

# THE IRISH TRADITION LIVES STRONG THIS ST. PATRICK'S DAY

By DON O'SIKORSKI

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The country of Ireland is certainly well-known for producing worthwhile commodities. Beyond potatoes and Guinness Stout, Ireland also carries a proud tradition of excellence in distance running. With 40 sub-4 minute milers living in a country of just 4.1 million people, Ireland might certainly boast the best track runner to resident ratio anywhere. Villanova University would become a prominent pipeline for the Irish athlete to study and compete in America, and soon a tradition was born. Many of the first students to attend Villanova University were of Irish descent, and given the strong tradition of distance running excellence developed by the Wildcats' legendary track coach Jumbo Elliott, young Irish scholar-athletes began to descend upon the Villanova campus to earn degrees and become outstanding track stars. In honor of St. Patrick's Day, here's a look at the stellar careers of four of the greatest Irish milers of our time.

**RON DELANEY** – Delaney was a middle distance specialist best known for earning a gold medal in the 1956 Olympic Games 1,500 meter championships in Melbourne. Born in Arklow and growing up in Dublin, a young Delaney was the first of the Irish Pipeline attending Villanova University and under the guidance of Elliott, earned three NCAA titles and reached the final in the 1500 meter distance at the 1954 European Championships. Upon his graduation, Delaney became the seventh runner in history to run under the 4 minute mark for the mile. Yet he was not a lock to represent his native country in the 1956 Olympic Games. Struggling through the qualifying process, Delaney earned a place in the Olympic 1500 meter final, which featured heavy favorite John Landy of Australia. Delaney stayed in contention until the race's final lap before moving in front during the final stretch to win in a new Olympic record of 3:41.2. Delaney would continue to race well, earning four consecutive AAU championships and four Irish national titles in the mile. He would also post an impressive streak of 40 consecutive track races without a loss and later retire as one of the greatest middle distance runners of his day.

**EAMONN COGHLAN** – Known as the "Chairman of The Boards" for his outstanding ability to run well indoors, Coghlan is a 4-time Olympian and world champion on the track. Born in Drimnagh, Coghlan is now a naturalized United States citizen. Earning Irish national titles at both 1500 and 5000 meters as a teenager, Coghlan attended Villanova on scholarship and thrived under Elliott's' tutelage. At Villanova, Coghlan won four NCAA titles and soon joined the sub 4 mile club, setting a new Irish record of 3:53.2 in 1975. Coghlan would later go on to set the world record in the indoor mile run twice, running 3:50.6 in 1981 and then posting an amazing 3:49.78 clocking in 1983 at New Jersey's Meadowlands Arena, a mark that stood for 14 years. Until last year, it was the fastest mile ever run in the United States (Daniel Komen's 3:48.28 in Eugene, Oregon on June 10, 2007 finally bettered that mark). Coughlin's run is one of only four sub-3:50 miles run on American soil. Coghlan also showed his range in winning the 1983 World Championships at the 5,000 meter distance and earning two fourth places in the Olympic Games (at 1500 meters in 1976 and at 5000 meters in 1980). Coghlan also claimed a record seven wins at the world famous Wanamaker Mile at the Millrose Games in New York City's Madison Square Garden between 1977 and 1987. In 1994, Coghlan became the first man over the age of 40 to run a sub-four-minute mile indoors, running 3:58.15 at Harvard University's track on his 41<sup>st</sup> birthday. Coghlan retired from competitive racing with a total of 74 sub-4 minute miles and 11 Irish national titles to his credit.

**MARCUS O'SULLIVAN** – O'Sullivan, like Delaney and Coghlan before him, also competed for Villanova. A participant in four Olympic Games, O'Sullivan earned three gold medals at the 1500 meter distance in the World Indoor Championships. With a running resume boasting 101 sub 4 minute miles, O'Sullivan ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> all-time behind only Steve Scott and John Walker in that category. O'Sullivan represented Ireland at the Olympic Games in 1984, 1988, 1992, and 1996 at both the 800 and 1500 meter distances, reaching the 1500 meter final at the 1988 Seoul Olympics. In 1989, O'Sullivan posted an indoor world record of 3:35.4 for 1500 meters. Like Coghlan a fierce competitor indoors, O'Sullivan kept the Irish tradition alive by winning five Wanamaker Mile titles of his own (1986, 1988-90, 1992). O'Sullivan is also part of Ireland's world record team in the 4x1 Mile Relay, as the team of Coghlan, Ray Flynn, Frank O'Mara, and O'Sullivan ran 15:49.08 in Dublin in August 1985. O'Sullivan is currently the head Cross-Country and Track Coach at his Alma mata Villanova University.

**SONIA O'SULLIVAN** – Let's not forget the Irish ladies. O'Sullivan (no relation to Marcus) grew up in Cork County and won her first gold medal in the Irish Cross Country Championships at the age of seventeen. Also a strong part of the Irish tradition at Villanova, O'Sullivan would later earn a gold medal at the 1995 World Athletics Championships, a silver medal at the 2000 Olympic Games, three gold medals at the European Track Championships, and two gold medals at the World Cross-Country Championships. O'Sullivan continues to compete at a world class level but has hinted at retirement from competitive running in the near future.

These Irish runners are just some of the strong and proud tradition of Irish distance running stars. This St. Patrick's Day, lace up your shoes, wear something green and head out the door to your local track. Run one mile as fast as you can, then later that evening, lift a pint of Guinness to relive your aching muscles and toast the proud tradition of Irish distance running.

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