

THE

David Matthews is enjoying a new lease of life 16 years after setting an Irish 800m record that's still standing

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RECORD MAN

INTERVIEW: RONNIE BELLEW • PHOTOS: THOMÁS GREALLY, BRENDAN MORAN - SPORTSFILE.COM

RUNNING A RACE Wasn't on David Matthews' agenda when he travelled to the Donadea Duathlon in Co Kildare at the end of June. The Irish 800m record holder and two-time Olympian had promised some friends he would deliver a pre-race pep talk, but before he knew it he was cajoled into entering the 5km leg of the event. His competitive instincts, dormant for 11 years, weren't long kicking in.

Four runners, including Matthews, broke away from the field towards the 4k mark and he kicked for home in the final kilometre to clock 19:20 and win his first race since his retirement in 2000. He seems slightly embarrassed relating the story in case he's perceived as showboating on the day, but there's also a hint of satisfaction that the old ruthless streak is still intact.

"I started at the back of the pack, but pride and the competitive instinct kicked in and with half a mile to go there were four of us left in front and I dug in and won it," he says. "Now, there's a big caveat here because the guys I beat went on and did a 20k cycle and another 5k run. I still got a kick out of it though, winning my first competitive race in 11 years! I have to say there was a lot of black smoke blowing at the end – going hard in any race is a big step up from jogging around the park."

Now 37, Matthews isn't planning any more surprise swoops on neighbourhood duathlons or 5ks, but he eyeing up a comeback in serious Masters' competition once he turns 40. In the meantime, he's concentrating on building up the personal fitness and coaching business he launched earlier this year. It's only been four months but the business is flying, with the Irish Olympic Handball squad and some high-powered corporate firms among his clients. After experiencing some tough times personally and professionally, Matthews has the air of a rejuvenated man about him.

He effectively disappeared from the

mainstream Irish athletics' radar when he retired from athletics following the 2000 Sydney Olympics. He was 26 and says he was burned out after eight years total immersion in the sport. "I had run 13 major championships in six years which was overkill, and that's not including the World and European Juniors in 1992 and '93," he says. "I was in this cycle where I would run a European or World Championship and come straight back off it into hard training in UCD with no more than a week's break at any time. The seasons rolled into one with literally no break.

"I had accumulated a lot of miles on the clock physically and emotionally and then the carding requirement came in and you felt under an onus to qualify for championships to ensure your funding. I got engaged in 1998 and married in 2000. I wasn't making any money from running. I had a house, I had a mortgage, I had to hold down a job so I had to make a decision at 26 that it was time to move on."

The death of his long-time coach, mentor and friend Noel Carroll in 1998 was also another factor in nudging him towards early retirement. Carroll spotted Matthews' potential in June 1992 when the Leaving Certificate student from Colaiste Chiarain in Leixlip won a 800m race in UCD – beating the pick of the Irish and British Varsityes talent as well as a US contingent from Yale and Brown. "From that night I instantly hit it off with Noel," says Matthews. "Noel said, 'You will come to UCD with me', and there was no question of me going to the States on a scholarship after that."

One of the godfathers of the first Irish running boom in the 1980s, Carroll was an international class 800m specialist who set a European record (1:47.3) for the distance in 1963, won two European Indoor titles in '66 and '67, and ran in the 1964 and '68 Olympics. After signing Matthews on a sports scholarship

to UCD, he became a father figure to the young Kildareman.

"I met Noel every day for about three years," says Matthews. "Noel was more than an athletics coach – he was a coach of life, a mentor, the guru who would put you on the straight and narrow if you were having any sort of personal problems. You would go for a jog and warm-up with him, off load your troubles, get on with your training and that was it. When he passed on in 1998 it was probably one of the final nails in the coffin for my athletics' career."

