**Santry- the Mecca of Irish Athletics .**

Santry : Even the very name conjures up a multitude of allusions , associations, images and memories . Santry : The site of World Records. The arena which has staged over 150 sub-4 minute miles. The Mecca of Irish athletics. Santry : The Dream Child of Billy Morton. The home of Clonliffe Harriers. The stadium in which every young Irish athlete wishes to compete. Santry : The athletics stadium that keeps reinventing itself , from cinders to Tartan to Mondo. From world records to military tattoos, from pro cycling to pro football, from stock car racing to rugby league, Santry has done whatever needed to be done to survive. And survive she has ,seeing off crippling debt, terrorist attack and global pandemics. She has been battered , bruised and even bombed –but she’s still standing. There is a tall pillar situated in Santry Demesne , just outside the track near the start of the 100m. A former Captain of Clonliffe , Christy Brady, who had a wry sense of humour, used to say that it marked the tomb of The Unknown Clonliffe Warrior. ( “ He gave his all for the Club but they can’t even remember his feckin’name “ ) It is usually called the Eagle Monument but the bird on top looks more like a Phoenix . And is there any more apt symbol for this stadium which keeps on rising from the ashes than that mythical bird ?

Santry Stadium was conceived in the fertile mind of the little optician from Berkeley Street, Billy Morton . Little in stature , but generous in heart and gigantic in imagination . And wasn’t it Einstein himself who assured us that imagination was more important than learning ? A former runner himself, who won the Irish marathon title in 1936, Billy had a life long, passionate love of athletics. A natural born impresario, who organised a number of “athletic extravaganzas” in the early to mid 1950s , Morton recognised that Ireland was hungry for entertainment after the War ( or “Emergency” ) and was even hungrier after Ron Delaney’s magnificent success in the 1956 Olympics. Morton succeeded in drawing huge crowds of up to 25,000 in Lansdowne Road ( now the Aviva Stadium ) and Trinity’s College Park to watch track and field meets. Billy was a cunning operator : he publicised these events as showdowns between Irish heroes such as John Joe Barry, the “Ballincurry Hare “,or Ron Delaney , and the Golden Boy of British athletics , Brian Hewson . Billy is also believed to have enticed athletes from the UK to compete in Ireland with promises of fresh eggs, ripe bananas and succulent oranges – pure manna for British people starved of such delicacies since the War. But he also recognised that he could not continue to persuade world class athletes to compete on grass tracks . And so, at a famous press conference in Moran’s Hotel, he prefaced his remarks with the immortal words “ Gentlemen , grass is finished “. And he proceeded to inform his stunned audience that it was his intention to develop a cinder track on a patch of land that he and Clonliffe Harriers had bought in the little semi- rural village of Santry . ( Incidentally, Clonliffe AGMs were often held in hotels and other hostelries in those days. Sometimes the premises were “raided “ by the Gardaí who found members drinking after hours . But they were always solemnly informed that they were residents of the hotel and , as such, were entitled to consume alcoholic beverages after the legal limiting time .)

Public reaction to this news about an athletics stadium was far from positive . “ Did you hear what that fella Morton has done now ?” “Wha ‘ ?”. “ Hasn’t he gone and bought a few acres of land out in Collinstown , near the airport ; says he’s going to build a running track there “ . “Ah , for feck’s sake ! Way out in the sticks – on the bleedin’ North side ? Sure no one will go near that, He must be mad !”

Of course he was mad . But then, as the poet said, “ Great wits to madness are close aligned , And thin partitions do their bounds divide”. And Billy’s reaction to all this negativity ? Let’s just say that it was similar to the usual succinct response of Logan Roy to adversity. ( Long before Succession was even heard of ).Luckily , he had a very supportive Clonliffe committee , wonderful men of vision such as the long serving Captain Harry Cooney, Mattie Hewson, Michael McStay and Sam Grey. Clonliffe embarked on a fund raising campaign that lasted for decades. Donations were received from various sources including a $1000 contribution from Bernard McDonagh , an Irish American of Galway descent, who had worked his way up from factory floor to outright owner of the Ames Company, a firm that dated back to Revolutionary times. He also presented Billy with a chromium plated Ames shovel and it was with this shovel that Billy and newly crowned Olympic 1500m. champion , Ron Delaney turned the first sod in 1957. And so, the track was laid , a beautiful, seven lane vision of red cinders. The official opening, and the first Meet, was held on May 19th. 1958 and featured another showdown over 880 yards between Ireland’s Olympic 1500m. champion , Delaney, and Hewson , who had finished 5th. in that Melbourne final in 1956.On this occasion it was Hewson who prevailed in 1:49.7 from Delaney’s 1:50.2. Hewson would go on to win the European 1500m. title later that summer in Stockholm . Another great British athlete to feature that opening night in Santry was Gordon Pirie who won the 3 mile event . Pirie had won the Silver medal in the 1956 Olympic 5000m.and would win a Bronze in the Europeans in August. At a certain point in the programme on that first night, Billy took the microphone and addressed the crowd. After thanking them for their support and telling them how proud he and Clonliffe were to be able to provide the Irish people with this fine new facility, Billy seemed to hesitate . But then , after a dramatic pause , and with impeccable comic timing, he looked up at the crowd on the makeshift stand and , with his characteristic impish grin , roared at them “ And yous will pay for it “ !

