

# The bright young things who faded from view



In December 2010, six young Irish distance runners claimed U23 gold at the European Cross Country Championships, but despite their relative youth, most of them have now retired from the sport. What lessons can be learned from how their careers played out? **Cathal Dennehy** tracked them down to find out

At first he thought it was a joke, and Brendan O'Neill didn't find it very funny. It was December 2010 in Albufeira, Portugal, and the Dubliner had just crossed the line to finish 13th in the U23 race at the European Cross Country Championships when he was approached by his teammate David Rooney. "We won," said Rooney. "Fck off," said O'Neill, clearly annoyed. "Don't joke about something like that." David McCarthy, meanwhile, was already making his way through the mixed zone, the Waterford man in no mood to talk to the media after finishing 11th and falling well short of an individual medal. "Well done," said an Irish voice in the crowd, which caused him to swivel his head. "Ye won."

McCarthy stopped dead in his tracks, did an about turn and hurried back to his teammates at the finish. When he got there, he knew the voice wasn't lying. These six Irish lads — McCarthy, O'Neill, Rooney, John Coghlan, Michael Mulhare and Ciarán Ó Lionáird — were champions of Europe. Even now, seven years on, the images are vivid, the passage of time only enhancing each scene with a warm, nostalgic filter. They remember their faces plastered across the front pages the next day — the six friends with bright smiles, big ambitions, and the best years still ahead of them. They remember appearing on *The Late Late Show* and being VIP guests of *The Script* at their concert in Dublin. When the dust settled on their achievement, they looked to the future and envisioned sponsorship deals, Olympic appearances, and more medal-winning heroics

— all this just a pit stop on their way to the summit. But readers who've already traversed the minefield of their 20s might know how this one ends — how life is not so much a wind sweeping you along to your intended destination but a hurricane that sends you hurtling all over. The place you usually wind up at is one you never considered. "I do have a bit of regret," says David Rooney. "I look back and wish we could have done that at senior level." And he adds, through the wretched wisdom of experience: "It doesn't always work out that way."

More often than not, the end sneaks up on you — it arrives at the door of elite sportspeople without an invitation. Some, of course, are lucky. They cherry-pick a date deep in the distant future, kiss goodbye to their obsession and walk away content with their lot. But that's rare. More often, whether it's through the encroachment of injuries, career obligations or the tap running dry on desire, they leave harbouring a boatload of what-ifs. The facts are simple, and rather startling: of the six athletes on that golden team who are all still in their late 20s — just one is still competing. Two are fully retired, two are mostly retired, one is planning a comeback, while the other is still going. Ciarán Ó Lionáird knew he was done in July last year, a chronic, creaking pain in his Achilles tendon forcing him to accept the end. "I knew my time was up," he says. "Were there things I would have liked to do in the sport? Sure, but I gave it a good go."



Of the six, Ó Lionáird's career was the one that blossomed most in the aftermath of the gold medal. In 2011 he reached the 1,500m final at the World Championships, signed a professional contract and went to train with world-beating athletes like Mo Farah at the Nike Oregon Project in Portland. But his body was unable to cope with the training intensity and the following year he moved 100 miles south to Eugene to the Nike Oregon Track Club, which helped revive his career and saw him win a European indoor bronze medal over 3,000m in 2013. The only one of the six to run at the Olympics, that dream turned into a nightmare when Ó Lionáird trailed home last in his 1,500m heat at London 2012 while nursing an injured Achilles. He travelled to Sweden for surgery, rehabled for all he was worth with renowned Limerick therapist Ger Hartmann, who told him he'd be running with pain for the rest of his career. In the end, at just 28, Ó Lionáird accepted the inevitable. These days he works as a product line manager in per-

formance footwear for the Jordan brand at Nike's headquarters in Oregon, and he admits the 9-to-5 grind took some getting used to. "I feel like I'm in year one of a whole new life," he says. "But as obsessed as I was, I knew early on that I wanted to access things outside of running through running so I wasn't left hanging when my career was over. You spend a lot of time on your own when you're running, and the biggest change is being around people all the time and learning to interact." Ó Lionáird admits he was lucky — reaching the level he did brought substantial support from Nike — but for others, like Brendan O'Neill, the financial burden of chasing the dream became unsustainable. "Guys in college, they're often bright-eyed and excited about going for it, but there are very real challenges to run certain times and you have to get into the right situation," says O'Neill. "As soon as I finished college I felt the economic reality of the walls caving in."