Under Carroll's guidance, Matthews made a seamless transition from European Junior bronze medallist in 1993 to senior international athlete by 1994. In September '94 he broke the Irish senior 800m record in Rieti, outside Rome, and a year later, at the same venue, set the 1:44.82 mark that remains the Irish record (see panel page ??).

In tandem with Carroll's coaching, he also benefitted from Dr Zbigniew Orywal's expertise. A sub-four minute miler in 1958, Dr Orywal from Poland was appointed national coach by the now defunct athletics body, the NACA, in the late 1980s. Matthews believes Dr Orywal was years ahead of his time. "He took me under his wing in the early 1990s and introduced me to a strength and weights-based conditioning programme. He was a genius: we did training back then that was only beginning to be touched upon by mainstream athletics coaching in the noughties."

The countless hours of running with Noel Carroll and strength work with Dr Orywal stood to Matthews in 1995 when a stress fracture grounded him for March and April. "I started back jogging in May, and between June and September – off the back of only six weeks' proper training – I got to the World Championship semi-finals in Gothenburg and went on to break the Irish record.

"I often look back at my training diary to see how I did it. I didn't do a single training session on tartan that summer. Everything was done on grass in College Park or UCD. I had also discovered the benefits of water training. I had an aqua belt – Sonia O'Sullivan had told me about them – when no-one here had one. I used to do high intensity aqua training sessions in the pool at Glenalbyn where people would look at me as if I was a nutter."

After his stellar efforts in 1995, Matthews was approached by Kim McDonald, who was then the biggest global name in athletics management, with athletes like Sonia O'Sullivan, Moses Kiptanui, Daniel Komen and Noah Ngeny among his clients. "Kim asked me to go out to Australia to train for a few months. His attitude was: 'If you can run 1:44 off six week's training, come out to Australia and see what you can do with a bit of proper training.'

"I headed off on December 18 for three

months and spent Christmas with Sonia and Nick Bideau. I starting training in the New Year and I was exposed to Kenyan-style training with a lot of mileage. I was 12 stone 7 when I went out there and came back 11 stone 7. I came back to Ireland and got to the Olympic semi-final, finishing fourth and running 1:45, but I didn't progress. I possibly lost some of my core strength in Australia," says Matthews.

"People talk about 800 m and whether you are coming from the power side -- the 400m Alberto Juanterena side -- or the 1500m Ovett side, the endurance-based style...I was probably more of a power rather than endurance runner. Having said that I actually ran 2:17.58 for the 1000m (still an Irish record) but I never officially ran a 1500m in my life. I should have moved up – if you can run 1:44, 1:45 it's logical enough that you should be able to cover the last 700m of a

1500 in a half decent time."

Matthews set the Irish 1000m record at an IAAF International Meeting in Sarajevo in September 1996, the one and only occasion he ran the distance. It was a memorable experience all round. "I was one of 20 athletes Kim McDonald flew into Sarajevo after the IAAF Grand Prix final in Milan. This was the first public sporting event to be held in Sarajevo since the siege on the city was lifted in 1995. It was a full year before U2 decided to come to the city and the athletics meeting was held in the stadium that hosted the 1984 Winter Olympics.

"We stayed in the Holiday Inn on 'Snipers Alley' and it was the only building in the city that had its windows intact. What struck me was the sheer destruction of the city – it was like something out of World War 2, but over 45,000 people crammed into the stadium for the meeting. It was a very moving experience as it exposed the cruelty and destruction of war in a country only an hour or so flying time from Milan where we ran the previous day – worlds apart."

The athletes waived their appearance money for the Sarajevo meet and were rewarded with an IAAF all-expenses-paid beano to that year's World Sports' Awards ceremony in Monte Carlo. But the trip to the French Riviera and sojourn at the Ritz Carlton passed in a blur for Matthews, as did much of his travel on the IAAF international circuit in the late 1990s when he spent his summers at Kim McDonald's London base. "You would fly out on Tuesday to a European city, race on Wednesday, fly back to London on Thursday, and fly out again on Friday for the next meet in Rome, Paris, Madrid or wherever. I was so focussed on athletics I can't remember half of it. For a few years, I lived a very monastic life and was absolutely ruthless in what I wanted to do."

