

JENNINGS

comes of age



A latecomer to top class distance running, Catriona Jennings' long term target is to run a sub-2:30 marathon, writes Eoghan Young-Murphy.

PHOTOS: Pat Murphy / SPORTSFILE

IRISH WOMEN'S MARATHON RUNNING has experienced a spectacular revival in the past year – a revival that presented Athletics Ireland with one of the toughest selection headaches in the association's history.

Four into three won't go and there was bitter disappointment for Maria McCambridge on May 21 when Athletics Ireland announced that Catriona Jennings, Ava Hutchinson and Linda Byrne had been selected to fill the three places on the women's marathon team to compete in London 2012.

Catriona Jennings was the last athlete to join the selection race, achieving the Olympic A 2:37 qualification standard with a 2:36:14 run in the Rotterdam Marathon in April. And of our four London 2012 women's marathon qualifiers, it's Jennings' story that's possibly the most intriguing.

A relative latecomer to athletics, the 31-year-old Rathfarnham WSAF runner wasn't on the Olympics' qualification radar until this time last year when she entered a new phase in her career with a convincing 35:29 victory in the Flora Dublin Women's Mini Marathon.

Originally, she had intended to attempt the London marathon qualification standard on her marathon

debut in Dublin last October. She increased her training mileage too soon, however, and sustained a leg injury last August. Ferociously committed, she maintained some fitness by exercising on a cross-trainer for up to four hours a day. She decided to run the Dublin Marathon at a conservative pace and clocked an impressive 2:43:06 in doing so.

Buoyed by this display, she became a full-time athlete early this year, taking leave from her job as a tax adviser with PriceWaterhouseCoopers. In the build-up to the Rotterdam Marathon, she stuck rigidly to the training schedules of her coach, Terry McConnon, an impressive distance runner himself in his heyday.

Toeing the line in Rotterdam on April 15, Jennings knew that simply reaching the A standard wasn't sufficient. With Linda Byrne (2:36:23), Ava Hutchinson (2:35:33) and Maria McCambridge (2:36:37) already qualified, Jennings knew she would have to better one of their times to stake a for claim selection. Everything went off without a glitch that spring day in Rotterdam where she became the second-fastest qualifier with her 2:36:14 showing.

"I was so worried about going off too fast that I ended up going off too slow," says the Letterkenny woman who now lives in Dublin. "There was an Irish group from the Marathon Mission – Gladys Ganiel, Lizzie Lee and Breege Connolly – and we all set off around the same pace, but we went through the first mile in 6:18, which was 20 seconds slower than what I should have been going at.

"We did increase the pace and we went through a couple of 5:58s. Around 5km, I was conscious that the pace was probably a bit slow for me so I pushed ahead on my own. I was trying desperately to find a group running at the pace I needed. I would run a mile or two with a group and then I would feel that they were too slow and I'd have to move on.

"As it turned out, that's the same way I ended up running the whole marathon," says Jennings. "It ended up pretty much being a time-trial. By the time I had got to 30km, I had recovered the 20 seconds I had lost in the first mile. I was back on target again for 2:37 at 30km so I literally started to put the foot down and I started picking people off. I passed a lot of women that I knew were elite women by the look of them.

"I felt really strong the entire way to the finish. My fastest mile of the marathon was mile 25. My average pace for the race was 5:56 minutes a mile and I ran mile 25 in 5:41."

There were joyful scenes at the finish line. "I was completely elated," says

Jennings, who jetted off to Portugal on May 11 with Linda Byrne for warm-weather training. "I was really emotional because it was something that I just wanted so badly for so long. My mum Theresa and dad Michael, my sister Deirdre and her husband Paul, and my boyfriend, Martin McCoy, were there.

"When I saw them, there were tears flowing. It was my mum's birthday on the day, so it was a great feeling. It was bittersweet as well because my other sister, Sinead, who wasn't there on the day, is a world champion rower and this is the third Olympics that she has tried to qualify for without success.

"I felt very sad for her because I could potentially be getting there when, for so many years, Olympic qualification was her dream. It was much more tangible for her – she was much closer to getting it than I ever was."

Jennings was in her 20s before she started to concentrate on running. "As a junior I competed in triathlon, winning a number of national titles and I was selected to represent Ireland on three occasions. I was also a member of Swilly Seals swimming club from a very young age and that was my first introduction to competitive sports. I won a number of provincial medals in underage swimming.



Jennings entered a new phase in her career when winning last year's Flora Women's Mini-Marathon

“

I felt really strong the entire way to the finish in Rotterdam. My fastest mile of the marathon was mile 25. My average pace for the race was 5:56 per mile and I ran mile 25 in 5:41.

My dad was a member of Letterkenny AC and I ran for the club, but my main interest was triathlon."

