned professional. It's still the hardest thing I have ever done. I suppose in many ways it almost broke me."

"I did everything I could to try to break into it. I moved to England because there were more opportunities. And, yeah, I had my big days and my big winners, but I knew there were situations where I was pushed aside because I was a female. I saw it daily, weekly. Nobody is ever going to say that to you. But then you start to believe, 'Maybe I'm not good enough'."

"Of course, it's different to 20 years ago. Of course, we've progressed. But where are the rest of the girls? Where are the girls coming through? You don't see it happening."

The excruciating difficulty of making a breakthrough in a cut-throat business is not gender specific. There are occasional fairytales in racing, but essentially, it is without sentiment. Young men struggle too. Scroll down the jump jockeys table in Ireland for last season and there are nearly 100 riders who rode fewer than 10 winners, most of them professionals.

The issue, though, is equal opportunity. Do women riders find it harder to get on good horses? O'Farrell is convinced of it.

"Yeah, 100 per cent. Don't get me wrong, there were loads of people who supported me too. There were people who would have liked to support me but didn't have the horses or they had owners who wanted a particular jockey. There's a lot of stuff that's out of your control and you just have to accept that," she says.

"But for a girl the obstacles are left, right and centre. If a lad gives a horse a bad ride he's just given it a bad ride. If a girl gives a horse a bad ride it's a much bigger deal. 'She wasn't strong enough,' you know, there's always handy excuses that people can pull out of the sky. I don't think it's fair, because girls have proved themselves time and again to be as good as guys. People like to glorify how far racing has come, but Rachael is the exception, not the rule."

Boys aim higher

Aine O'Connor has been riding as an amateur over jumps for the last 14 years, often in the silks of JP McManus. In her day job with Horse Racing Ireland, though, her role has been supporting young jockeys: training, education, holistic stuff, from every angle. In the last week she has been sifting through applications for their junior academy courses in the summer, unsurprised to see more girls than boys. In recent years, the numbers have been faithful to that trend.

At some point, though, all the chicks must fly the nest. O'Connor recalls when she was working in Race, the apprentice school, there was a workshop run by their sports psychologist that teased out the young riders' ambitions. The clear and startling outcome was that the boys were aiming higher.

"The lads were saying, 'Win a Gold Cup or a Grand National,'" says O'Connor, "and the girls were saying, 'Get my license, have a ride.' Their ambitions tended to be lower."

"In my opinion jockeys are far more equipped to make it now than they were 15 years ago with all the supports that are in place, but in my experience, girls are probably less inclined to step forward and look for help. It's like they don't feel worthy of it. It's like, 'Oh God, I've only had so many

rides. I'm not that well known."

"Girls tend to be, in my experience, less confident in their ability than the lads are and probably don't push themselves forward as much. I see a lot of girls coming through our courses and the standard of rider is just as high as the boys. There are so many good girls there but they're just not getting the opportunity. I don't think that's an industry problem, I think that's us as females probably not willing to put ourselves forward confidently."

O'Connor can see that reticence in herself, even after all these years of riding winners. Not every yard has a stable jockey, and many rides will be open to bids from agents or jockeys. But every one of those interventions will be a cold call and carry the threat of rejection.

Blackmore tells a story, from early in her career, when she rang a trainer looking for a ride on his horse in a bumper. The trainer had never heard of her and assumed she was a jockey's agent. The ride seemed to be available until Blackmore clarified that she was the jockey and she was immediately shut down.

"You'd see horses in races and you wouldn't pick up the phone to ring for them," says O'Connor, "even though there mightn't be anyone jockeyed up on them and it could be 11.50am [midday is declaration time]. You're thinking, 'Why would they want me?'"

"I think it's something that's maybe programmed in us. I don't know is it the fear of putting people out or that we're not confident in our abilities that way. I have spoken to other girls about this and they're kind of the same opinion. 'Oh, I don't want to be bothering people.'"

Trust

Just like O'Connor, Maxine O'Sullivan has been one of the leading amateur riders in the country over the last decade, and just like O'Connor, it suited her circumstances not to turn professional. Her father Eugene is a trainer, and selling point-to-point horses drives the economy of the yard. If O'Sullivan was a professional, she couldn't ride in those races.

Everyone's experiences are different; O'Sullivan's have been positive. She acknowledges the stream of opportunities her father supplied and the home-made advantage that conferred on her. "Aine didn't have a dad to give her rides, and Rachael didn't," she says. "I really admire

■ Clockwise from top left: Rachael Blackmore; Maxine O'Sullivan; Aine O'Connor and Katie O'Farrell. Below: Sarah Kavanagh has been a professional for half a dozen years. PHOTOGRAPHS: INPHO & GETTY IMAGES

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Aine and Rachael for that. They worked really hard and put themselves out there. They mightn't have felt like doing it, but they did. They got there."

At the track, and in point-to-points, there is a programme of races for women jockeys only, amounting to fewer than 20 races altogether. O'Sullivan wonders how "society" might view such an allowance, but she has no qualms about it. In her career, those races were a source of contacts and an opportunity to build trust. In racing, trust is fragile and propulsive all at once.

"I never found, in all my years, anyone having a problem with me for being a girl," says O'Sullivan. "I found they had a problem with me because I didn't give a horse a good ride – which I would have known myself. I know my qualities and I know my weaknesses. If you're good enough there's never been an issue with me that I can see."

"Rachael's success, I think, might have attracted more young girls – girls, maybe, that were always interested in showjumping or something and said to themselves, 'Do you know what? I want to be a jockey.' But it didn't mean that, all of a sudden, the phone is hopping, and trainers are ringing us because they think women are making horses go faster."

The number of professional women jump jockeys in Ireland remains extremely small. Aileen O'Sullivan has had 14 rides this season, but is without a winner in three years. Emma Twomey has drifted off the scene. Sarah Kavanagh has been a professional for half a dozen seasons, but this is the first season in which she has ridden more than one winner.

Racing is brutal

Last year, Caragh Monaghan joined the professional ranks. She had been part of the Meath squad that won the football All-Ireland, but horses were her passion. Gavin Cromwell gave her a start. In November she rode her first winner, a 40/1 screamer for Ian Patrick Donoghue.

"It's hard, but I love it – I absolutely love it," Monaghan says. "But it is very hard. It's hard to get rides, it's hard to get going. Sure, that's the way it's gone in Ireland now, it's so competitive. But it is probably harder for a female jockey to get going. There are trainers who are still a bit old-fashioned. A female jockey just needs that little bit more support – in that one trainer just pushes them and gets their name out there."

O'Farrell rode her last race nearly three years ago. She had tried her hand in England, first with Paul Nicholls and then with Olly Murphy, but it didn't take off. She came home, rode a handful of races, and cut the cord.

"When you get knocked down it takes a while to get going again," O'Farrell says. "Not even in terms of work but your own self-esteem. A sports psychologist [which is O'Farrell's profession now] helped me manage myself better and I think that was a big factor in helping me keep going as long as I did."

"I was heartbroken. I didn't want to give up at all. My spirit was broken. I tried so hard. I put so much into it. I was getting nothing back to keep me going. To keep me optimistic, enthused, to have a feeling of possibility. I'd lost it all from being knocked around. In my heart I wasn't done, but my body had had enough."

Racing is brutal. That part is unchanged too.