That positive ruthlessness propelled him towards the European Top 10 and World Top 16 for a couple of seasons between 1994 and 1999, years when he ran 1:45 or better on eight occasions. But he says his drive began to wane in 1997 and Noel Carroll's passing in 1998 hastened his retirement, although he did qualify for another Olympics in 2000.

Maeve and Sean Kyle took over his coaching in 1998 and he has a lot of respect for what they tried to achieve. "I found Maeve and Sean extremely knowledgeable, and unselfish with both their time and energy," he says. "They are thorough legends of the sport. It's was a pity that the mileage on my clock was creeping up when I met them. I would have loved to have turned back the clock five years and to have another go at it under their expert guidance, but time waits for no one."

A B Comm graduate from UCD, Matthews

A night to remember in Rieti

With a population of 50,000, Rieti is a modest town by Italian standards, but its end of season athletics meeting in September has been the scene of some notable record performances. It's been an especially happy hunting ground for 800m runners. Five of the All Time Top 30 times for 800m have been set in Rieti, including the world record 1:41.01 clocked by David Rudisha at last year's meet.

In September, 1994 David Matthews ran 1:45.57 to break Marcus O'Sullivan's Irish record of 1:45.87 which had stood since 1985. A year later, Matthews returned to Rieti to set the 1:44.82 record which has become one of the pillars of the Irish men's rankings alongside Ray Flynn's 1500m record (3:33.5, 1982), Mark Carroll's 5000m mark (13:03.93, 1998) and John Treacy's 2:09:15 for the Marathon (1988).

Matthews recalls September 5, 1995 as one of those nights when he felt in the zone, completely at one with himself. "It was a very untypical September Italian day," he says. "It was more like a wet day in Belfield, it rained constantly through the afternoon and only stopped one hour before the meet.

"There were still puddles on the track as we warmed up. After a few words of wisdom and encouragement from Marcus (O'Sullivan) and Frank (O'Mara) – it was time to run. The race was stacked with a half a dozen world class Kenyans – including William Tanui, the 1992 Olympic champion – as well as the top Europeans. Everyone knew it was the race to be in.

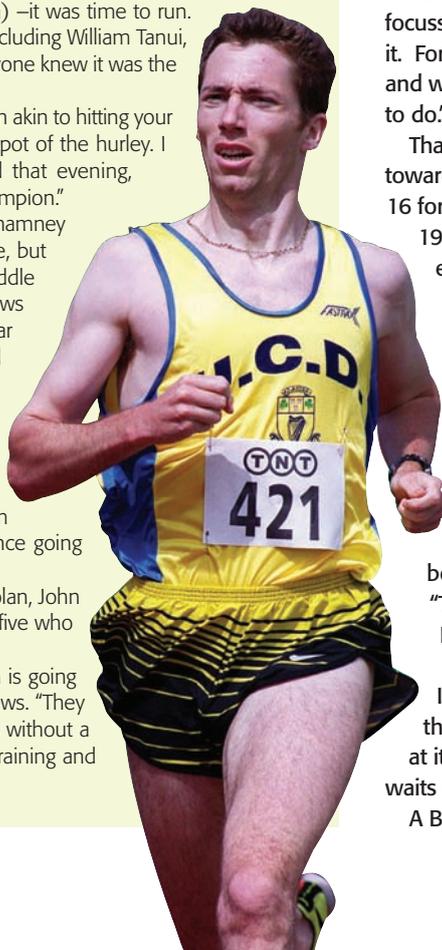
"I can best describe the run as feeling effortless and the sensation akin to hitting your best ever golf drive or striking the sliotar perfectly on the sweet spot of the hurley. I passed through 400 metres in 49 seconds and finished third that evening, smashing the Irish record and finishing ahead of the Olympic champion."

