

ATHLETICS 1979 IAAF WORLD CROSS COUNTRY CHAMPIONSHIP

'I saw grown men cry that day'

Friday marks the 30th anniversary of the day when John Treacy won the World Cross Country Championships in Limerick. **Brian McDonnell** gathered the memories of Ronnie Long who played a central role in that historic event

THIS week, as the Irish athletic fraternity prepares to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the seventh IAAF World Cross Country Championships, which were held in Limerick on March 27, 1979, Ronnie Long could be forgiven for cracking a wry smile.

Thirty years ago Long, who was PRO for the 1979 Kerrygold World Cross Country Championship, was as responsible as anyone for turning Greenpark Racecourse into a whirlpool of noisy delight.

This week the 73-year-old spent a few quiet days on the Renvyle Peninsula in Connemara. The contrast between there and then couldn't be greater - Connemara is far from the 30,000-strong madding crowd attracted to Limerick 30 years ago.

There were, of course, plenty of highlights: Waterford's John Treacy streaked to a world title, the event pumped £500,000 into the Limerick economy and the £50,000 race profit was used to purchase the BLE offices on Prospect Road in Dublin (sold recently for €1.2 million). But what stands out in Ronnie Long's mind 30 years later was the response of the Limerick people to the event.

"What made it so special was the tremendous effort every one made," Ronnie Long explained this week.

"There were so many volunteers. I couldn't walk down the street, but people were coming up to me and offering to help in any way they could. That's what made it so special: everyone knew what the event would mean to Limerick.

"Like lots of other people I worked on it every day for two years - there really was a tremendous amount of work involved. I saw grown men crying that day; that made all the work worthwhile seeing so much emotion.

"The minute John Treacy won in Glasgow I said to myself that would add an extra 15,000 to the gate, but in saying that I was always confident that we would get a large crowd. Limerick people will always support a sporting event like it. If there were two flies going up a wall in Limerick the local people would come out to support it. The event was held in Ire-



John Treacy (in 1979): "The crowd was great encouragement, but it was a little scary coming towards the end as I thought I would be trod on."

LIMERICK LEADER

land twice since, once in Belfast and once in Dublin, and they didn't get a quarter of the crowd we did.

"The 30,000 that turned up in Limerick hasn't been beaten since and nowhere else has even come close."

Some contend that John Treacy's found his greatest performance at the 1984 Olympics, but surely an argument could also be made to call March 27, 1979 his defining day.

Twelve months earlier Treacy had become the youngest ever winner of the World Cross Country championship when he surprised many to win the 1978 renewal at Bellahouston in Glasgow. In '79 Treacy was the favourite, the marked man.

The 1977 champion, Belgium's Leon Schotts, took an early lead, but on the second of the five laps (seven miles in all) Treacy streaked into a 100-metre lead which he would never relinquish.

Indeed John Treacy treasures to this day the look on Schotts' face and the reaction of the partisan crowd as he strode past the Belgian.

The hysterical crowds, who strained at the barricades to celebrate Treacy's magnificent performance, fell into a horror-struck silence when Treacy slipped in the mud on a sharp turn, but regained their voice when Treacy sprang up and wiped a fistful of grassy mud off his singlet.

As Treacy edged closer to the finish a wildly encroaching crowd forced Treacy to run farther and farther from the ropes in an attempt to elude the reaching arms of his ecstatic countrymen. Immediately after the race John Treacy told the Limerick Leader: "The crowd was great encouragement, but it was a little scary coming towards the end as I thought I would be trod on."

It was an extraordinary perform-

ance especially since warm rains had descended the day preceding the race and churned the course into mud.

"I remember the athletes giving out to me on the Friday complaining that the course was going to be too fast," recalls Ronnie Long.

"Then it rained for 24 hours before the event and they were down to their knees in parts of it. I was expecting John Treacy to win and once he broke clear he was gone; I don't think it was ever in doubt. I felt very sorry for Neil Cusack (from Shelbourne Park in Limerick). He ran 11 times in the event, but didn't qualify that season. He was heart broken."

Despite Neil Cusack's disappointment Ireland, inspired by 37-year-old Danny McDaid (10th), finished second in the team event - a team which featured Limerick's Mick O'Shea (46th) while another local, Paul Moloney, came 20th in the juniors.

