

BATTLING BRUTON



Niall Bruton has emerged as the man most likely to fill the shoes of Eamonn Coghlan and Marcus O'Sullivan. On the eve of his graduation from the University of Arkansas and entry into full-time athletics, the Clonliffe athlete spoke to *David Kelleher*.

"...the Niall Bruton that came to Arkansas four years ago is now a different person and a different athlete."

Q After a successful collegiate career, are you going to miss running for Arkansas?

A Yes because it's nice to have a team aspect. Now everything will be on my own - all individual - at least it will be something to fall back on but I'm looking forward to the next few years. I have a lot of good memories of Arkansas so in that respect I'm going to miss it.

Q Could you sum up in a few words how your career at Arkansas has gone.

A I would like to say it was successful. Two NCAA titles were not so bad. It has been really good. It has had some rough patches, and can't be a rose garden all the time. My collegiate career has had its ups and downs but I think it has had more of its ups.

Q Already this year you have run 3.39.88 in Fayetteville in the 1500m, what are your views about going into this year's NCAA 1500m in Boise, Idaho?

A I feel confident. A number of people could win but I feel that I could win. I have a lot going for me. I have run fast but I feel that I haven't peaked yet, so that gives me a lot of confidence.

Q In the strength of the good 1500m time earlier this year you have qualified for the European Championships in August. What are you aiming for in these games?

A I made the semi-finals of the World Championships last year and I think if I had run with a little more confidence and ran up near the front as I did in the heats that I might have made the final. I was happy with the World Championships but this year I

would like to make the European final. I need to get my confidence up and start realising that I maybe can do well there. Frank O'Mara hopes to go for a medal and I realise, why not? So naturally I'll be trying to win a medal.

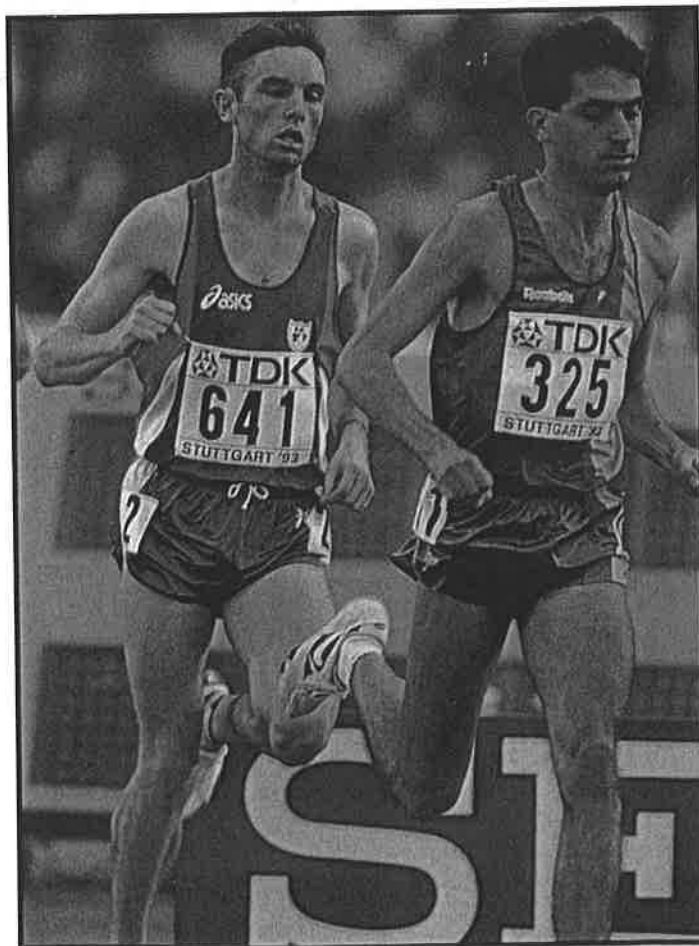
Q Coming back to the World Championships, what did you learn most from the competition in Stuttgart?

A I think that I learnt a lot. There is not just one good guy out there. Everybody in the race is world-

race. You have to be strong and fast and you also need to have a good tactical mind. If you give them two yards - well that two yards is not going to come back to you as if you were in the BLE Championships.

Q After Arkansas, what are your plans to prepare for the Olympic Games in Atlanta '96? What event will you run - the 5000m or the 1500m.