In the intervening years, James McLroy, James Nolan, Thomas Chamney and David Campbell have all threatened to better Matthews' time, but it's still standing and there's a feeling that one of the emerging middle distance tyros from Donegal could be best placed to relieve Matthews of his record. Mark English, for example, ran 1:48.63 earlier this year to knock almost a second off Matthews' National Junior record which had stood for 20 years.

"I thought the senior record would have fallen by now and I think its days are numbered," says Matthews. "800m is one of those events where you get peaks and troughs and when you get a good group of athletes together, they push each other on to new heights. I can see that happening now with the young runners from Donegal. It's great that they have a group and centre of excellence going and I am sure some of them will go on to great things.

"It's a bit like my time in UCD when there was myself, James Nolan, John O'Reilly and the Walker twins – there was a core group of four or five who were able to run 3:45 for 1500m and 1:47 for the 800m.

"Picking and choosing what races and championships to run in is going to be the key for the young runners coming through," adds Matthews. "They must avoid getting caught in the rut of running indoors, outdoors without a break – the real trick will be in how their coaches manage their training and race loads as they move up from the junior to senior ranks."



DAVID MATTHEWS FACTFILE



David Matthews leading the Irish Olympic Handball squad on a training session at the Magazine Fort area of the Phoenix Park. Matthews' brief is to bulk up the players by an average of 5kgs while also increasing their speed and agility; (below left) Matthews was still a student at UCD when he broke the Irish 800m record in Rieti, Italy in 1994 and then improved on his own record at the same venue a year later; (below right) Matthews ran for Ireland at two Olympics -- Atlanta 1996 and Sydney 2000

worked in banking and finance until 2005 when he decided he "wanted out of the office. I went out into the building boom and set up my own building company, doing one-off housing and sub-contracting. I am an outdoors person, but I took the tough option and I probably should have gone down the personal fitness route back then."

The recession took its toll on the construction business, but Matthews and his wife Niamh suffered a far more serious blow in autumn 2008. "We had been trying for children for five or six years. We had gone down the IVF route and Niamh became pregnant in April 2008. Twenty three weeks into the pregnancy Niamh phoned me to say she was showing and three days later the twins, David and John, were born but they didn't make it. We thought we were home and dry and to lose them at that stage was a brutal blow." The couple have rallied, though, and are now looking to adopt.

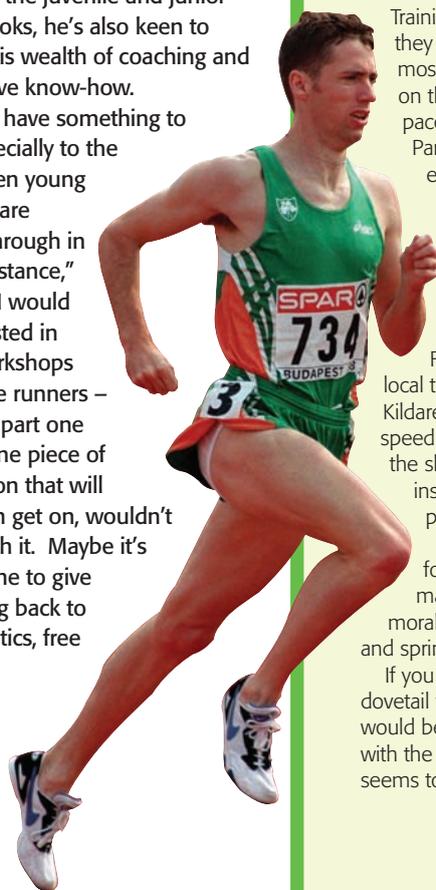
The personal fitness and coaching business has also given Matthews a new lease of life. Apart from making a living, he feels he's finally fulfilling his potential professionally. "If Noel Carroll was around he probably would have had me at this a long time ago. I am beginning to sound like him, repeating verbatim what he told me over the years.