Fate smiled sweetly on Billy and Santry at that time. The Commonwealth Games ( then known as The Empire Games ) were held in Cardiff in July of that year , drawing some of the very finest athletes in the world from Australia and New Zealand. Billy immediately saw a golden opportunity to put Santry on the World Athletic map . He got over to Wales in double quick time and persuaded a group of Aussie and Kiwi runners that if they came and ran on his brand new cinder track, they would all shatter not just their PBs but National records, Commonwealth records , All-Comers’ records , World records and any other records you cared to mention . A master of the blarney, Billy laid it on heavily . He convinced them that , because his track was situated in a beautiful park ( no exaggeration there ) and because it was surrounded by ancient oak trees , the air in the stadium was like nowhere else in the world. “ You see “, sez the bould Billy , giving his entranced listeners a creative lesson in ecology , “them lovely trees breathe in all that oxygen during the day , and then they kindly let it out at night ,just when you lads will be running , and yous will never before have had such pure, oxygen enriched air going into your lungs . Sure, it will only make yous fly . I’m tellin’ yous”. Promises of bananas , oranges and eggs were also made again .

And it worked . And they came . And they ran . And indeed they flew. The first to arrive was Albie Thomas and on the 9th. July 1958 Thomas , who was coached by Arthur Lydiard , persuaded Merv Lincoln , who was coached by Lydiard’s great rival Percy Cerutty, to act as pacemaker in the 3 miles. Lincoln did an excellent job and Thomas set a new World Record of 13:10.6. But you ain’tseen nothin’ yet. Barely one month later ,on the 6th. August , Ireland’s Olympic Champion Ron Delaney lined up against three Aussies ,including Lincoln and the newly crowned World 3 mile record holder Thomas, the 880 yard and 1 mile Empire Games Champion , Herb Elliott, and a New Zealander, Murray Halberg, with a withered arm sustained in a rugby accident , as well as several fine Irish milers. And on that never to be forgotten night , five men broke the 4 minute barrier for the mile, led home by the incomparable Elliott in a new World Record of 3:54.5. Elliott ,never beaten over 1500m or the mile, would , of course , win Gold in Rome two years later, as would the man who finished 4th., Murray Halberg , with his withered arm, who became Olympic Champion in the 5000m. Legend has it that 25,000 people packed into Santry that night to witness this extraordinary event. Several fine Irish runners also competed in that legendary mile : athletes like Mick Connolly, a member of that famous Donore Harriers team which dominated Irish distance running for two decades, and the late Tony O’Donoghue , who went on to become the main athletics commentator for RTE. (Incidentally, Tony was the uncle of Paul McNamara who is now the Director of High Performance with AAI . ) Another man running in that never-to-be-forgotten race was 19 year old Dan Carberry from Carlow whose grand-nephew, Niall , is now one of Clonliffe’s most promising young runners. The very next night, Elliott acted as pacemaker for Albie Thomas as the diminutive Aussie set another world record , this time over 2 miles, of 8:32.0.

Many years later Thomas returned to Santry for the Morton Games. The 5000m. at that Meet is now named in his honour. A silver-plated plaque acknowledging his great achievements adorns the wall at the entrance to the Clonliffe Clubhouse. Incidentally, he was quite critical of the running style of a group of runners that he saw training while on that return trip. “They should get their butts up if they want to run faster” was his pithy comment !

But back to 1958, and suddenly Santry was the name on everybody’s lips . News of these remarkable achievements went all around the world. Santry was the fastest track in the world. “ Lightening fast “ was the overused cliché to describe those red cinders. The air in Santry from those magnificent trees was a pure, performance enhancing elixir.

In 1960, the aforementioned Gordon Pirie came back to Santry and ran his first and only sub. 4 minute mile , clocking 3:59.9. A New Zealand quartet of Olympic 800m. champion , Peter Snell, Olympic 5000m. champion Murray Halberg , Olympic Marathon Bronze medallist Barry Magee and another Olympian, Gary Philpott came to Santry the following year, in July of 1961, and set a new 4 X 1 mile world record of 16:23.8

Four years later , Snell, who by now was a world super star came back to Santry on his own . The immensely powerful Kiwi had won the 800m. in Rome in 1960 and the 800/1500m. double four years later in Tokyo. He had set a world record for the 800m of 1:44.3 in 1962 and later broke Elliott’s mile record when he ran 3:54.4 in 1965 - on grass ! How he must have loved running on those fast ,red cinders of Santry. A huge crowd turned up to see this remarkable athlete but , in the absence of fast pacing and strong competition , Snell just did enough to cruise to an easy victory.