O'Neill graduated from Dublin City University before following Ó Lionáird to Florida State University to do a master's, but at the age of 24 he said goodbye to his team for the final time and was left with a troubling question: what now? "I felt the rug being pulled from under my feet and I felt that loneliness: now I'm on my own," he says. After working with Nike in Portland for a year he then returned to Dublin and got a grip on what was needed to make it as an international athlete. He spent time in Holland training with the Melbourne Track Club — a collection of world-class distance runners — and thought about joining them to be coached by Nic Bideau, the husband of Sonia O'Sullivan. But to sustain that lifestyle for just one year would have cost upwards of €25,000. "Where was that going to come from? As soon as I saw how hard they were training, I realised it wasn't possible for me to work full-time and do the same training." O'Neill took a job in Dublin, and each day he'd drag himself out for runs before and

after work before deciding, in 2015, that he'd had enough of chasing two rabbits and catching none. "I could ignore the writing on the wall and blindly go after running, then start a career at 32 and find it very difficult, or I could focus full-time on other opportunities and be happy with what I got out of running," he says. "I tried as long as I could to make it work and hold the walls but it got to the point it took too much energy." For Michael Mulhare, the issue wasn't so much financial walls caving in as his own body, though his story raises questions about cracks in the system that talented athletes like him are falling through. The Laois man was the youngest athlete on the gold-medal-winning team and finished as third Irishman. He progressed well in the years after, finishing 15th at senior level at the 2013 European Cross Country, but weeks after his knee began to throb. "I fractured my patella and had cartilage damage," he says. "The injuries put every-

thing on hold and made me realise that running can't be forever." In 2014 Mulhare grew frustrated as his injury was misdiagnosed until an MRI scan confirmed the problem required surgery. He hasn't raced since, but still gets out for a 40-minute run twice a week, usually to clear his head at the end of the 13-hour days he puts in at his accountancy job in Dublin. "I hope to get back, even if it's only on a national level," he says. "But working has taken preference." What bothers him most isn't how things worked out for him, but how he was left to walk that path alone. "The minute anything goes wrong, you're kind of discarded," he says. "That's the way I felt: you're injured and you're no good to us anymore, even though nine months before that you were one of the top people in Europe." He'd like to see more funding channelled towards athletes trying to reach the top tier rather than those already there, and more support for those who fall down the well of injury.

"It's more of a reward system to reach a certain level and then you get a pat on the back and support," he says. "Athletes should have some protection if something goes wrong." It went wrong for him, just like it went wrong for David Rooney, the fourth scoring member when the team won. In the years after the Dubliner developed into an international-level athlete while on scholarship at McNeese State University in Louisiana, and in 2012 Rooney finished an outstanding seventh in the NCAA Cross Country — a race featuring the best collegiate talent in America each year. "That allowed him to join a professional running group in Arizona after graduating but his true talent never bloomed in that environment. I found the professional life very tough," he says. "I got injured and didn't produce the results." He returned to Ireland in 2015 but injuries and the lack of a group environment, which he had grown accustomed to in the US, made running an unattractive prospect. He hasn't raced since.

"It hasn't gone the way I thought, but that's on me," he admits. "I'm not blaming the system, but it's a lot harder when you come back here. You have to be very self-motivated and life takes over." When it comes to success as a distance runner, there's an unfortunate paradox in play for many Irish athletes. It takes many years of high-volume training to reach your peak — which usually arrives in your late 20s or early 30s — but long before that most find the demands of full-time work incompatible with 100-mile weeks, at least those who want any kind of life outside the sport. "The only way is if athletes can train consistently for several years," says Brendan O'Neill. "You need a flexible working arrangement and if you could tie that together with a world-class coach and athletes training together, it'd have a huge effect." He cites the approach taken by Gary Keegan during his time at the Institute of Sport, who helped Irish international Mark Christie secure

**GOLDEN BOYS:** Ireland's Men's U23 gold medal-winning team from 2010: David Rooney, Brendan O'Neill, David McCarthy, Michael Mulhare, John Coghlan, and Ciarán Ó Lionáird. Eight years on, and four of the six are no longer running competitively. Coghlan continues to complete while McCarthy is preparing a return.