"I don't have any secrets about how to run," he says. "I can just put a structure on what you are doing. Running is simple and most of us

complicate it. The role of the coach is to simplify and structure running and get the mind and body right. Training is simple: you do an interval at your race pace, you do a slightly longer interval at a slightly slower pace, and you do a slightly shorter interval at a slightly faster pace – that's the basis of running. In between that you do recovery, tempo and weights' sessions, and what makes a good coach is knowing how to juggle all that."

And as a new generation of middle distance running prodigies continue to rewrite the juvenile and junior record books, he's also keen to pass on his wealth of coaching and competitive know-how.

"I feel I have something to offer, especially to the six or seven young guys that are coming through in middle distance," he says. "I would be interested in doing workshops with these runners – if I can impart one nugget, one piece of information that will help them get on, wouldn't it be worth it. Maybe it's time for me to give something back to Irish athletics, free gratis."



DoB: 09/04/1974
Height: 1.91
Racing Weight: 75kgs
Education: Colaiste Chiarain Leixlip; UCD 1992-98
PBs 800m: 1:44.82, Rieti, Italy - Sept 1995; 1000m – 2:17.58, Sarajevo, Sept 1996

NATIONAL HONOURS

Senior 800m champion 1995, '96, '97

INTERNATIONAL HONOURS

1993 – 3rd European Junior Championships, San Sebastian, Spain
 1994 – European Indoor Championships, Paris
 1994 – European Championships, Helsinki
 1995 – 4th World Indoor Championships semi-final, Barcelona
 1995 – 4th World Championships semi-final, Gothenburg
 1996 – 5th Olympic Games semi-final, Atlanta
 1997 – World Indoor Championships Paris
 1997 – World Championships, Athens
 1998 – 5th European Indoor Championships Final, Valencia
 1998 – European Championships, Budapest
 1999 – 4th World Indoor Championships final, Maebashi, Japan
 1999 – World Championships, Seville
 2000 – 5th Olympic Games Heat, Sydney

TRAINING

1995 Mid-season

Mon: 4-5 miles easy(6.30 pace); 3-4 miles gym
 Tues: Track-4 x 400 in 50-51 with a 400 jog; 4-5mile recovery (7.00 pace)
 Weds: 6 miles steady (5.00 to 5.30 pace)
 Thurs: Am 8 x 300 in 38-39 with 45 sec recovery; Pm 4-5m recovery (7.00 pace) Fri: 5 miles and gym if no race.
 Sat: If race 2-3 mile easy; No race – 4 mile tempo run (start 6.00, every mile drop by 30 sec. finishing @ 4.30 pace) or hill session
 Sun: Race or 1 hour run (6.00 pace)

JULY 2011

Training is determined by the clients and groups and what they want to do and need. But I'm running every day, mostly twice and sometimes three times daily. Depending on the client it can vary from tempos at 5 minute mile pace, hill sessions at the Magazine Fort in the Phoenix Park, intervals from 1 minute up to 10 minutes and everything in between. It keeps me on my toes and fit. Pacing is crucial in personal training and it's important that you can demonstrate the pace in an interval no matter what. Luckily enough, I still have enough horsepower and endurance to keep up.

FOOTBALL

From 2007 to 2010 I played Junior A football for my local team Robertstown. In that time we were beaten in two Kildare County Finals. I played midfield and had plenty of speed and endurance in mid field, but I was a little shy on the skills department. Playing football gave me a unique insight into the fitness requirement of a modern GAA player.

Because of my athletic background I would have found training relatively comfortable, and there was many a night I'd hold back a little. It's not good for team morale when a 35-year-old veteran is leading all the runs and sprints. It was very enjoyable though!

If you had to pick a discipline from athletics that would dovetail with Gaelic football, I have no doubt 800 metres would be the perfect fit as it combines the speed of sprinting with the endurance of distance running – this combination seems to be absolute requirement in today's game.