

All this and Mayo too

HE RAN fluidly across the finish line in Longford, face creased in a broad smile, arms raised in celebration of his first marathon victory.

This was John Byrne's day to shine and he felt strong, positive and capable. His great buddy Tom Hunt had given him the usual pep talk on the way to Longford. And his coach Paddy Murray had told him he would do well.

Hunt had a wise head and had won the M55 category in last year's Dublin Marathon. Murray was a great coach (though on this day he happened to be at the Community Games in Mosney, watching his son Daniel win 800-metre gold).

John had run a sound tactical race — waiting until 15 miles to put in a surge to test the four others still in contention. Only Pat Byrne of Tinryland had gone with the break, and before long before John was in front on his own.

He felt enormous relief when, late in the race, he reached the outskirts of Longford town, a minute ahead of the nearest chaser; he knew that barring accident he would win.

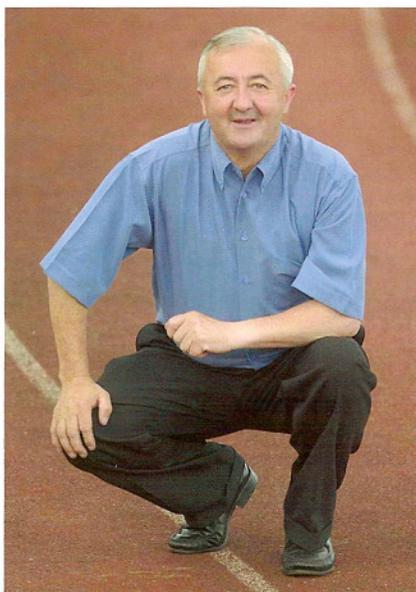
It was a comfortable cushion to have in those closing miles. And yet a muscle cramp, a stitch or one uncongenial stretch of tarmac could change everything. Byrne knew only total focus would bring him safely across the finish line.

He'd had a nightmare at 21 miles when he felt the bear on his back. Seriously worried, he had resolved to take the road a mile at a time. So committed was he that he cannot remember passing the 22-mile marker. All he knows is that suddenly the 23-mile marker loomed and he immediately felt better.

It would have been cruel luck if he had faltered. He had experienced what it was like to finish second, in Connemara a couple of years back. That had been especially painful as he arrived five minutes late for the start and still managed to medal. The memory still nagged him.

John ran his first marathon a decade ago. His maiden voyage over the classic distance was in Dublin, and he was delighted to run just a little under 3:30. The particular satisfaction of that first marathon was that it mirrored his commitment to losing weight.

Growing up in Straide, near Foxford, Co Mayo, John was a strapping lump of a teenager. But as a keen soccer player with Foxford United, he didn't feel good



BY FRANK GREALLY

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tipping the bathroom scales at 13 stones. For bad measure, his efforts on the football pitch had little effect in the weight department.

Eventually it dawned on him that while he had a modicum of talent at football, it was the running he loved best. If only he were a little lighter on his feet.

Anyway, it came to pass that John took to running around the fields and roads of Straide. At first it was sheer purgatory, but stubbornness yielded results — and the kilos began to drop off.

That 3:27 in Dublin 1996 launched John on a mission to fully realise his running potential. He discovered he had the appetite for the distance and had found a challenge that fuelled his passion for excellence. Long noted for his work ethic, he was soon applying that industry in training.

Six months after his marathon debut John posted a PB of 3:16 in Belfast. And

six months later he was back in Dublin and dipping under three hours.

He was now a lean, generous running machine - and growing in confidence.

The memories of races past greatly helped him keep the pressure up in the closing miles in Longford. He was tired to the bone, but he knew recovery takes much longer when you finish second. Besides, he had always worn the red and green of Mayo AC with pride, and for added incentive there was the clash, later that day, of Mayo and Dublin in Croke Park.

He also knew, having run Longford previously, that his effort would be fully appreciated. It was a race that lived up to the 'friendly marathon' tag. It would be like winning at home.

The crowds were out in force shouting encouragement when John came through Newtownforbes at the very time he was suffering and craved such support. 'Just keep on pushing,' he told himself.

The streets of Longford brought blessed relief, and his confidence surged as he galloped the final quarter-mile. His 18th marathon was ending in triumph - and a winning pot of 1,200.

John finished in 2:33:34 and savoured his victory, mingling with other runners as the field trickled across the line. Later, he sat on a high stool in the local hotel and reflected happily on a summer of personal bests - 25:23 for five miles, 31:45 for 10k.

And of course to make a perfect day even better, Mayo got the desired result above in Croke Park.

John looked forward to heading back home. He had asked for the Monday off from his job in O'Hara's Bakery in Swinford and would welcome the rest — though he also knew he would enjoy clocking in on Tuesday, because his workmates in the bakery had been hugely supportive and a few had even caught the running bug.

Of course he knew the heroics of Ciarán McDonald and Conor Mortimer and co would dominate the pages of the Western People and the Mayo News — and that his own breakthrough victory might in consequence become just a footnote.

But he was happy and content. He had put himself through a searching test and passed with honours. It would be a great memory to draw on when the champion chips were down in some future marathon.