part-time work with Microsoft to enable him to further his career while also training like an elite. O'Neill has heard the usual lines people use to explain the distance-running decline, and he's not buying them. "It's not that athletes aren't training hard enough or athletes don't believe in themselves and I get annoyed when I hear that," he says. "No amount of belief will do anything if you can't get a good night's sleep and pay your rent. That's the crux of the whole problem." His advice for runners following his path: "Make the absolute most of your college years. You don't realise how good it is until you finish." David McCarthy knows just how much of a twilight zone those post-collegiate years can be. Since leaving Providence College in Rhode Island, he struggled to replicate the same training environment back in Ireland, although he showed many flickers of brilliance — most notably at the World Indoor Championships in 2014, where he narrowly missed the 1,500m final. But in 2016, when the door shut on his Olympic dream and McCarthy ran himself into a hole by overtraining, he decided that was it: he didn't want to run anymore. And for the best part of two years, he didn't, though in recent weeks he's had a change of heart and is now preparing for a comeback. "When I walked away there was no begrudgery," he says. "I never fell out of love with the sport because of all it gave me, and before I could point fingers at anyone else I'd have to point fingers at myself." In sport, retirement is often spoken about in grieving terms, but overlooked in that is what it often does for self-development. During his time off McCarthy reconnected with long-lost friends, helped out on the family farm and started a course to become a secondary school teacher. "The time off gave me a chance to say to myself: 'Dave, there's a life out there for you besides running. Don't worry about that. I never knew that, I had to go see it for myself.'" Rooney too, has gained a more balanced perspective since ditching athletics, and his latest passion is the home-less crisis. On his way to and

from his retail job in Dublin City, he passes the hordes sleeping rough and feels compelled to act. He protested outside the Dáil to highlight the issue and he spent Christmas Day volunteering at a shelter. "I see the suffering every day and I want to make a difference," he says. "Running is a very selfish sport, but when you get out of it you start opening your eyes a little bit."

John Coghlan — the one member of the team to stay in the sport throughout the last seven years — believes his best days are yet to come. Coached by his dad — former world 5,000m champion Eamonn — he faced the same fork in the road his teammates did in his mid-20s but decided that as he made tracks in his working life there would always be room for competitive running. "I wasn't making the Olympics or Europeans on the track so you eventually have to grow up and start earning money," he says. "There are some people who hang on trying to be professional athletes even though they're not, and they're kidding themselves." Coghlan is a category manager for Micks-Garage, an online store for car parts and accessories, and he believes it's possible to run fast while working full-time. "There is a transition period, and it was about six months before I was able to run feeling good but at the end of the day, get on with it," he says. "I still think I can work a 9-5 and run a 2:15 marathon. I have the ability to do that." When he reflects on how things have gone for the golden team of 2010, he believes, like Mulhare, that support from Athletics Ireland should trickle down far deeper than it does. "Funding is basically a congratulations — well done, you've reached a target, here you go. If people want to go to a race, and want 50 quid for a hotel room, it should be open to that — open to everyone and not

just elite." Ó Lionáird, meanwhile, believes athletes must be willing to invest in themselves. "If you're waiting around for Athletics Ireland, they're never going to have the resources to set it up for you like an Oregon Project," he says. "Look at the Europeans who've been successful: they've taken a bet on themselves and broken away." For him, making it in athletics comes down to personal responsibility. "If you look at anybody who's successful in any field, it's usually down to the person themselves deciding what is expected of them to do something special." Mulhare advises young athletes to develop their whole lives, not just running: "When you're all in and it doesn't go right, a lot of people end up in a bad way and walk away from the sport. They should always have some distractions." Knowing what he now knows, McCarthy urges athletes to take the long-term view. "I look back on my career and the next race was always the big race," he says. "But we can't all be Olympic champions or win the race, so look at success at self-development." Rooney doesn't mince his words when it comes to what's required: "If you want to achieve good times, you have to get out there and fucking do it on your own. It's a lonely sport, but that's how it is in Ireland." Like the others, Rooney reflects on that golden day in Albufeira with fond memories, and he urges younger athletes to treasure such experiences. "Don't take it for granted, because you'll get older, things will change and life will take over," he says. "Enjoy the moment." For Coghlan and McCarthy, the hope is that the best days are ahead, but for others, like O'Neill and Rooney, that special Sunday will go down as the greatest gift they got from the sport. "It's the thing I'll hang my hat on, the highlight of my career," says O'Neill. A sentiment echoed by Rooney: "When I'm 60 years old, if I do fuck all again, at least I can say I did that. "It's something I'll always cherish."



Ireland's Ciarán Ó Lionáird finishing in 11th during his heat of the Men's 1,500m event at the 2012 World Indoors in Istanbul. Ó Lionáird retired in 2017.