And Billy basked in the limelight of all those great athletes who graced his beloved Santry – and why wouldn’t he ? But , unfortunately , it didn’t erase the financial burden on himself and Clonliffe. Those beautiful cinders became soggy and slow in the Winter , making it impossible to hold track meets in anything other than a short window of opportunity in the late Spring and Summer. And so , the members of Clonliffe had to resort to all sorts of stratagems to raise money that would at least service the debt. Long serving members like John O’Leary ( A Harrier since 1956 ) can recall himself and other youthful members, such as Maurice Ahern, standing in O’Connell Street shaking collection boxes in front of passers by. Life memberships were on offer for the princely sum of £5. Johnny also recalls collecting money in pubs in Drumcondra and getting verbally abused from some customers !

Billy’s ripe imagination went into overdrive and came up with all sorts of schemes to raise money –some of which were quite bizarre. Santry staged military tattoos ( ask your granny), stock-car racing, rugby league , soccer matches, professional cycling .......anything that might raise a few quid.

In 1959 Billy persuaded Lord Moyne , chairman of Guinness, to pay for a banked cycling track on the outside of the running track . The black ashphalt cycle track , 515 yards long and 25 feet wide, gave the visual impression of a bowl or amphitheatre.

Later that Summer Billy and Clonliffe put on a cycling event that, among others, featured Shay Elliott , the Dublin cyclist who later became the first Irishman to wear the Yellow Jersey in the Tour de France. Elliott raced against the Italian ,Fausto Coppi, in a 4000m. individual pursuit . Coppi won the Tour twice and the Giro d’ Italia five times. Much to the delight of the home crowd , Elliott won the race in Santry and a substantial sum of money was raised by this venture.

Of course , Billy was seen by a section of Irish athletics as Public Enemy No.1 and Santry Stadium was regarded as a prime target on which retribution could be exacted . Billy was the first honorary treasurer of the Amateur Athletic Union Éire ( AAUE ),formed in 1937 after a period of international isolation following the refusal of the NACA to accept a ruling of the International Amateur Athletic Federation which confined its jurisdiction to twenty six counties. This resulted in the infamous “Split” which lasted until BLE was formed in 1968. ( some would say it lasted until the AAI was formed in 2001 ).Despite being a zealous campaigner for unity during that period, Billy and Santry became , in the minds of certain people, symbols of disloyalty and veritable treachery. And so , at 4 a.m. on the 15th. June 1959, on the very day that Elliott was due to race against Coppi, an explosion rocked the stadium damaging part of the newly laid cycling track and the terracing . The bombers were never identified and the Republican movement specifically went on the record denying any involvement . A small army of volunteers managed to repair the damage and the show went ahead with Elliott winning the “Devil take the Hindmost” event as well as the 4K pursuit. While amateur cycling events went on in Santry until the late 1960s , there was never another pro cycling event held there .

Santry’s financial future continued to be precarious. Billy himself went on a brief hunger strike and the motto “ SAVE SANTRY STADIUM” became a catchphrase and practically a national movement. It inspired three young men from Galway, Murt Coleman , Brian Geraghty and Colm Roddy ( all students in UCG) to run all the way from Galway to Dublin to raise money for the cause . Wearing their club vests with “SaveSantryStadium” notices ( A4 , homemade ) pinned to them, they were sent on their mission by Ronnie Delaney and the Lord Mayor of Galway. A friend of theirs drove a VW camper van behind them . They stopped after approximately each 20 mile segment, collecting money in the pubs of Tyrell’s Pass , Horseleap, Kinnegad and other far flung, midland towns. Each evening they poured oil in their wounds ( no massage guns or foam rollers back then ) and rubbed sweet smelling Wintergreen on their aching limbs before collecting money in the pubs for this worthwhile cause. After seven biblical-like days, they arrived at the Mansion House where they were greeted by Dublin’s Lord Mayor and, of course , the irrepressible Billy . They handed over £600 to a grateful Morton who then treated them to a fine lunch in the Crofton Airport Hotel . Amazingly, they then proceeded to take part in a 4 X 5 mile relay staged later that afternoon by Clonliffe ( around “The Top 5” ) and , despite having about 150 miles in their legs , finished seventh-or was it 17th.? - out of 20 teams. Murt Coleman, is not quite sure whether it was 7th. or 17th. It may have been a liquid lunch in the Crofton.

The plight of the stadium also inspired Clonliffe marathon man , Noel Henry , to run from Dublin to Longford, accompanied by several young female athletes to raise money for the newly formed Ladies Section and also to help the survival of the stadium itself. Anne O’Brien , (a true pioneer of Women’’s running in Ireland) the great future Olympian Claire Walsh \*, Pádraigín O’Dwyer, Jean Dowling , Nuala O’Brien and Anne Killeen were just some of the pioneering women to undertake this daunting run, a distance of 85 miles. They all survived and their efforts were not in vain . Santry , and the Clonliffe Ladies Section also survived and went from strength to strength.