A I'm going to run in the 1500m because I think I'm just tapping my



• Bruton in last year's World Championship semi-final race.

class and hard to beat. You have to respect everybody. It's not going to be a walkover and you will have to run flat out all the way to the line. You're never going to have an easy

potential. I'm most likely to base myself in Fayetteville because it has a great set-up here and I don't think it would be wise to change what I have at the moment.

NIALL BRUTON INTERVIEW...

Q How big a role has John McDonnell played in your career?

A I think he has played a very big role because the Niall Bruton that came to Arkansas four years ago is now a different person and a different athlete. John has played a big role in that because he has helped me to mature as an athlete but also as a person. When you come out here and you're only 18 years old, you're just a kid. He helped to turn me into a man, built lots of character, helped me build respect for myself and other people. John helps you to mature and mould you into an all-round person. I don't think an athlete is an all-round athlete if he is just an athlete on the track. You have to be an athlete off the track. So John helped me to become dedicated on and off the track, taking care of myself, eating right, sleeping right, not socialising too much. He has become a father figure in that respect.

Q As part of a great team (one that McDonnell ranks his best ever), has that been a help to you?

A Oh, definitely. If I had gone to Providence I would have had Andy Keith and Mark Carroll to train with but that would be it. I mean they are really great runners, but we haven't just great distance runners. We also have great long jumpers, high jumpers, great sprinters and when all on the team are winners, it's also positive for you because when everybody is going round with a positive attitude all the time it's going to rub off on you sometime and that helps you to become more successful in such a positive environment.

Q What have been the highlights of your athletic career while you have been over here? Surely

Millrose has to be one, or is that the one?

A I don't really know if that was the highlight. I think winning the Collegiate NCAA indoor mile this year was even bigger for me because there were so many people speaking so much bullshit that Andy Keith was this and Andy Keith was that. I was kind of the forgotten person. Even Kevin Sullivan (NI) was tipped as the man in form, so I wanted to show them

ously huge. Beating Marcus in his own backyard in Madison Square Garden and with the Irish tradition in the race, that will be something I'll be always be able to look back on. Even if I never win it again, I can say I won the Wannamaker Mile!

"I don't want to be known as just an indoor runner."

Q Since you did every well indoors and since you have yet to win an outdoor title, are you going to put much emphasis on indoors next year or will it mainly be for the out-

stereotyped in that category. Sure, it's great to run well indoors but I want to be known as an outdoor runner, because that is where the Olympics are held (outdoors) and that is the pinnacle of an athlete's career. I mean it's nice to run indoors. it's exciting and I like it, but I don't want to be known as just an indoor runner. I want to run great outdoors and so more emphasis will go to outdoors in the coming years.

Q Niall, how did you get into running, because you're a very talented sportsman overall, not simply as a runner.

A I never really started off in running, I was just an active kid in Ireland. I played a lot of soccer, hurling and Gaelic. I loved sport and I loved fitness, but I ended up racing, I don't know how. I was a sprinter in schools sports and I just took it from there. Peter McDermott guided me along quietly and slowly. I suppose he recognised a bit of talent there and he really developed me in the very beginning.

Q What was your first All Ireland Schools - Junior, Inter, Senior?

A I think it was Junior. I got my butt kicked big time in that race. I didn't like that but it made me work harder to do well. At Intermediate I won an All Ireland and won the Schools International in the 3000m, the first Irish athlete since John Treacy to do so. That was a nice win. It kind of felt that I had achieved something, especially beating the English guys because they are always good at that level. As a Senior I won the Schools 800/1500m so I have fond

memories of the Irish Schools Competitions.

Q Catching Frank O'Mara in last year's Senior B.L.E. Championship was a great run to win your first Senior



• Bruton outpaces O'Sullivan in the Wannamaker Mile..

that wasn't just a fluke. Obviously Millrose was a great run but there was a lot of pressure and anticipation for the NCAA's so it was really pleasing for me to win. However, Millrose was obvi-

door season?

A No, I don't think I'll put too much emphasis on indoors because I hate when people say that Irish people are just indoor runners. I don't want to be

title!

A Well it wasn't really because Frank was training for the 5000m, so he really did not have the speed that he had when he was doing 1500m work and I had been doing 1500m work. The race was so slow it basically slowed down to a 200m race. It was unlucky for Frank that it went that way but it was still nice to beat him.

Q What advice would you give to Irish kids coming over on a scholarship to the States?

