

The term 'old school' could almost have been coined to describe Donie Walsh and his approach to distance running. Initially as an athlete and latterly as a coach he has been active at the heart of Irish athletics for more than 40 years and his contribution to the sport, particularly in his native Cork, has been substantial. When he recalls his days as one of the country's premier distance runners, he does so with disarming clarity and honesty.

His first foray into competitive athletics was in 1964 when he entered and won an 800m race at the North Mon Schools Sports Day. Having had a small taste of success on the track, Walsh gradually took on more challenging opposition in South Munster and Munster Colleges' meets with his form continuing on an upward curve as he gained more experience.

An early indication of his cross-country potential

across the Atlantic would be in his best interests. Many years later Walsh was able to pass on the compliment when he introduced Marcus O'Sullivan to the same university.

Marcus maintains his links with Villanova to this day as head coach to their cross-country and track and field teams. Walsh says, "Marcus was the only athlete I ever recommended to go to Villanova but if I thought anyone else was good enough, I would recommend them to go to because I know Marcus would look after them."

Having settled well at Villanova, Walsh combined his studies with representing both college and country with increasing success. He was a little unlucky at the World University Games in Turin in 1970 where he was just out-sprinted by Britain's Mike Tagg for a bronze medal over 10,000m.

In 1971 the Cork native had what he describes as his best ever collegiate cross-country season. At the conclusion of the campaign he was just beaten into

Dashing Donie

A senior international by his 20th birthday, Donie Walsh went on to represent Ireland in the 1972 Munich Olympic marathon and win World Cross-Country silver with Ireland in 1979, writes Mick Rice

came not long afterwards. "The first cross-country race I ever ran in was a club race for the Fr. Matthew's Club and I was fourth. I was disappointed and I thought I should have won." Having been advised about pacing his effort more effectively, his record in cross-country races improved dramatically. He smiles now remembering, "I never lost a championship race under the age of 18 in cross-country and that included two schools, two colleges and two All-Ireland titles."

Leevale AC was founded in 1967 from the amalgamation of the Hilltown and Fr. Matthew's athletic clubs. Walsh progressed rapidly with his new club and recalls an early success. "In 1967 we had a trial for the Europa Cup. I was still a junior at the time and I knew I wasn't good enough to win the 5,000m so I ran the 10,000m. I won that race up in Belfield in 30:52. This performance was enough to rank Walsh as 6th in Europe and 10th in the World junior ranks.

In the spring of 1968, the All Ireland cross-country championships took place in Mallow, Co. Cork. In these first national championships under BLE rules, Walsh managed to finish in a very impressive 6th position. He was then selected on the Irish senior team for the International Cross Country Championships in Tunisia, further enhancing his already impressive international credentials.

In September that year Walsh decided to expand his horizons and he accepted an offer of a scholarship at Villanova University near Philadelphia. Cobh native and Villanova scholar Ian Hamilton had convinced Walsh that the move

second place by the renowned American runner Steve Prefontaine at the NCAA Championships over a six miles course in Knoxville, Tennessee. The high-class field included many future American Olympians.

The same year, Walsh represented Ireland at the senior European Championships in Helsinki, where he placed 21st in the 10,000m in a time of 28:52.6. Never one to pass up a competitive opportunity in those days he raced frequently and ran hard each time. "I remember one time when I was back home, I ran 52 races in a single year," he says. Asked about the pressures of running within the American collegiate system Walsh said: "I think it's very much up to the individual. I never had any problem when I was in the States, 'cos I wanted to go to the States and I wanted to go to the Olympics and that was the way to go and that was it."

Walsh targeted the 10,000m at the 1972 Munich Olympics. "I was training for the 10,000m but then I got injured around Christmas time of 1971 and I missed a load of training. The American NCAA track and field championships were held a few months later and the 10,000m qualifying time for the games was 28:50. Neil Cusack and myself decided that we would take alternate laps. We burnt off most of the field and it was down to four of us. With about six laps to go I was leading but I was outspurred by two chaps on the last lap and I ran 28:53."

Undeterred by his failure to make the Olympic qualifying time over 10,000m, Walsh decided to go for the marathon instead. "I always had a backup plan. I used to run twenty miles every weekend and I said to myself that I'd come home and run the



County race he selects the 1978 All-Ireland Championships that were held outside Portlaoise.

Neil Cusack was favourite to win the title that day having beaten Walsh in the Munster Championships just a few weeks previously. After a ding-dong battle over a hilly course, Walsh made a break late in the race to collect his fourth All-Ireland cross-country championship. Walsh finds it harder to pick out a single favourite memory from his track racing days, but fondly recalls hard fought races at the Cork City Sports, a furious battle with Dessie McGann in the Irish Championship 10,000m and a number of occasions when Cork teams took on their Dublin counterparts on the track, as being especially memorable.

These days Walsh coaches young athletes for his beloved Leevale AC in Cork and serves on the Irish Universities Athletics Association Committee of the AAI. He continues to invest more back into the sport of athletics that he ever earned from it. If Walsh is 'old school' we could do with an entire class of his kind. ■