

# OLD LIONS YOUNG TIGERS

BY DICK HOOPER

It was just another road race. This time in Ratoath. A four miler around the flat narrow backroads that so personify the races in County Meath. God, I love those roads. The hedges are so close and the routes twist and turn like frightened snakes. Makes one feel one is flying. The race had been held in memory of the late Martin McLoughlin, a local athlete who had been tragically knocked down and killed months earlier. Martin McLoughlin had met his creator on those same narrow roads doing what he loved to do most with his spare time.

Before the gun we stood for a minute's silence - 100 or more in silent tribute. The moment was simple, poignant, sad and yet beautiful. He was one of us and now he was gone. Young and strong and fit. May he rest in peace. Seconds later the starter's gun startled the birds and sent the athletes away.

Afterwards we adjourned for a pint, or was it more, to the Ramble Inn in Ashbourne. The company was dominated by Clonliffe men - the talk was free and varied. Padraic Keane and Gerry Finnegan recalled times and races past, Loughlin Champion seemed more content with the present. Tommy Griffin and Bernard McLoughlin spoke little, listened a lot, thinking perhaps of the future. A future where they could score on winning Clonliffe teams, win championship medals by the hatful and gain international vests with regularity. The things Keane and Finnegan have done. The Clonliffe tradition. Two more pupils of the Clonliffe School of distance running excellence.

Later I drove Keane and Griffin home. Earlier the youthful Griffin had outlasted Keane in a desperate surge to the finish for 5th and 6th places. At 20 years of age this represented a good scalp. Keane is like the cat with nine lives. He is always there or thereabouts. In the pub Finnegan had kidded that he was way behind in his preparations for the cross country season. He didn't mean a word of it. Tommy Griffin may have believed him but it was words that Finnegan had earlier uttered that stuck most in Griffin's mind. Something to the effect that no young fella' was going to beat him when the real racing came round.

He dwelt on this comment when discussing his ambitions for the forthcoming season. How he would dearly love to score in the championship races. Mentally I empathised with him and yet



• "Old lion and young tiger" : Gerry Finnegan and Tommy Griffin.

old loyalties would bend my sympathy more towards Finnegan. Fundamentally this is the fountain of club athletics: young guys trying to dislodge old guys. Some people grow old just trying to do this. Some people never manage it. Imagine if you were 15 and joined Donore in 1974 with a view to beating Jim McNamara (then aged 37). You'd be 30 now and Jim Mac would still be haunting you.

As Tommy Griffin walked away into the night air I thought of Gerry Finnegan. I wondered how much Tommy Griffin knew about Gerry Finnegan. How could he? Tommy Griffin was six years old when Gerry Finnegan was at his most supreme. Did he know that Gerry Finnegan had finished 10th in the World Junior Cross Country Championships in 1975. That in the same year, aged 18, he had been 7th in the National Senior Cross Country, had reached the final of the European Junior 5000m in Athens. Was he aware that Finnegan was the owner of track PBs of 14.00 for 5K and 29.05 for 10K.

Because he is so steeped in the tradition of Clonliffe - Griffin's father, Tommy Senior is an international walker and the current president of Clonliffe Harriers - Tommy Griffin may be aware of all or some of these facts. It is more likely that Griffin's perception of Finnegan is of a silver-haired foe who has an uncanny

knack of scoring well in big races. Griffin can never remember a time when Finnegan was not around.

Gerry Finnegan is 33 years old. His hair is prematurely grey and if it makes him look older than in athletic terms he is old. Ask any of the Clonliffe juniors. • Finnegan has a wife, a child, a good job in Aer Lingus and lives in Ashbourne. In many ways he has it made. Where running once was a huge part of his life it is now his hobby, albeit a very serious one. In running terms he is an achiever. He's running well now and the thought of continuing to achieve excites him. Maybe even more than 10 years ago.

Tommy Griffin is 20, has a temporary job and lives at home with his parents. He has good ability, is a hard worker and is hungry. His proudest achievement was when he scored on the Clonliffe junior team that was second in last year's national championship. It was a start. The taste felt good. He wants more.

To achieve more he has to beat Gerry Finnegan, Padraic Keane et al. Finnegan and Keane have seen off the challenge of many would-be Tommy Griffins before. It doesn't get any easier and it can't go on forever, but it always feels nice keeping a younger opponent in check.

Is anybody prepared to move over?