

The day Ronnie Delaney walked into Hartmann's life

Reporter **ANDREW CAREY** mingled with the stars at book launch

FOLLOWING a brief encounter with a sporting legend, a young Limerick athlete sat in the breakfast room of a hotel in the West of Ireland and tucked into two big breakfasts, several bowls of porridge and enough coffee to make you never want to have another cup, but meeting Ronnie Delaney, Ireland's Olympic gold medalist of 1956, would do that to you.

For Ger Hartmann this was the beginning of a career that would take him to the top of his athletic ability and then to the top of the sports

physiotherapy world, albeit through the intervention of an aardvark.

And for one of Limerick's finest, his story is encapsulated between the leaves of his new book, "Born to Perform".

Written on 300 A4 sheets as he locked himself away in Lanzarote, the story of Ger Hartmann and his pursuit of perfection, excellence and his aim to become the best ironman and triathlon athlete is told before a freak accident with the unseen aardvark where cycling on a highway in Florida changed his life.

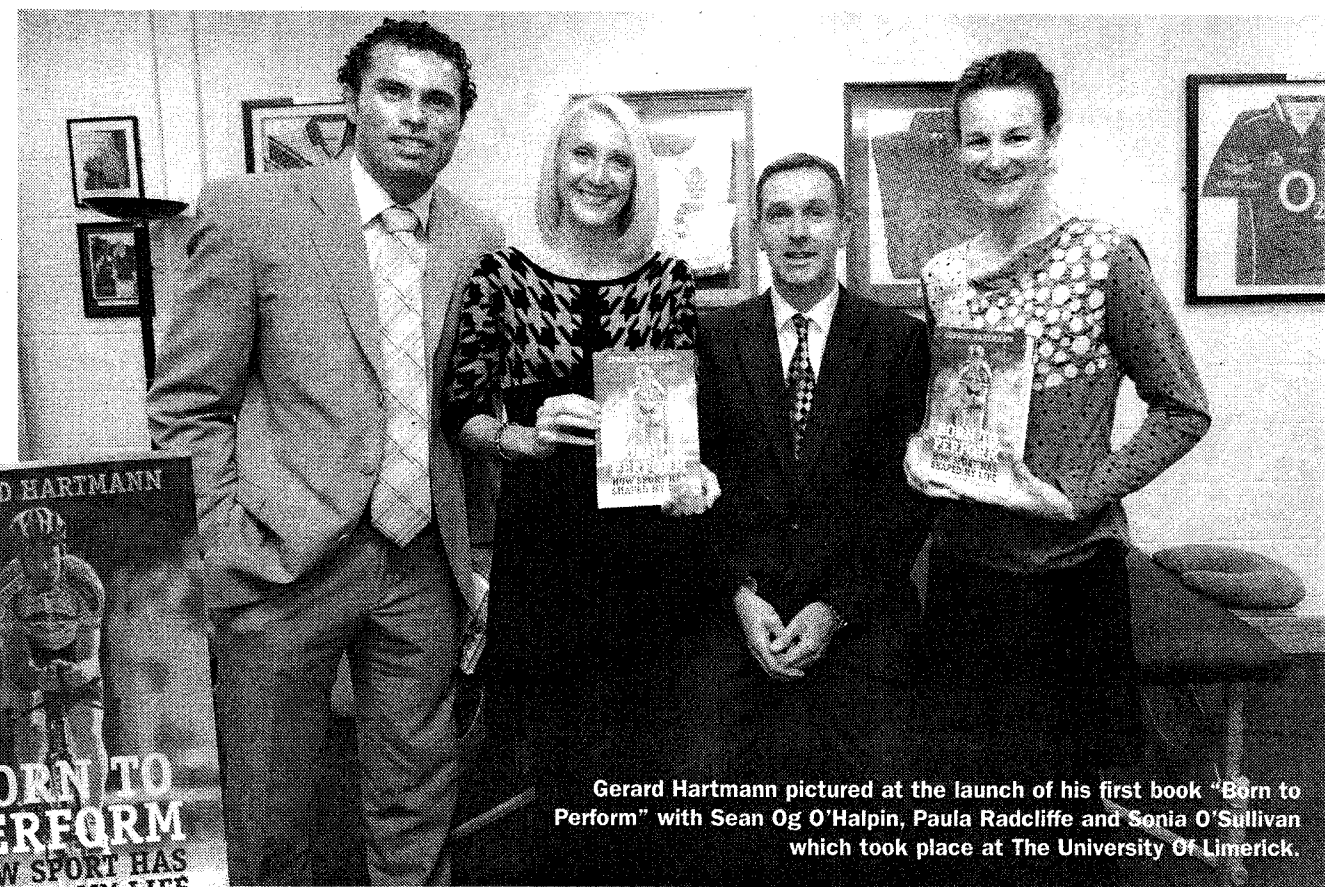
Today, Ger has located his International sports injury clinic at the University of Limerick, where he launched a sporting story befitting of Limerick through the wondrous memorabilia donated to him by some of the world's sporting elite.

And it was there that played host to the book launch, attended by a plethora of some of the finest athletes who came to pay tribute and speak warmly of the man with the power of healing.

As many paid tribute and told their own little story of encounters

with Ger, it was the man himself who told of his journey and "how sport shaped my life".

Ger moved his clinic from Patrick Street to the University campus over four years ago and he knows the importance of having the facilities



Gerard Hartmann pictured at the launch of his first book "Born to Perform" with Sean Og O'Hallpin, Paula Radcliffe and Sonia O'Sullivan which took place at The University Of Limerick.



around him.

"I have found that the new surroundings are fantastic and it's true that shedding new light on the clinic has been really great for me and for the people that come here. It makes me think how I operated between the five renovated floors in Patrick Street but I did, somehow".