*\* Claire Walsh ran 2:03.4 for 800m. in 1971 and represented Ireland in the 1972 Munich Olympics. When Claire married in 1970, she moved to Sligo where she had only a 200m. tarmac strip on which to do speed work. Her 800m. best still ranks her 22nd. in the Irish Women’s All-Time Best List.*

The mystique of Santry had an inspiring effect on many young men of twenty all over the country . In the most northern and remote part of Donegal ,two young athletes named Danny McDaid and Paddy Marley were beginning to make a name for themselves. But, after a while, they realised that while winning races at local sports or even Ulster championships were fine achievements , they were a long way from realising the dream which burned like a fire in their hearts . Like so many other youngsters , their dream was of Olympic glory –or at least Olympic participation . And they realised they would have to leave their beautiful home county if they ever wanted to make this dream a reality. And so, they packed their few belongings and headed for Dublin . Or more specifically , they headed for Santry. It was a simple ,beautiful dream: train on the Santry track and become Olympians.

And on arriving at their destination who was the first person they met ? A portly little man who grunted in greeting. Recognising him as The Famous Man Himself , they timidly enquired “ Please , Mr. Morton , could you?...would you ...? Do you think we might do a training session on the track? ” Billy looked at them and growled “Isn’t that what we built the shaggin’ thing for?. Now get out there and start running. “ It was their first experience of the seemingly gruff little man with the huge, generous heart. Some years later , in June 1969, to be precise , when, as a wide eyed teenager, I paid my first visit to an International track meet in Santry, who was representing Ireland in the 1500m. only the same Paddy Marley and the aforementioned Brian Geraghty.

Of course both Marley and McDaid eventually joined Clonliffe and the latter went on to represent Ireland in the Olympic Marathon in 1972 and again in 1976. Danny would also Captain the Irish cross-country team to a magnificent Silver medal winning position in the World Cross Country Championships in 1979. Paddy would go on to become one of the Club’s most successful Captains . ( As well as a long serving President ) He would also become one of the finest team managers ever for Ireland’s cross-country and Track and Field teams, culminating in his position as Team Manager for the Irish Olympic team in Barcelona in 1992. Indeed, both Paddy and Brian Geraghty ran in the very first Morton Mile in 1970.

I’m sure Billy would have felt handsomely rewarded for his largesse.

And Santry continued to entice many of the greatest athletes in the world .In 1967 the lure and aura of Santry were enough to attract the magnificent Australian ,Ron Clarke, to the now fabled venue . Clarke was the first man to break 13 minutes for 3 miles (12:50.4 ) and ,during the course of his career ,set 17 world records at distances ranging from 2 miles to the 1 hour race . His most extraordinary performance came surely in July 1965 when , running in driving rain on a churned up cinder track in Oslo , he set a new 10000m. world record of 27:39.4 smashing the previous record by over 36 seconds. It would be a full six years before another man would dip under 28 minutes. Clarke is regarded as the unluckiest athlete of all time as he never won the Olympic Gold he so richly deserved . One solitary Olympic Bronze and a fistful of Commonwealth Silvers was not an adequate testimony to this great runner’s ability . On July 17 1967 Clarke ran the 3 miles in Santry but, due to lack of quality opposition, while he won the race he did not break 13 minutes on this occasion .

Possibly the most popular athlete to run in Santry was the magnificent Kip Keino , the first of the great Kenyan runners. This remarkable athlete who won the 1500m. Gold in Mexico and the Steeplechase Gold ( plus the 1500m. Silver ) in Munich four years later, seemed to epitomise the sheer joy of running and crowds all over the world loved him for it. He ran with a 100 megawatt smile on his face and , as somebody said, “ he didn’t run on the track : he floated over it”. He ran with what Italians ( and the late Jerry Kiernan) called “ sprezzatura”, the nonchalant ability to make something appear effortless. When once asked what was his strategy going into races he replied “ I just run as hard and as fast as I can . If I win , I am very happy . If some other man beats me , I will shake his hand . But that man will know he has been in a race .” Keino ran twice in Santry , in 1969 and again in 1970 when he won the first Morton Mile . On each occasion he was pushed all the way by Clonliffe’s Frank Murphy (“Big Frank” ) who had taken Silver in the European 500m.Championship in Athens in 1969. Also running in that first Morton Mile were Paddy Marley and Brian Geraghty.

Incidentally, Keino returned to Santry many years later, in 2012. He was taken on a tour of the Stadium . He noted happily that practically everything had changed for the better . The only thing he recognised as being familiar was the old terrace.

Later, in the Clonliffe Bar, ( the most stringent debating forum since Cicero’s tenure in the Roman Senate) he graciously took part in a Question and Answer session . The Right Honourable Member from Ballinlough, Mr. P. Keane , had just one question for him: “ Mr. Keino , did you have a Sport Psychologist when you were running ? “ The great man looked slightly bemused but admitted that no, he had not , and indeed he had never heard of such people until quite recently.

