

The past ten years of athletic success that Kerry's athletes have brought to the county can be attributed to a variety of factors but one which shines through is the facilities of An Riocht athletic track. This weekend the international standard track, ranked amongst the best in the country, celebrated its first decade in existence by holding the AAI Games which incorporated the Irish team relay championships. This was the first time this event was held in Castleisland since the inaugural edition held in the same year as the opening of the track.

Early Sunday morning the interior of the mammoth leisure centre was opened to the top brass of the AAI who took entries in the exercise hall in between breaks at the adjoining canteen. Little use was made of the member of the AAI's recently acquired and rather expensive road fleet which contained all types of track and field equipment needed for a competition due to the more than adequate stock of the track itself. Long gone are the memories, left now to only the most hardened veterans, of the large green container emblazoned with the clubs name which stood where the leisure centre is now. Lawnmowers had to be moved to get at the hurdles and a bucket of paint could easily be knocked in search of a discus. County Board meetings are held now in the room whose corner is the foundation stone set by Gillian O'Sullivan in 2003 and few of the present members have ever seen the inside of the small dark green port-a-cabin which still stands at the corner of the track as a testament to the early days when meetings were held around as opposed to in the cabin and you had to pray for a quick meeting and no rain.

In ten years athletes have come and gone, competed at national and international level and brought glory to their county. In near darkness in 2003 Gillian O'Sullivan was welcomed home by a packed track after her silver at the World Championships in Paris. County Boards have risen and fallen but in that time one unchanging constant has been the hard work and often thankless dedication of Denny McSweeney. Since day 1 he has served tirelessly as manager of a facility which grew from a field to a track to an entire leisure complex and has involved himself in every aspect of its running from securing national and international competitions to moving the boards during the triple jump.

The AAI Games are a major national competition with prize money in the sprints attracting many of the countries top names in search of qualifying times for international championships later in the year. On the track the poster girl of Irish athletics, Kelly Proper, was handed a rare defeat in the women's 100m. Although exactly step for step for the last 30m of the race and crossing the line in the same time of 11.79 Niamh Whelan was adjudged to have won, reversing her defeat to Proper earlier in the 200m. To be present in a field of that magnitude was an achievement in itself and Eilish Fitzpatrick of Gneeveguilla put in a solid run in the 100m after a long layoff due to study.

Gold medals were going to be hard to come by at these championships but were in no short supply for Kerry's top athletes. Continuing a strong run of recent form Caoimhe Casey of St. Brendan's AC won the women's 3km walk. Conal O'Callaghan of Spa Muckcross took top place in the long jump with 6.45m, Mairead O'Neill of Gneeveguilla won the women's hammer and Jonathon Foley of Farranfore Maine Valley was close to his best in the pole vault, winning with a clearance of 3.60.

Daniel Clifford took silver in the shot putt and discus and a bronze in the 56lb wf which, along with club mate James Nagle, helped Farranfore Maine Valley take the Irish team relay title in all three events. Sinead O'Connor of Tralee Harriers picked up silvers in the long jump and triple jump while Pat Murphy of Castleisland was 2nd in the men's 5km walk in just under 24 minutes. Further bronze medals went to Ann Marie Costello in the 1500m and Shelia O'Donoghue in the shot putt, both Gneeveguilla, and to Ger Cremins of An Riocht in the 110m hurdles.

With schools competitions in the weeks ahead Kerry's next generation of aspiring athletes will be making their way to Castleisland to prepare for provincial and national championships and it is here, in the medals what will be won, that the true value of the An Riocht facility will be made known.

Of the 47 affiliated nations of Europe only 801 of its best athletes have been invited to the European Youth Olympic Trials which will be held from the 21<sup>st</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May in Moscow. Only 11 athletes were selected to represent Ireland at these games and this team includes one of Kerry's most promising race walkers, Emma Prendiville of Farranfore Maine Valley AC. Emma, who followed her brother Niall into race walking, was selected to represent Ireland by virtue of her recent indoor national title and a qualifying time secured when winning the Isle of Man Open 5k. Both members of national squads, Niall and Emma are following in the footsteps of their former club mate Gillian O'Sullivan from whom they have received much advice in the past. Qualification to the World Youth Olympics is difficult and unlikely at this early stage of her development but selection for these trials is a measure of Emma's immense potential