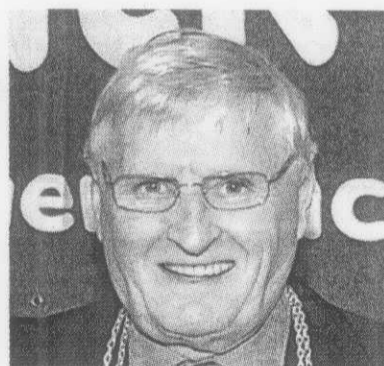
Ronnie was involved in the presentation made by Bill Coughlan and Al Guy to the IAAF congress in 1977 - Ireland pleaded its case that day and Long always had Limerick in mind as a potential venue.

"We looked for it at a time when I was PRO for the national association," explained Ronnie Long.

"Personally I was pushing hard for it and, to be honest, if I wasn't there I don't think we would have got it. I took the whole thing by the neck and got it brought to Limerick.

"A few days later I called into the Limerick Leader offices and told Charlie Mulqueen about it. He thought I was pulling his leg. I suppose the idea of Limerick hosting the world championship with all the top athletes in the world was a little hard to believe."

The logistics involved in hosting the World Cross Country Championships



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meant work, lots of it.

A five-man committee, consisting of Ronnie Long, Bernie Hartigan, Liam Hennessy, Declan O'Donoghue and Trevor Morrow ploughed through a mountain of work in Limerick - 12 months before the race Long contacted every sporting organisation in the province asking them not to schedule any event in direct competition with the World Cross Country Championships. He looked for 100 per cent support and he got it.

While the organisers faced an intimidating work load the Irish postal workers strike at the time created further havoc.

Ronnie Long, however, came up with an ingenious solution: "I could not tell this story then, but I suppose I can tell it now. Dealing with entries and so on was very difficult. I had to communicate with every journalist in the world and how I managed it was through the Aer Lingus crews in Shannon. When they landed in London they would post letters for me and I also got my hands on a London address that the Aer Lingus crews

could collect post from for me. I must say though that the local post office people helped us; they stood on their heads for us because they knew what this meant to Limerick.

"I also had another problem in that I had no way of notifying people about meetings or anything like that. I met with Brendan Halligan (then editor of the Limerick Leader) and he allowed me to write an article in the Leader every week to let people know where and when meetings would take place. That really worked a dream for us."

The influx of foreign press, 300, forced an 80-strong RTÉ crew to be billeted as far away as Ennis while the Army, FCA and Gardai were called on to act as stewards for the event.

But when Israel entered a team the organisers were presented with another headache - Israeli athletes were a stated target of Islamic extremists at the time.

"Israel decided to send a team and we had to think about how we were going to handle that," explained Ronnie Long.

"So what we did was we got a couple of drivers, put them into a car, sent them up to Connemara one day and then the Ring of Kerry the next. That way no one knew where they were so no one could get at them."

Although the Post Office had agreed to issue a commemorative stamp in honour of the occasion because of the postal strike it was only publicly issued five months after the championships - Ronnie Long had contacted every TD and Senator in the country to ensure that the World Cross Country Championships would have a commemorative stamp while he also made sure, from a collector's point of view, that the stamp was actually produced on the day of the race.

1979 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP RESULTS

Long Race

Men's Individual

Gold - John Treacy (IRL) 37:20 min
Silver - B. Malinowski (POL) 37:29 min
Bronze - A. Antipov (URS) 37:30 min

Women's Individual

Gold - Grete Waitz (NOR) 16:48 min
Silver - Raisa Smekhnova (URS) 17:14 min
Bronze - Ellison Goodall (USA) 17:18 min

Men's Team

Gold - England
Silver - Ireland
Bronze - Soviet Union
Irish Team: John Treacy (1st), Danny McDaid (11th), Gerry Deegan (43rd), Mick O'Shea (46th), Donal Walsh (47th) & Tony Brien (50th) - 198pts.

Women's Team

Gold - United States
Silver - Soviet Union
Bronze - England

Junior Race

Men's Individual

Gold - Eddy de Pauw (BEL) 23:02 min
Silver - Steve Binns (ENG) 23:09 min
Bronze - Ildar Denikeyev (URS) 23:20 min

Men's Team

Gold - Spain
Silver - England
Bronze - Soviet Union