

A slip up.

Running up past the fourteenth-century O'Doherty's Keep in Buncrana, I turned right onto a grassy track that was once lined with houses of the medieval town, and slipped. My shoes had no purchase on a patch of mud. It was a minor skid that flashed me back to my first cross-country shoes, fresh out of their box. They had arrived that morning, mail order from a running magazine. I'd thrown a school bag from my shoulder to open this rare delivery.



O'Doherty's Keep, Buncrana, Co Donegal.

At my first secondary school, I'd taken part in school games, though none particularly successfully. This four-year spell for those of us who failed the 11-plus exam, was to prepare us for the world of work at sixteen. P.E. class was another way to pass the time; few took it that seriously. The good footballers played their best games for the town's teams.

Four years later, a self-propelled jump into a grammar school, where my brother had landed three years earlier, was a shock. Part of the cultural sea change was the importance of success at sports. Winning teams were famed and framed in the school's heritage mounted in the foyer of what was a brand-new building. And there was a hierarchy with rugby - the First XV - at the pinnacle, cricket, tennis and towards the other end athletics and cross-country running. Though all winning

teams, and their individual champions, were revered. Many of them went on to regional and international stardom, and were always 'Academy past pupils'.

As far back as I can recall, I have had an instinctive fear of pain. It's somewhere deep and hidden, and I've never fathomed it. To trust my physical self to the fortune of the moment, to a tackle, to a fight had never seemed right; it became second nature to shy away. The rugby motto of putting your body on the line was the antithesis of sense to me. Oddly now, the prospect of medical surgery, and I've had a few, doesn't fill me with any dread.

Only once do I recall getting into a school fight. It was at primary school. Ringed by a cheering crowd, I threw a punch out of panic, drew blood and ended up in the principal's office. I didn't gain any kudos or reputation from it. There were others who fought regularly; they drew the abuse from teachers.

My first trial game for a minor team place ended my rugby career there and then. As a lanky runner, I was put on the wing. And I ran. In any direction to avoid being caught, the end line was irrelevant. To take a crushing tackle to advance the team a few yards down the field, again, was all wrong. Maybe, I hadn't yet bonded with my teammates? But if they saw fear in my eyes and laughed, I didn't see it, nor suffered any aftereffect. Aversion to such threatening circumstances had, by then, become second nature; my style was certainly not in the spirit of the game of rugby. And so, at the end of the game, the trainer kindly guided me back in the direction of the cross-country team.

Here I found many other like-minded individuals, including those who thought the whole sport thing ludicrous. We would suffer the same misfortunes of the weather as the rugby players, but we saw a lot more mud. I wasn't a star runner but a good mid-team dependable. There was one training day when I ran effortlessly, passed everyone, and crossed the line well ahead; pity it hadn't happened during a competition. I've recently heard such days called *float days*; I wish there had been more.

Those first running shoes had soles like tractor tyres, deep, angled rubber chevrons, no padding or support, leather uppers that were green suede. I thought them cool, and lent some seriousness to my running.

During early summer months, the focus turned to track and field athletics. One regional event I recall was held at the local St. Patrick's Secondary School. I competed in the high jump where my goat-like legs could spring the rest of me upwards to a significant height. Among my competitors that afternoon was the longer-legged Liam Neeson. He cleared the bar higher than me, with an old-fashioned scissors jump, not the more adventurous belly-roll. These were the years when Fosbury was experimenting with his *flop*, and Liam was discovering play-acting. I assume he remembers beating me that day.

Years earlier, on my first running climb up Slemish Mountain, my uncle Tom christened me *the mountain goat*. At home, I would climb along the outside of the bannisters, run and leap halfway down the stairs, spring-jump up onto worktops and tables. This was natural to me, an extension of my leaning towards a restless motion. And I think running cleared my head, without being aware of it, dampening the tumbling anxiousness of teenage years. Then I got hooked on endorphins.

Since then I've run in London at college, in the Solomon Island's Honiara Hash House Harriers - a hare-and-hounds running event evolved in the British colonies, setting up the weekend with exercise and cold beer - I've run in Derry, Donegal and Dublin, and other more exotic places, much of it by myself. And now on most Saturday mornings, at Park Runs among my friends in Sanctuary Runners. Mostly avoiding mud.

Yet I like this grassy old track that runs up to join the Military Road, and its historic connection from the town to the Napoleonic fort at Ned's Point. The earlier houses around O'Doherty's Keep are long gone, any stone scavenged to build Vaughan's Castle and the buildings of the relocated planters' town. Lined with trees, there's a sense of being in a woodland, and through mature beech there are elevated views of the Crana River and the beautifully renovated Swan's Park, or Swan Park to be more colloquial and less proprietary. And then, there are those occasional patches of mud reminding me of running shoes with tractor tyre soles.