“ No further questions “ , said the rather smug looking Mr. Keane, believing that he had put “the witch doctors” firmly in their place. He then invited his new Right Honourable Friend to sample the delights of a creamy pint ( or two ) of Guinness followed by a Bailey’s Cream . But it wasn’t just international stars that brought the crowds flocking to Santry in those early days. Great Irish athletes also thrilled the fans throughout the ‘60s and ‘70s. Very fine runners, such as the late Noel Carroll, Donie Walsh, Ian Hamilton, Basil Clifford , Jimmy O’Neill and “Junior” Cummins, all graced the cinder track with performances which would still stand scrutiny today .

In December 1969 tragedy befell Santry and Irish athletics. Billy , who had suffered a heart attack some years earlier , was making his way home one evening with Mattie Hewson , when he suffered another heart attack , this time fatal. Many wondered if Santry could go on after this catastrophe . But it’s the mark of a great man that his legacy is strong enough to survive him . Billy had built his foundations solid and , even though he would no longer be present , his beloved Santry and its famous track would live on .

But time was catching up with cinder tracks . 1967 saw a new, rubberised all weather surface called “ tartan “appear in Crystal Palace and this new surface was used in Mexico the following year for the Olympic Games. Athletes who ran on it raved about how much faster it was than cinders and , furthermore , it was weather independent. Ireland had to wait for a decade but eventually, in 1977,a brand new tartan track was laid in Belfield. And suddenly Santry began to feel obsolete.

All the attention now switched to the Belfield Bowl and all major events switched to this natural amphitheatre with its brand new track . Some epic races were held there. Even the Morton Mile, accepting the new reality, was now held on this new, super fast surface . Coghlan’s duel against Walker in ‘ 77, his equally epic battle with Mike McLeod over 5000m. in ’78 and John Treacy’s solo Irish record run over 5K in the ’78 National Championships, all took place on the South side of Dublin while the old lady of Santry began to feel like the former pretty debutante who was now being ignored due to old age having ravaged her beauty.

The Clonliffe committee knew that something had to be done about this . Recognising that the club would no longer be able to meet the escalating costs of maintaining the track and stadium, overtures were made to the Department of Education, Cospóir ( the forerunner of Sport Ireland) and Dublin Corporation with a view to a transfer of ownership to the Government . Needless to say this was viewed almost as sacrilege and treachery by the more conservative members of the Club and an animated debate took place at the AGM in October of 1979. ( Clonliffe AGMs tended to be heated affairs back then , partly due to the fact that some members did their warm-up in The Swiss Cottage)

That Redoubtable Member from Roscommon West , The Right Honourable Mr. Keane , focused the minds of the members by standing up and saying “Gentlemen , that track out there is fit for nothing right now only growing cabbage “. He went on to point out that if he and Jerry Kiernan and the rest of the Clonliffe Senior team wanted to do any form of speed work , they had to run down to the Clontarf sea-front to do fartlek sessions there. The vote to yield outright ownership was carried resoundingly by the pragmatists and the following Summer saw the biggest reconstruction of the track since 1957.The cycling track was dug up and a new 8 lane tartan track replaced those historic cinders. A Board of Management, consisting of two members from the Government agency Cospóir, two from Dublin Corporation ( later from Fingal County Council )and two from Clonliffe Harriers, was set up to manage the stadium. And so, in late August 1980, the all new Santry track hosted its first International Meet in a decade. One of the highlights was the thrilling victory of Eamonn Coghlan in the 5000m. leaving people like one Alberto Salazar floundering in his wake.

The 80s saw Santry return to its former glory . Now named Morton Stadium ( having been called J.F. Kennedy Stadium in honour of the assassinated President since 1963 ) it witnessed some outstanding performances by several Irish world beaters such as new 5000m. World Champion Coghlan , double World Cross country Champion and Olympic Silver medallist John Treacy as well as multi World Indoor winning champions, Frank O’Mara and Marcus O’Sullivan . It also hosted some of the greatest names in World Athletics such as Steve Scott and Sidney Maree.

Some extraordinary training sessions also took place on the new track . These were memorable not just for the level of performance but also for the quality of the banter . Jerry Kiernan ,for instance, was known to have run 8 X 1 mile in 4:28 off a 60 seconds jog recovery while preparing for the Dublin City Marathon . Most sessions ( the word “ workout “ was unknown back then ) were supervised by the legendary Laro Byrne . Training had to start bang on time or get a reprimand from the indomitable Laro. “ Hurry up young man ; the Liza Jane is leaving and if you’re not on board she will not wait for you “. Talking during a session was frowned on : “ Save your oxygen , young man “ was one of Laro’s most frequent exhortations. If an athlete had put on a little excess weight Laro would castigate him with “ Excess *avoirdupois* young man , excess *avoirdupois”* And if a man had stopped training and put on a lot of weight , Laro would give him an icy stare and admonish him with the stark warning “ I don’t want to be going to your funeral , young man “. He had no time for athletes who constantly claimed they were going to do wonders but never delivered. “ The road to hell is paved with good intentions “ was his comment on those individuals. He himself was accused by the Great Hairy Lugs ( as Laro always called Jerry ) of being “bombilious” . Even Laro was left speechless by that -although nobody still quite knows what exactly it means . But Laro finished every session with praise for the athletes who had endured , “those who had been tested like gold in a furnace ” , with the same comments every time : “ Fait accompli (sic); par excellence , merci, arrivederci, auf wiedersehen” giving bystanders the impression that he was fluent in at least four languages . Sadly . his likes will not be seen again.

