

Niall Bruton of Clonliffe Harriers is one of the best Irish middle distance runners to take up an American scholarship in recent years. The young Dubliner, who won the American Junior Cross Country title last year, continued on his winning way while home in Dublin for Christmas. CLIONA FOLEY profiles the talented aspiring track star.

The morning after the Oman Cup in the Phoenix Park on New Year's Day, there was a highly unusual athletics picture of the winner in the *Irish Times* sports pages. It captured Niall Bruton, hair askew, in jeans, jumper and scruffy sneakers, perched atop the dressingroom table, cup in hand, with the cheekiest of grins on his elfin face. The picture and its protagonist, in the most subtle and silent of fashions, screamed, "I'm different!"

The 19-year-old Dubliner is indeed an individual, a street-sussed youngster who admitted to not doing a tap in St. Aidan's School in Whitehall and having had a passion for soccer, until his beleaguered maths teacher and future coach, Peter McDermott, persuaded him to join Clonliffe Harriers four years ago.

There followed a quick rise through the ranks of the national junior middle-distance talent with people like Bray's Nigel Brunton and Nenagh's P.J. O'Rourke, culminating in the PBs of 1.49 (800m) and 3.47.84 (1500m) and just missing qualification for the World Junior 1500m final last summer. There also followed some disciplinary run-ins with team management when he was caught slightly inebriated at the post race celebrations. Neither has he made a secret of the fact that he felt the Kerrygold Squad, of which he was a member, was little more than a PR job, with not enough investment to afford the athletes the planned competitive opportunities abroad.

So, when Bruton took up a scholarship at the University of Arkansas, the breeding ground of great milers, last August, it was not hard to imagine that he might have some problems with what is undoubtedly the most servile of routes to stardom: heavy training schedules, demanding study routines and the sublimation of the self for the good of the team. Niall Bruton's assimilation into the *Great American Dream* promised to be his biggest test to date and an embodiment of all that our young hopefuls face when they cross the waters. How would he fare?

BRUTON



• All American Junior C.C. Champion

Photographer
SPORTSFILE

THE BRAVE



BRUTON THE BRAVE

Four months later, after taking Gerry O'Reilly in the last five metres of the Oman Cup, he is unequivocal: "I feel healthier and fitter than ever before in my life and I'm running stronger than I knew I could." So far Bruton has had a dream entry into the American system. The Dublin rookie made the Arkansas cross country team by outrunning all but one of the existing team at an 8k in Missouri in September, came 44th in the NCAA Cross Country to help Arkansas to yet another national team title, and has already become the first Irish junior to win the American National TAC Junior 5k in New York. But behind that success is a lifestyle which Bruton realises is never understood by the public or the media.

This city kid cannot adjust to life in smalltown Fayetteville - population 100,000; focal point - the shopping mall; speciality - bible-belt racism of the strongest kind. In the first months, the combination of homesickness and an exhaustive seven-day-a-week training schedule made him sometimes hide in bed, crying, feeling like it was the end of the world, too tired to face training or study.

Though he had expected tough training, the amount of speedwork so early in the season and the short recovery rates left him jaded. "For the first few months Nigel (Brunton) and I would come home from training on Sunday morning at 10am, fall into bed and sleep until 2pm. We really used to look forward to those sleeps."

The early problems of fatigue are exacerbated for athletes by having all classes crammed in before 3.30pm daily. A 7.30am sociology class led to Bruton's mitching for the first time in his life. Inevitably he ended up in front of Arkansas head coach, Mayo-man John McDonnell, who told him "to shape up or ship out." He doesn't miss sociology any more. "Yes, I think I have already changed a lot in America," Bruton says. "In a way it's up to yourself. You have to do your morning training and get to class and study on your own and if you don't, your academic performance will suffer."

"It's hard, very hard, and, in fact, people tell Nigel and myself that we've settled in better than most! I think we're lucky to be together, sharing a room, and also that Frank Hanley of Limerick is in Arkansas too, a year ahead of us."

He respects McDonnell as a coach and a person, despite his strictness. "I think I'm probably a bit more cheeky to him than anyone else. You know us Dublin kids," he grins. "But he's straight, and a very good coach."

Bruton and Brunton are also luckier than most scholarship athletes in having Frank O'Mara, who has returned to his alma mater to study law, act as their



• **Niall Bruton strides to victory in the Oman Cup**

guardian angel. As well as bringing them to his home for the much-missed rashers and cups of tea, O'Mara has helped Bruton with his maths and once made him join him in a five-hour study session.

"Frank has become like a big brother to us in ways and it's unbelievable because he's always been someone I looked up to internationally. Sometimes when I run badly out there I feel bad because I might have let him and people like him at home down."

Bruton is gradually blending into the Great American Dream and is already convinced it is the best alternative. "A kid cannot make it here in Ireland because you just don't get enough quality competition and facilities and you have too many excuses not to work hard. In the States, you have no excuses. They lay everything on for you: design your day around training. You do it or get out."

He still can't understand the American coaches' obsession with perfect racing weight. He still weighs 153kg, but they want him down to 150kg, if not lower, and he knows of the dangers of over-competiting, but feels cushioned from that in Arkansas. "We may or may not be the very best distance college in the States, but already I've seen that they have such a strong team that you get rested and they don't over-race you. I was rested already twice this season."

But the competition to get on the Arkansas middle-distance team, which includes Reuben Reina, is terrific, and

even on daily team training runs he says "it's very competitive, with guys pushing the pace, trying to psyche each other out. The team is really nice, but out training no one's your friend."

No, it is not a home-from-home or anything like the luxurious summer-camp some people imagine. Life on a scholarship for Bruton is a seven-day-week slog in a small twin bedroom with two desks, a second-hand TV and a huge Madonna poster over his bed.

Bruton is delighted with the selection of Eamonn Coghlan as BLE's new Chief Executive - a man he looks up to as an athlete and who he feels has *been there*. Ironically, Coghlan himself initially ran away from Villanova after a home-sick six months.

"That's a thing that really bugs me, this thing of athletes going to America and not making the grade and people writing them off saying, 'Oh, that kid just wasn't good enough, he got lost in the States.' These people know nothing about what it's like. You might be freaked out by the homesickness, the training or the study, but no one takes account of that. No one knows what people like Coghlan and O'Mara have gone through and no one cares, they only want you to win."

Bruton is still Bruton, persuading the more gullible Arkansas locals that, yes, we do not have cars in Ireland and that he drives a donkey called Fred. But he is learning his trade and his lessons. "Running is the most important thing in my life. On New Year's Eve I was at home in bed by 10.30pm. I've lost girlfriends over my running, but I don't care."

And he has obeyed John McDonnell's orders, cut his hair and removed the jewellery, mindful of his new coach's advice: "If you want to be noticed, don't wear an earring, kid. Run 3.55 for the mile."

Winter Training Schedule

85-95 miles a week, combining individual morning runs with the following daily team training from 3.30pm to 6pm.

Monday	5 x 1 mile in 4.3 - 4.5 mins, with 3 mins recovery. 600m of each mile on strong climb.
Tuesday	Weights and 8 mile team run on the campus. 2-mile woodchippings trail or golf course.
Wed	15 x 400m on steep hill, with 55 secs recovery.
Thurs	Weights and 8 mile team run.
Friday	10 mile 'steady-stay' team run.
Saturday	12-14 team road-run or competition.
Sunday	14 mile team run or competition.