A I think that first of all you're going to be coming over when you're 18 years of age. You must realise that you're somewhat immature whether you like to hear it or not. You think you're God's gift to running when you're 18 years of age. You're going to experience some hardships. Everybody goes through them. The first few weeks will seem great and then reality will hit and you will get homesick at some point. You will get your ass kicked by bigger and better guys and no matter how good you are you will still get beaten. Some people can handle that but you have to be prepared to get beaten. This is one thing you must accept if you're going to make it out here. You have to use the experience to build up character and make yourself a better athlete. You have to prepare for things to go wrong and mature very quickly.

Q Did you find the adjustment to be very hard or since you qualified for NCAAAs as a freshman did you find it easy?

A I think I have been very fortunate. I did get my ass kicked but I also made the team at Arkansas, which is hard to do. If your running goes well I find everything else goes well. I was just one of the for-

tunate ones. Nigel Brunton who came out with me to Arkansas and didn't accept getting beaten, did not know what was going wrong and he just did not handle the pressure and he wanted to go home. That's a perfect example of two people who had different experiences here.

Q Alright, coming back to that a lot of Irish athletes have come out and haven't made it, you have been one of the lucky ones. You have succeeded in the tradition of Delany, Coghlan, Treacy, O'Mara and O'Sullivan who can make a living out of running. Do you think that some of the athletes who came out in the last 10 years were good enough or found the pressure too much?

A I think in that respect that I have been one of the lucky ones. I have gone to one of the great programmes at Arkansas. I haven't been over-raced. You hear so many stories about kids being over-raced every weekend. John has never done that to me. John has been very kind.

He's interested in me as an athlete and as a person. There are guys that go to a small school and get over-raced and then are injured and people back home don't understand that we are all only human. We are not machines and we can only do so many races. Some get injured and you get frustrated and shy away from the sport. These guys don't make it but there are a lot of factors other than talent that may mean that some Irish athletes don't reach the international level.

Q Were you pleased about getting a grant from Cospoir this year?

A I was really pleased. I was not expecting anything like the amount of money that I got. It's really great. It's really

encouraging that the Irish Government is taking an interest in helping athletes to reach the world-class standards. We do need the support to start competing at the highest level and start winning medals at the major games.

Q Do you think the government is doing enough or would you like to see more private businesses sponsoring athletes like Niall Brunton and Sonia O'Sullivan who realistically have a chance of winning a few medals at the next Olympics?

A Yes, I think Sonia has been such a refreshing breath to Irish athletics. She's so marketable right now. I would like to think that I'm an up and coming Irish athlete and winning Millrose was good publicity for Irish athletics.

The tradition is going to continue. Mark Carroll is going to be great, Catherina McKiernan is winning medals on the world stage. I think the time is so ripe for Irish companies to sponsor Irish athletes because over the next ten years Irish athletics is going to be so marketable that it will be great for those businesses to get involved.

Q Do you have a good relationship with BLE, since some Irish athletes in America haven't always had good relationships with the governing body in the past?

A I feel I have a good relationship, I feel that they respect me and I respect them for I feel a lot of people don't understand where BLE are coming from. They don't have a huge organisation. It's still pretty amateur. They are working people who have other jobs as well. They are not miracle workers. If they don't have the backing they can't perform either, just like the athletes. The BLE Management have been very helpful to me,

bringing me to Finland last year. They helped me with the air fare and with the grants. I have no complaints about BLE.

Q How would you describe yourself?

A I think I'm likeable, I get on well with people and try and treat others the way I would like to be treated and I feel that I'm not all focused on athletics. I like to have an outlet also. I'm sure that some people back in Ireland feel that I'm a cocky person. I don't feel that I'm cocky but that I'm confident of my own abilities. I think that is the difference between being

in Ireland and being in America. People in Ireland will only set themselves certain standards while I set myself high standards. People in

"I don't feel that I'm cocky but that I'm confident of my own abilities."

Ireland can be so negative. You have to be positive.

Q Are you fearful that some day an injury would cut short your career?

A Well that reverts back to your previous question. I say that I'm a very positive person and if I start worrying about injuries then I'll become a negative person. To be a winner you have to stay one hundred and ten per cent positive. If you're negative all the time then you're not going to run well.

Q Niall, can you see yourself going back to Ireland or would you like to remain in America until your athletic career is finished?

A Athletically, I'm going to stay in the U.S. You're not going to make it athletically as a college kid and unfortunately you're not going to make it as a world-class athlete in Ireland. I have to remain in the U.S. or I may go to England. I'm most likely to remain in America.

"Even if I never win it again, I can say I won a Wannamaker Mile!"