Young lads, returning from athletic scholarships in the USA, with shaved legs had to run the gauntlet of some of the harshest slaggin’ from their team mates. Captain Marley would just glance at them , shake his head ruefully and say nothing. But it didn’t prevent them from doing excellent “*workouts.*”

The 1990s were dominated by the remarkable Sonia O’Sullivan who won Irish titles at 800m.,1500m and 5000m. in Santry before going on to win European and World titles on the track and country. She ushered in the new millennium with a brilliant Silver medal in the Sydney Olympics. Caitríona McKiernan too graced Santry with her immense talent before winning a European Cross Country Gold medal, four World Cross Country Silver medals and setting a London marathon record .But male athletes like David Matthews, Gareth Turnbull, Noel Berkeley, Dave Taylor, John Downes, Mark Carroll, James Nolan and Clonliffe’s own Niall Bruton also thrilled the athletics aficionados who continued to flock to the famous track on Dublin’s northside. Irish sprinters too began to make their mark. Fine sprint coaches like John Shields, Jim Kilty, Paddy Fay, Brian Corcoran and Tommy Coyle started producing excellent speedsters such as Brian Gregan , Derval O’Rourke , Emily Maher , Joanne Cuddihy ,Paul Hession and David Gillick. Ireland , famous for so long in producing distance runners , now showed that Irish athletes could also win medals on the International stage in the more explosive events.

Some old timers, who considered anything shorter than 800m. to be less than “real running,” viewed with a jaundiced eye the prominence of the sprinters but the historic stadium embraced and welcomed them all.

In 1994 a massive renovation of Santry took place . Now managed by Fingal County Council, not only was the outdoor track re-surfaced but a magnificent new indoor facility was built. This comprised a six lane , 60m. long Tartan straight together with a gym and spacious dressing rooms. The sprinters, and Field eventers, could now train properly here, out of the rain and the cold. The Elders in the Clonliffe Bar muttered about the athletes “ getting soft “ but most agreed that it had been very difficult ( and possibly dangerous ) for sprinters to train outdoors in freezing conditions. Indeed when Chi Cheng of Taiwan, the then World Record holder for the Women’s 100m.visited Santry in 1970, she proclaimed that she could never see a world record being set for a sprint event in Ireland as it was “ simply too cold “. And that was in the month of September ! ( Chi Cheng had set a World record of 11.00 seconds for the 100m.in July of 1970 , just two months before she ran in Santry , She had also won the Bronze medal at the 1968 Olympic Games in the 80m. hurdles ).

A new spectator stand was also built ,replacing the old “hayshed” like structure that had stood there for almost forty years. Clonliffe also got a new clubhouse, which incorporated dressing rooms , gym and Bar. It was officially opened by the future Taoiseach , Bertie Ahern ,in September 1995. It was a big improvement on the dressing facilities which had crouched under the terraces since 1976 – although they, in turn, had been a massive improvement on the old Nissen hut ( a relic of the Emergency ) which had served as dressing rooms since 1958. And as for the new Bar ? : well, the captains and the colonels still maintain that it can’t hold a candle to the old shebeen which nestled for almost twenty years under the original terracing. The craic was better, the slaggin’was wittier and the pint was creamier in the old place – and sure the opening hours were also , shall we say ..... a little more flexible ? ( These ould lads were the kind of men who gave up “the dhrink “ for Lent- and sometimes for November too; very devout men who substituted the black stuff for Smithwicks instead . In their reckoning Smithwicks didn’t count as real drink )

But other events were stirring too –events that would affect those lovely trees that Billy had often mentioned. Five or six years after the resurfacing of the track and the building of the facilities outlined above , Santry Demesne began to be developed into a beautiful manicured park. And this, too, had a huge relevance for athletics – or at least for cross country running – in Santry. Formerly the estate of the Domville family, it had long been owned by the reclusive property developer, “Pino” Harris. Pino had a soft spot for Clonliffe and had generously allowed training and racing to take place on his lands for year after year. The land had been let to a farmer who grazed his cattle on it. The grass, however, had not been cut in years and , with the passing of time and long before “wilding” was heard of, it had become a sort of wilderness with thistles ,docks and weeds proliferating. Of course it was a haven for wild life and, if you went for a run on the narrow pathway beaten out by other irrepressible runners, you could encounter foxes, badgers , squirrels , hares and rabbits all scarpering across your path. If you stopped to stretch you might be surrounded by a herd of ruminative, inquisitive cows. Gentle creatures who never did anybody any harm- although when your pristine training shoes might, occasionally , step into one of their warm, wet, squelchy deposits, you might direct a few unparliamentary remarks in their direction . The proposal to develop the park was met with strong opposition by Nature lovers and wildlife conservationists . They objected to the building of apartments ,etc. on more than half of the estate. But, a compromise was reached and nearly half of what had become an impassable thicket of brambles , nettles and bushes was now transformed into an idyllic, accessible park in which people could walk , cycle and play while admiring the sheer beauty of Nature. And , from a runner’s point of view , it was now about to become the finest cross country course in Ireland.

