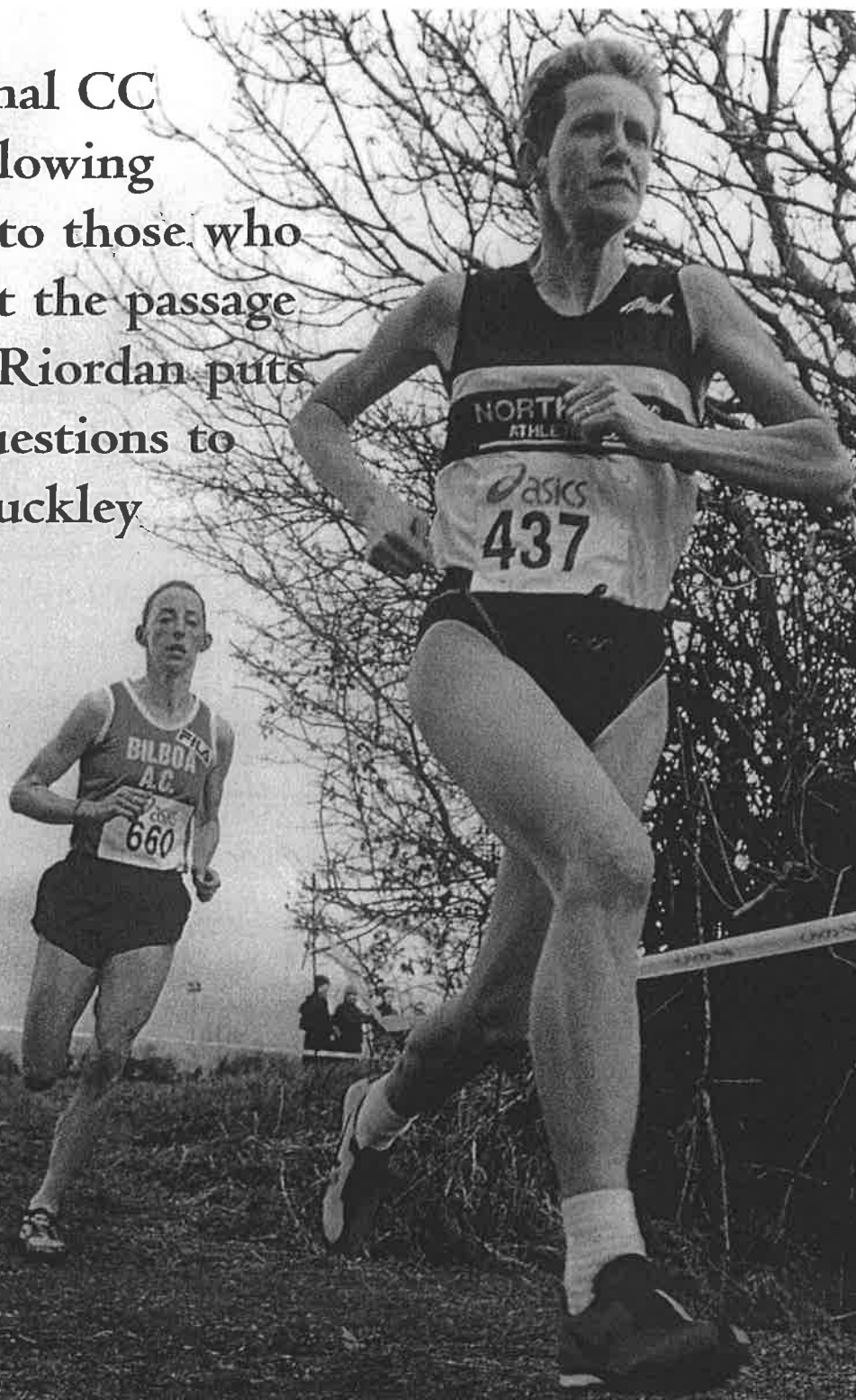


STAYING AT IT

The new National CC champion is a glowing encouragement to those who might fret about the passage of years. Ian O'Riordan puts some age-old questions to Anne Keenan Buckley



PHOTOGRAPHS: DAVID MAHER, SPORTSFILE

For Anne Keenan Buckley, winning the gold medal at the National Senior Cross Country championships last month must be the

most satisfying achievement of her long career. For followers of athletics, it is one of the most inspiring achievements of all time.

At aged 38, and with a string of seven silver medals in her cabinet, Anne proved to herself and all those watching that good things can come to those who

wait - and work at it. The way she pulled in front in those decisive final metres, leaving in her wake Rosemary Ryan, 14 years her junior, was simply awesome.

Much has been written in this

has she managed to climb back to the top of her sport? The reasons, it appears, aren't all that complicated.

For a start, the training, under the coaching of Robert Denmead, is organised in four-week phases. On average, there are two interval sessions a week, and vary from progressive repeats of 300m to 1,000m and right up a mile. They are usually done on golf course or road. There may also be one specific hill session built into a particular phase, but hills are not a dominant aspect of the training.

Her long run, once a week, is rarely more than 80 minutes, which she regards as not very long. Over winter, the total weekly mileage was gradually increased to between 60 and 70 miles, with low-key races sometimes included. Before an important race, the fourth week in the phase would be lightened considerably.

Recently, she has been doing some tests at the Human Performance Lab in Trinity College Dublin, measuring anaerobic threshold, which is important for the harder workouts. She is also using a heart-rate monitor on some, more specific, runs.

She considers a number of things crucial to maintaining fitness at her age. Having studied massage and acupuncture, she's aware of how hard training can hurt the body - at any age. She gets regular massage with Anthony Geoghan in Carlow and takes extra care to avoid injury.

Her diet is uncomplicated:

'I wouldn't be all that strict about what I eat. I've been aware for a while now about what's right to eat and what's not, and I know where the fuel comes from. That's the important thing. The training is hard enough without punishing yourself at mealtimes as well - so I enjoy the foods I like.'

There are, however, some interesting elements to her diet. From her studies in Chinese medicine, she learnt that certain foods - such as bananas, dairy products, and nuts - are regarded as 'damp' foods, and are best avoided by some people. So she usually abstains from them.

As for finding inspiration, she has no difficulty:

'I realised there wasn't a whole lot of time left for me to achieve much more in the sport. I suppose I've always believed

that I had the talent, and knew deep down that if I just gave it the commitment I could probably pull out a little more.

'You have to want to do it though, and in many ways it's easier to do it now. I'm certainly enjoying it now more than ever. I still get a great buzz out of competing.

'But you know, I'm not out to beat the younger girls. I never think that way about a race, or how much older I am than the rest of them.

This year, Anne received a £7,000 training grant, and while she admits it helps on trips abroad, she insists she would be doing this anyway. She also says that since moving back to Portlaoise and joining North Laois AC, she has found particular

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motivation from training companions that include her brother and sister.

The next big challenge is Olympian - to return to the track and take a shot at the 5,000m qualifying time for Sydney (12 years on from Seoul 88, where she ran the 3,000m): 'I really feel that, bar injury, I can do it. A lot will depend on the races I can get into and who else gets the time. I know what's required to get the times.'

Meanwhile, she continues to inspire others, something that seems to please her as much as the winning itself:

'I'd like to think that this encourages other people out there to stay at it, whatever their sport. People think when they hit their late twenties that they're past it, whether it's running, football, or whatever.

'All you have to do is apply yourself and your lifestyle, because the physiological aspects of the body don't decline all that much. You've just got to stay at it.'

magazine and elsewhere about Anne's remarkable career. But questions remain. What's the secret of her longevity? How