She studied law and accounting at the University of Limerick before moving to Dublin in 2001. She joined Rathfarnham WSAF in 2002 and started competing in cross country. "Terry McConnon started coaching me in 2007 and we decided to do a season on the track so I ran a couple of 800m, 1500m, 3000m and 5000m events. I enjoyed it, but I prefer road running so I have focused on that.

"I think because I really only started running seriously at an older age, my body in terms of running years would be quite young. So I think that really I can get much faster. Long-term, I would like to break 2:30 for the marathon."

Factfile

CATRIONA JENNINGS

DoB: 17-06-1980
Height: 5' 4" / 1.62m
Weight: 56kg
Club: Rathfarnham WSAF

PERSONAL BESTS:

5km: 16:48
10km: 35:23
10 Mile: 57:34
Half-Marathon: 77:48
Marathon: 2:36:11

TYPICAL TRAINING WEEK

MON: 60 mins easy
TUES: 6 x 1 mile
WEDS: 90 mins easy
THURS: 45 mins steady
FRI: 40 mins very easy
SAT: 45 min tempo
SUN: 2 hour long run

Talty strides out in Docklands 5k

Aoife Talty, daughter of former Galway football star Brian Talty, had only one runner ahead of her in Tuesday night's Dublin Docklands 5k — an event that attracted 3,000 entries.

Sean Hehir of Rathfarnham/WSAF AC set the early pace in this popular event and came home a winner in 15.01, but a strong run by Aoife Talty saw the sweet-striding Raheny Shamrock AC runner finish in second place overall in 16.39. Neil Bolger finished third in 16.45, with John Mulvihill fourth in 16.57 and Annette Kealy 5th in 17.05.

"I was delighted with my run in what was a very well-organised event," Aoife said.

"I am now looking forward to running on the track this summer and I want to race in the 5,000 meters in the Woodie's DIY National Track and Field Championships in Santry in July."



Sean Hehir and Aoife Talty, who came first and second respectively in the 5k race.

RUNNING SHORTS

ENTRY DEADLINE FOR IRISH RUNNER 5 MILE

The entry deadline for the Irish Runner 5-Mile Road Race in the Phoenix Park — the first race in the Dublin Race Series — is fast approaching.

The online entry for this event closes on June 10 and the race takes place on Saturday, June 30 at 10am.

"We are encouraging intending runners to enter the five mile this weekend and the online entry is available at www.dublinmarathon.ie," Dublin Race Series director Jim Aughney said. "This year we have four races in the series and the Irish Runner 5-Mile takes place in June rather than the usual July date."

Don't miss that entry deadline — log on to www.dublinmarathon.ie.

RUN THE SKY ROAD

An event with its own special identity is the Sky Road Challenge — a 10k road race that takes place in Clifden on Sunday, June 3, starting at 2pm. Walkers start at 1.30pm.

The Peter Bailey Cup 10k Challenge on the stunningly beautiful Sky Road has a top cash prize of €500 on offer for the first male and female runner to cross the finish line and there are other prizes too — €50 each for the first walker, first buggy and fancy dress as well as medals for all participants.

Organised by the Connemara Chamber of Commerce, this could make for a nice break-away weekend in the west. The event is also part of a special Clifden 200 Years Celebration.

For more details go to www.visitconnemara.com.

MURPHY WINS CALCUTTA RACE

Brian Murphy made his long trip from Ennis to Dublin worthwhile on Saturday when he coasted to victory in the annual Calcutta Run 10k in Blackhall Place — a big fundraiser for Third World charity GOAL.

Murphy finished strongly in 35.18, comfortably clear of Shane Collins, 37.58 and Mark Hanlon, 38.23. Caroline Crowley won the women's race in 39.57. Over 1,000 took part in this event which was run in sunny and very warm conditions.

BUSY WEEKEND AHEAD

This Bank Holiday weekend has got to be the busiest road-racing weekend of the year with the Flora Women's Mini-Marathon in Dublin and The Cork City Marathon — both on Bank Holiday Monday.

The AVIVA Irish Schools Track and Field Championships also take place in Tullamore on Saturday — a day-long event of top-class action.



Participants show off their medals after completing the Clare Burren Marathon Challenge last Saturday.

Clare Burren Marathon Challenge

Barry Hartnett came home a winner in Saturday's Clare Burren Marathon Challenge — a race over the classic distance that took place over a variety of terrain along a scenic route.

Hartnett posted 3:06.52 for the distance ahead of Matthew Urlanski, 3:20.25, and Phillip Rainey, 3:28.59. Niamh Crowe won the women's event in 3:42.12 from Ruth Ann Sheehan, 3:52.05, and

Jenny Hennessy, 4:01.37.

Keith Lynch won the half marathon event in 1:33.23 ahead of Dermot O'Connor, 1:34.46, and Richard Walsh, 1:37.06. Ronan Wogan won the 10k race in 34.10.