But where did it all begin?

"I had that big breakfast and in

walked Ronnie Delaney, I was a big fan and remember reading and seeing the footage of his 1956 gold medal win, and thought that one day I really wanted to be an Olympian. We spoke for a few minutes. Funny thing was, Ronnie met my parents during the course of the morning and asked if I was their son. He felt I wouldn't do any good in the race after he witnessed the amount of food I had eaten. I actually went on to win".

Ger's athletic success continued through the years until reaching the top of his game with Irish triathlon titles and success at World Ironman, but through injury, as told in his book and etched on his face in the pictures that tell the story, he took a different, but similar, path and subsequently set up his sports injury clinic in Florida in the early 90s after qualifying there in massage therapy.

The ambition to return home was

high, so Ger moved lock stock and barrel back to Limerick to the setting of Patrick Street, where world-class athletes would beat a path in search of his healing hands.

But as well as being clients to his clinic, Ger considers those stars of the track and field to be his friends as he speaks of the collection of sporting memorabilia on display in the 3,000 square feet clinic and showroom that now holds the Hartmann collection.

From Patrick Street to UL and the beginning of a new era

"OVER the years in Patrick Street many people have been very good to give me tokens of their thanks through their sports items, I never asked or went seeking souvenirs, but they just gave them to me. I remember a number of years back, the people at the Civic Trust, Debbie Jacobs in particular, thought to compile the second volume on Limerick Commerce through the years and in it was a section on rugby and also, as it turned out, there was a section on the items of sporting reference at my clinic.

"Debbie put a lot of time in to the 18-page chapter that covered pictures from the walls of my Patrick Street clinic. In the book, she attributed all the photographs, scans and items to the Hartmann collection and so, the name was born and became the obvious choice today. When the details of the proposed development in the area, the Opera Centre became known, I had to find a new home as the clinic was located in the middle of the plans. I spoke to Dave Mahedy, head of sport at UL, to locate a new home for the clinic. It became quite clear that UL was the place to go and the way I see it, Limerick has the best sports facilities, just look at the Arena.

"The facilities are improving all the time and I believed this was a step up. A bright new home is good. When I brought it to Dave's attention the number of sports artefacts I had, we came up with

phase one of the plan to give all these sporting tributes a home and combine them with the clinic. I have more items in storage and I hope that we can find some more space".

Ger has a very special corner dedicated to the late Tim O'Brien, a proud Limerickman that had sport in his blood.

"There is a section for Tim and his Sporting Limerick concept, look at the way that has taken off, it's fantastic. He was a great credit to Limerick. I have had schools in contact asking if they could bring the children to come and see the collection. Open days, you name it, but it is open all the time so people just come and look all they want.

"Many come back. I had one message from a 92-year-old lady on her way down from Dublin asking if she could come to see the collection. If you thought you or I knew a bit about sport, you'd be wrong because this lady knew more than anyone I have ever met. It was great to see the joy and pleasure it brought to her. The commercial value of the collection is not important. It brings much more than that".

At the book launch were Sonia O'Sullivan, Eamon Coughlan, Jim Hogan, Paula Radcliffe, Sean Og O'Hallpin, members of the Munster Rugby squad, stars from the world of GAA, including Kilkenny manager Brian Coady and Jamsie

O'Connor, while Ger read a passage about Sean Kelly, also in attendance and that was to name but a few. "Some of the GAA lads come in and see the signed jerseys and can't believe that they're next to something from Sonia (O'Sullivan) or Paula (Radcliffe)".

Never in question, but if evidence of Limerick's sporting dominance and tradition was ever needed then a wander through the corridors, treatment rooms and indeed the main room of the Hartmann Clinic and Collection will provide all you need.

The book, tributed and endorsed by Dame Kelly Holmes, Paula Radcliffe, Henry Shefflin, Frank O'Mara, Ronan O'Gara and many more, recalls stories and the journey taken by both Ger and the athletes he has worked with and his story to date. In the museum, the centrepiece is the beautiful silver medal Sonia O'Sullivan won over 5,000 metres at the Sydney Olympics, along with her spikes and tracksuit. Next to that are the spikes and running vest worn by Eamon Coughlan in his world indoor mile record of 3:49.78 back in 1983. There are also the two World Indoor gold medals won by Limerick native Frank O'Mara over 3,000 metres, in 1987 and 1991, and the spikes worn by Derval O'Rourke during her European 100 metre hurdles silver medal run last summer. The opposite side contains All-Ireland winning jerseys and boots from Cork's Seán Óg O'Hallpin and Kerry's Séamus

Moynihan.

Ger has had a long-standing relationship with the Olympics through many ambits and with several international teams. He has a signed blazer from the 1984 Olympian Carl Lewis, as well as signed items from the British and Irish Olympic teams. But Ger is looking to the future and the 2012 Olympics.

"As soon as I heard that London had got the Olympics for 2012 I got very excited. We'll never again have an Olympics so close to our own back door. That got me realising a few things, that this is a huge opportunity for Irish sport and also a chance for my clinic to help in that opportunity.

"The 2012 games is less than 12 months away. And I honestly feel Limerick is in a great position to benefit, especially with Shannon airport so close, and all the facilities available at the university. The way I see it, Limerick has the best sports facility in Ireland. The swimming pool is being expanded and there are six new astroturf pitches going in, all right on campus. You also have the river-bank run within 200 metres, plus the track, dining facilities and accommodation".

The book tells it all. The royalty proceeds of "Born to Perform" will go to Console, the charity for supporting people in suicidal crisis of those bereaved from suicide, a charity that Ger nominated having lost a number of friends to suicide.