

2004: An Irish Athletics Year

2004 won't be remembered as one of Irish athletics' great years.

The year began with that optimism which invariably and unaccountably, seems to herald an upcoming Olympiad. But come late August, a few hot days in the magnificent stadium in Athens told us of the true strength of Irish athletics - or to be more accurate, the lack of it. Sonia O'Sullivan's Olympic farewell apart, there was little to stir the emotions of Irish athletics watchers. But after the disastrous build-up to the games, we shouldn't have been surprised. At the start of the year, an O'Sullivan had been earmarked as Ireland's best medal prospect but as it turned out, walker Gillian never even made it to the start line because of injury. Less than a week before the Olympics, the sport was rocked by news that 10,000m hope Cathal Lombard had tested for the banned substance EPO. Lombard's shattering of Mark Carroll's national 10,000m record in April had already set tongues wagging but even the most cynical of observers, were surprised when he was rumbled after an Irish Sports Council sting operation. The Corkman quickly held his hands up in admission and was promptly handed a two-year ban from the sport.

Back at pre-Olympic ranch in Greece, it must have seemed that things couldn't have got any worse but they very nearly did with walker Jamie Costin lucky to escape with his life after being involved in a car crash near Athens. Once the track and field action began in Athens, a familiar pattern of underachievement emerged although Alistair Cragg's performance in being the only athlete from a European nation to qualify for the 5,000m final did offer hope for the future. Our beloved Sonia scraped into the women's 5K final as a fastest loser and for a couple of days, the country attempted to delude itself into believing that she might be in the medal shake-up. As it happened, she went out the back door early in the final although there was nothing undignified about the way that she insisted on finishing the race over a minute behind winner Meseret Defar. It later transpired that

Sonia had been suffering from a stomach bug in the 48 hours before the final although typically, the Cobhwoman played down the effects of the illness. Amazingly, she was back in action a couple of weeks later when beating a world-class field at the Flora Lite 5K road race in London and while her major championship days may be over, it's unlikely that we have seen the last of her in competition. At least Sonia managed to make it to Athens. At the start of the year, several Northern Ireland athletes had genuine hopes of qualifying for the Games but come August, an out-of-form and injured Paul Brizzel was the lone standard bearer for the province. The Ballymena man gave it a lash but his achilles problem, and a bad lane draw, meant a time of 21.00 and an early exit.

James McIlroy, Gareth Turnbull, Zoe Brown and Paul McKee all had to be content with watching the Athens action on their television screens. 800m hope McIlroy never got near his best during the summer and a fourth place in the British trials effectively ended his hopes of making the plane. The injury-plagued Turnbull gamely travelled round Europe in search of the 1500m qualifying mark but 3:39 was the best he could achieve, after missing several months training during the previous winter. A lingering hamstring problem and a virus wrecked McKee's Athens ambitions and both he and Turnbull deserve a slice of better fortune in 2005. Pole vaulter Brown had hoped for a vote of confidence from the British selectors after she had achieved the Athens B standard but the call never came. As the summer ended, stalwarts Catherina McKiernan and Dermot Donnelly hung up their competitive spikes. McKiernan had to candidly acknowledge that time had crept up on her after several injury-ravaged years. Donnelly and his Annadale Striders team-mates later suffered tragedy when their friend and clubman Andy Campbell was found dead at his home on 18 December. A large turnout of athletics-loving folk turned out in west Belfast to offer their respects to the Campbell family and Andy's many friends. As only death can, it put the year's athletics happenings in a sharp perspective.