Both athletes and spectators agree that it is very difficult ,if not impossible , to find a finer venue for the sport . Runners will say “it has a bit of everything , flat fast sections, long testing drags, short sharp hills ...” while the spectators revel in the fact that they can see the athletes throughout the entire race and can get close to them to cheer them on . And what about the scenery ? Idyllic, inspiring , breath taking, are just some of the words and phrases that people use in trying to describe the beauty of this park. The shimmering lake with its stately swans, the gushing fountain , the canopy of trees along by the Garden Wall and the avenue of stately oaks standing like sentinels in mute admiration as the competitors give every last ounce of their energy sprinting up the long finishing straight. It has hosted the National Senior Cross Country Championships on numerous occasions , as well as Dublin Championships, Leinster and All Ireland Schools Championships, International Masters’ Championships and Clonliffe Schools’ Tournaments. But its finest moment surely was when it hosted the European Cross Country Championships in 1999. On that day , Clonliffe ‘s Mark Kenneally had possibly his best ever run when finishing seventh in a World class field that included Mo Farah in second. Foreign athletes , coaches and journalists all agred ( in spite of the mud ) that rarely , if ever , were the championships held in such a beautiful and inspiring venue. Epic national Cross Country championships have been held here – even before its development- and Clonliffe members will always recall with delight the National of 1986 when Noel Harvey won the Senior men’s title ( leading the team to victory also ) and Mary Donohue won the Women’s Senior event. We also remember the National of 1996 and the epic battle between our own Noel Cullen and John Downes , the rugged Limerick man running for Donore. 2009 was also a red letter day for the Club with the Junior and Senior men’s teams winning the elusive double.

And while all this was going on , the track was undergoing yet another transformation . Now, in the Autumn of 2009, it was the turn of the tartan to be ripped up and be replaced by an even newer, faster surface : Mondo . Fabricatio in Italia , it even sounded fast . Mondo? - sounds a little like Monza ; it had connotations of blistering speed and the smell of burning rubber . And it was fast. Very fast. The sprinters in particular loved it . First used in Atlanta for the 1996 Olympics , (to ensure that Michael Johnson would break World and Olympic records ) the new surface in Santry also started producing sprint times that shattered the old Irish records . Athletes like Paul Hession , Derval O’Rourke and Thomas Barr revelled on this new track and brought Irish sprinting onto the European and World stage .

Very briefly , about this time, the prospect of an indoor arena being built in Santry , with a full size 200m.track, seemed on the verge of becoming reality. Sadly , that prospect never materialised .

During the 90s and Noughties the infield was resurfaced several times until it was brought up to League of Ireland football standards. And it has hosted various clubs since including Shamrock Rovers ( while Tallaght Stadium was being built ), Sporting Fingal ,Dublin City, Raheny United F.C. , Shelbourne Ladies F.C. and Drumcondra F.C.

The “Noughties” also saw the revival of the Morton Games . Under the directorship of Noel Guiden and his hard working committee , these games, which had been on life support for quite some time , underwent a transformation and were given a new lease of life making them better than ever before. Killian Lonergan used all his contacts in the U.S.A. to bring world class fields to the Meet and to the Morton Mile in particular.

The long standing Mile record ,set by Elliott in 1958, was well and truly shattered by Will Leer in 2014 when he ran a superb 3:51.82. In all, there have been over 150 sub-4 minute miles ran in Santry. The most recent saw an epic duel between Andrew Coscoran and Clonliffe’s newly crowned Irish 1500m. champion , Cathal Doyle, with Coscoran’s dive at the finish line giving him the verdict by 0.02 of a second. Steve Scott of the U.S.A. won this famous event three times , as did Leer.

The 2016 Olympic 1500m. champion Mark Centrovich won the 800m. at the Meet in 2012 before competing at the London Olympic Games just a few weeks afterwards and winning Gold in the 1500 in Rio four years later. There have many nights on which the electric atmosphere of the former Glory Days have been recaptured and even surpassed . The 2014 games will live long in the memory with Thomas Barr’s thrilling victory over reigning World 400m. Hurdles champion , Jehue Gordon, and setting a new stadium record of 48.94. Mark English set another stadium record when winning the 800m. in 1:45.3.That same night Will Leer set yet another stadium record with that aforementioned 3:51 mile but the moment which really rolled back the clock and resurrected the Santry Roar was when Clonliffe’s own Brian Gregan came off the final bend leading the 400m. and went on to win in a new Morton Games record of 45.26.It was truly one of those spine tingling moments as the crowd rose to its feet and cheered the home victory to such an extent that we wondered why anybody could ever think that top class athletics is not an exciting spectator sport . This night was just reward for the herculean efforts of the hard working Morton Games committee , one of whom, Joe Cooper, is sadly no longer with us.

