

# EAMONN COGHLAN

**F**OR MOST 41-year-old athletes, the roar of the crowd has long fallen silent, relegated to bygone memories from a distant past. Unless your name is Eamonn Coghlan. The record-setting Dubliner, who earned the nickname "Chairman of the Boards" for his dominance on indoor wooden tracks, managed to defeat Father Time in a remarkable career spanning over 20 years.

On February 20, 1994, Coghlan became the first man over 40 years old to run a sub-four-minute mile, clocking 3:58.15 in Boston. In his autobiography, the sporting icon described the landmark race, *"It was the most profound running experience of my life - different to anything that had gone before... it was an emotional and physical triumph beyond my wildest expectations. Nothing compared to the feeling of ecstasy that enveloped me when I crossed that line."*

As a boy growing up on Cooley Road, Drimnagh, Coghlan was constantly in motion, playing various sports and running errands for family and neighbours.

His fleet of foot also allowed him to escape menacing local hooligans - inadvertent training that later paid big dividends. He began winning youth races in Phoenix Park and captured the Under-14 Dublin Cross-Country Championships in 1967.

Around this time, he met Gerry Farnan, an athletics coach who saw unlimited potential in the boy's future. Farnan developed a training plan to improve Coghlan's endurance while also incorporating innovative drills. The concept ('Reflex Speed') would ultimately hone Coghlan's trademark blistering kick. More importantly, however, the mentor instilled confidence to dream big - goals that included representing Ireland, competing in the Olympics, and setting world records.

**I**N 1971, Coghlan earned a scholarship to Villanova University in the United States. Under

legendary coach Jumbo Elliot, Coghlan followed in the footsteps of other standout Irish runners at 'Nova, such as Jim Reardon, John Hartnett, and 1956 Olympic gold medalist, Ron Delaney. But the transition proved difficult.

He struggled with homesickness, academic pressures, and a gruelling workout regimen that left him broken - physically and mentally.

After only six months, he had had enough and returned home to Dublin. Going against his standard policy, Coach Elliot urged the young runner to re-consider. The persuasion worked. Coghlan eventually conquered the American collegiate ranks with a renewed outlook while earning a degree in marketing and communications.

He then embarked on the next chapter of his life as a professional athlete.

**Christopher Warner profiles the Olympian who went on to be the first man over 40 to run a sub-four-minute mile**

The increasingly lucrative vocation also included serving as a spokesman for the Irish Tourism Board.

In the world of athletics, medals won at the Olympics Games often define success. Although Coghlan wore the tricolour in three different Olympiads (1976, 1980, 1988), a mixture of bad luck, inexperience, and injuries left him frustrated and empty-handed. But these setbacks also strengthened his resolve, allowing him to find redemption and glory elsewhere. Repeatedly.

Eamonn Coghlan didn't just break world records - he smashed them.

Coghlan once even managed to set two all-time bests in one race, lowering his own indoor mile record by two seconds while setting a new mark for 1500 metres. In America, his Irish heritage made him a huge



**From the Evening Press in 1976. Coghlan made an appearance at Arnotts and a 16-year-old Bono turned up with his nephew. Can you spot him?**

fan favourite. He thrived at Madison Square Garden in New York City, where he captured the Wanamaker Mile seven times.

**F**ROM START to finish, Coghlan's 1983 season showcased an athlete clearly at the top of his game. He became the first indoor miler to crack the 3:50 barrier with a time of 3:49.78, a record that stood for 14 years. Later that summer, he set his sights on the 5,000 metres title at the inaugural IAAF World Outdoor Championship.

In front of a packed stadium crowd in Helsinki, Coghlan trailed race leader Dmitriy Dmitriyev of the USSR by 10 metres at the bell lap. He refused to panic and instead waited patiently to ambush the Soviet on the final bend. With a burst of acceleration punctuated with a jubilant fist pump, years of disappointment suddenly vanished en route to being crowned world champion. The victory remains one of the biggest moments in Irish sporting history. Just how big was it? Back in Dublin, Bono announced the results on stage at U2's first major headlining concert.

In 2011, Taoiseach Enda Kenny nominated Coghlan to sit in the Seanad, and his philanthropic endeavours include work with Dublin-based humanitarian agency GOAL. With his wife of 44 years, Yvonne, the Coghlan family have raised four children and now proudly boast the addition of five grandchildren. ■