Things Irish: green hills, potatoes, cobblestone streets, good ale, fierce tempers, and great distance runners. To American track fans this last may be the dominant characteristic associated with "Elk," the Irish Republic. Names like Delaney, Carroll, Murphy, Walsh and Harnett have for years turned up high on US lists, helping Villanova become one of the premier distance powers in the country.

As good as these Irish runners were, however, it is likely that the best of them all is currently a junior at Villanova. In the space of one short track season, Eamonn Coghlan (pronounced A-man Cok-lun) has gone from "decent" Villanova middle-distance runner to 8th fastest miler of all-time, European recordholder, NCAA champion, ICRA champion, and prime candidate for the Montreal 1500 meter final. In five weeks, Eamonn ("It's the Gaelic for Edward") managed 3:56.9, 1:51.9 and 3:59.6 relay legs at Penn; open 3:56.2 and 13:35.0 wins at Pitt; a European Record 3:53.3 3rd in the Bayi Kingston race; 3:59.3 and 13:38.8 wins at the ICRA; a 4:01.2 victory over Marty Liquori on a muddy track at the Villanova Twilight; and a 4:00.1 NCAA win.

Quite a month's work for the 22-year-old marketing and sociology major, especially considering that his mile PR before this season was only 4:04.0. But somehow, one isn't surprised that this slightly-built (5'10"/137) Dubliner was able to cut off 12 seconds in the mile in one year. He comes from an athletic family of six ("My brother was once called the future "Pele of Ireland" but then he put a bit of fat on his backside"), and beneath the soft brogue and easy amiability lies granite. Still, for Eamonn, it has all come rather quickly.

T&FN: Are you at all surprised at your sudden emergence?
Coghlan: Oh, yeah, definitely. For the past couple of years, up until last September, I wasn't really into training as much as I am now--I was always just fooling around and didn't take it seriously. I'd always just relied on my natural ability. Then, last year, after running close to 4:00 just kidding around, I decided to come back to school and put my mind to it, you know. I started to train every day, not to where I was killing myself. Just do a little bit every day; just get into a routine. Now I'm starting to get the results from this routine; I'm now beginning to realize my true potential. It's very exciting to realize that I am up there with the world-class guys. I still don't believe it.

T&FN: When you say you were just fooling around, what were you doing?
Coghlan: I was training every other day, more or less. I wasn't into it, you know. I'd miss more days of the year then I trained. If I trained for maybe 3 days straight, I felt "My God, I'm in great shape." The week before the race, I'd decide to do a bit of work to get ready for it, just the week before the race. I've running everyday, so I never usually set goals--but I decided I would write on the back of my mirror in my room a time and see if I could get it this year. At that point, I'd never broken 4:00 and my best outdoor time was 4:05.5.

I forgot all about that time till I came back from the King Games, and I said, "God, I'm going to have to take a look at this now." I had no idea what I had written down and I looked and saw "3:53.5" by June 1975." I couldn't get over it. It was quite fascinating. I kept trying to convince myself that I had run faster than that time.

T&FN: How did you feel after the 3:53.5?
Coghlan: After the Kingston race, I was really tired. I was coming down the homestretch and I thought I would never get to the finish. My legs were like, wobbling, and I hadn't felt like that since a long time before. I think mostly really it was like that was that it was the fastest that I'd ever gone in my life; it was just a new thing for me.

T&FN: Did you and Liquori actually jostle during the race?
Coghlan: Not that I really remember. I remember Marty coming on me okay, and there was a little bit of a feel. I remember him grabbing my arm a bit, but I don't think it was enough to stop his performance or mine.

Marty, I don't know whether he was using it as an excuse or not. He said that if we had been working together, we'd have been passing Bayi, but I don't think we'd have been passing Bayi at all, because he had the whole race in his command. And I wasn't going to like sit down and say, "Okay Marty, go on ahead." I was running my race and he was running his and these things happen.

T&FN: Has this race increased your confidence quite a bit?
Coghlan: Not quite a bit; slightly I guess. Every race I go into, I always sort of feel that I'm in terrible condition, terrible shape, I always feel that I haven't done enough training. It's just my approach to a race. Then when I get into the race, the minute the gun goes off, "Poo!" I'm back to normal again. I'm relaxed again. So I don't know if it has fully increased my confidence to where I'd like it to be; I've got a lot of experience to gain yet.

Another thing: I always sort of liked the challenge, too. Where I'd come into a race with Bayi, with Walker or with Liquori, and I'd hear the people say, "God, you can't compete against these guys, what are you thinking about?" And I liked that; I liked a challenge.

This is one thing that is true about
MEET INFORMATION

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T&FN: Irish runners have a reputation for toughness . . .

Coughlan: My explanation for that is when I came over here, I was completely overwhelmed by the environment that is created by the American guys. Being at the track meets, you see how professional they really are about it. This is something that is very much lacking in Ireland: Everyone is lackadaisical and easy-going. They sort of expect other people to do things for them. So when we come over here, we're overwhelmed. If we can't beat them, we join them, and when we join them, our toughness begins to show.

T&FN: How did it feel to beat Liquori in the Villanova Twilight?

Coughlan: I was surprised at Marty, all right, because I couldn't understand why he let me get so far ahead. When I beat him, I was more surprised than glad. I did want to beat him because there was always a little bit of a comparison at Villanova between Marty Liquori and Eamonn Coughlan. So I did feel good about it, for took, as we say, a bit of his glory and put it onto me.

T&FN: Who else do you consider great in the 1500, besides Bannai and Liquori, obviously?

Coughlan: I'd say John Walker of New Zealand, definitely. He's so powerful physically and mentally that there's no stopping him. I think he's going to be, not the darkhorse, but the man to watch next year in the Olympic 1500.

T&FN: Are the Olympics a big event in your mind?

Coughlan: It's in the back of my mind, but I don't want to plan too far ahead. Anything could happen between now and then. I'm just taking one race at a time.

T&FN: Speaking of the Olympics, is Ron Delaney '76 1500 champion for Ireland? One of your heroes?

Coughlan: Not really. Take him as an example. When I was a kid, people would ask if I wanted to be the next Ronny Delaney of Ireland, and I'd say, "No, I don't want to be Ronny Delaney. I want to be the next Eamonn Coughlan of Ireland." I didn't want any comparisons there at all, you know.

But I guess that when I was in my teens, I always used to think of Kip Keino and say, "Isn't he fantastic." I used to idolize Keino. And now that I'm starting to reach the sort of times he used to run, I'm wondering to myself if there's some kid looking at me in the same way. It's something that is hard to accept.