Possibly the saddest phase in the history of this great old stadium was during the series of lockdowns caused by the global pandemic of Sars-Covi 2 in 2020. During those surreal and rather frightening early days of Covid 19, the gates were locked and the stadium stood silent. No longer did the historic arena echo to the delighted cries of young children, the encouraging shouts of coaches, the friendly banter of club members or the roar of a crowd witnessing some titanic struggle between elite athletes on the track. Even though the sun shone gloriously during the most stringent lockdown of Spring 2020, and while Paddy Tuite worked gallantly to keep the place looking resplendent, nevertheless a dark pall seemed to hang over the stadium as everything that was dear to her was absent. All sporting events were cancelled or postponed indefinitely and it was as if the life’s blood of the nation had been sucked dry. The sun may indeed have shone during that first lockdown and Nature flourished ,but the old stadium lay empty and silent ,mourning the loss of all that had been dear to her.

And then, gradually, we began to creep back ,tentatively and cautiously. First, with small groups of athletes and abiding by a plethora of protocols as regards hand sanitising , cough and sneeze etiquette and social distancing. To their great credit, the Clonliffe Captain and committee managed to hold a series of Club races on evenings when the lockdowns were eased. But a careful eye had to be kept on whether we were in Phase 3, or Phase 3 Plus or the awful Phase 5. ( remember those?). Yet it was great simply to get out again and enjoy the sport we loved and had missed so much. Meeting people again that we hadn’t seen for months.To paraphrase the words of another poet : “Bliss it was in those evenings to be alive, But to be young and active was very heaven”.

AAI deserve enormous credit also for managing to stage the National Track and Field Championships every year during the pandemic, even though it was only athletes and officials who were allowed inside the arena. But how strange it was to have to view these championships either online or, if you wanted to get a sniff of the action , watch them through the bars of a gate near the start of the home straight. It was a pallid substitute for what it had been like and what we had taken for granted.

But Time passed ; vaccines developed at warp speed proved to be game changers in the fight against the virus . All changed again , and all was well . Or maybe not. Some familiar faces , of men and women who had given their lives in service to the Sport , would never be seen again. We said goodbye to Joe and Jerry, to Christy Brady and Christy Wall , to Brian Corcoran and Tommy Coyle, to Des McCormack and Big Frank , to Harry Gorman and to that great Olympian , Pat Hooper, who never missed any Meet, large or small, and who helped out at Nationals, Schools and Dublin Graded events. They will be sorely missed . But we know for certain that they would wish for those who remain to carry on .

And so, in the summer of 2022, athletics came roaring back .The old stadium was rocking once more with the thrills of this glorious sport. With all restrictions lifted , the IMC Meets , the Schools’ Championships, the National Seniors, the Morton Games, all came back , better and sweeter than ever.

And now it was time for another renovation and upgrade of the grand old arena. D.C.U became the new owners and immediately began a major refurbishment . A new , beautiful blue Mondo track was laid, the Indoor arena was completely renovated, new seating was installed in the stand . New fencing was erected all around the track and the blue and yellow colours of D.C.U were painted on the new seating giving a bright , cheerful visage to a stadium which had started to look a little bit down at heel. The lovely old lady is being ”honoured with a new dress woven from (yellow) and blue things”. And now, once more , she is about to reappear ,Countess Kathleen like , no longer “a tired old woman” but as “a young girl with the walk of a queen. “ ( with apologies to Paddy Kavanagh and W.B.)

Sixty five years after those historic nights of world records the prospect of another glorious era of thrilling athletic competitions beckons and we can again look forward to moments which will linger forever and be recalled whenever and wherever athletic fans gather.

Some things have not changed, and will not change. For instance the grassy knoll, sometimes known as the Raheny Kop, overlooking the finish line will continue to attract the real, die-hard aficionados . Here , three time Olympian Dick Hooper and his faithful, erudite disciples will assemble on National Championship days and will cast a cold eye on the level of performance. Not easily impressed, these guys could write a Ph.D thesis on all matters athletic. Enter at your peril all ye who would wish to join this august band : you really need to know your track and field lore if you are to survive in this company.

Clonliffe will still have its club house, bar and car park . But ,most importantly, it will still have exclusive training rights on two evenings and one morning every week . Billy would not be happy if his beloved Black and Amber was dispossessed entirely. But he can rest easy , content in the knowledge that there is a corner of the stadium that is forever Clonliffe. And from his prime perch in the Clonliffe Bar, among the Olympians, the National Champions and the Committee members who have worked for decades behind the scenes to keep the Club going, Billy will keep a keen eye on all that is happening out on the track and field. He will have a warm welcome for the young men and women from D.C.U who will train and compete there. He will still delight in the shouts of joy of competing youngsters from all over the country and he will get a special thrill when some young man or woman , girl or boy , wearing that famous Black vest with the Amber sash , wins another National title.......

And if some of our new friends from foreign shores come and ask if can they train on the track , they may once again hear that same gruff reply “ Of course yous can ; isn’t that what we built the shaggin’ thing for !”