

By Mark Gallagher



THE AMERICAN DREAM

As Ireland's biggest ever team competes at the World Championships, the age-old debate continues over whether athletes are better off here or in the US collegiate system

WHEN Rhasidat Adeleke became the first Irish sprinter to claim an NCAA title back in June, breaking her own 400m national record in the process, it seemed further vindication of her decision to develop her career at the University of Texas.

The Tallaght native followed a well-trodden path to the US. From Noel Carroll back in the 1960s, some of the most talented competitors in Irish track and field have gone through the collegiate system on the other side of the Atlantic. From Eamonn Coghlan to John Treacy, from Marcus O'Sullivan to Sonia O'Sullivan. And now Adeleke.

The 20-year-old is part of Ireland's biggest ever team at the World Athletics Championship, which began in Budapest yesterday.

However, she is one of only a few who chose to hone their talent Stateside – 5000m runner Brian Fay, who was at Washington University, is another. Many of those competing are home-grown or have been coached in the UK.

Adeleke's remarkable rise under coach Edrick Floreal in Austin has breathed new life into the age-old debate about whether Ireland's top athletes should be

'NO NATION INVESTS IN COLLEGE SPORTS LIKE THE US'

going to the United States or staying at home. Coghlan left for Villanova in the 1970s and the former 5000m world champion feels that the discussion has been taking place for 40 years, if not more.

'It is nearly 50 years since I was in college in America, and a lot has changed since then. But I have said it before, I blossomed as a person and an athlete over in Villanova. I always felt it was like the song says, if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere,' Coghlan recalled with his usual charm while on holiday in Spain earlier this week.

'We have been having this debate for 40 years. In Irish athletics, whether our best athletes are better off going to America or staying at home.

'What I will say is that there is no longer a need for our best athletes to go over there if they don't want to. We have sent our biggest team to a world championship and more of the athletes stayed at home than went away.'

However, the former 'Chairman of The Boards' is steadfast about where he stands on the discussion.

'I will always veer towards the athlete going away. In America, they grind you to the bone and if they grind you to the bone, they get the best out of you.'

'And you have the best of facilities on your doorstep, step out of your dormitory for a top-notch track. And there is the team camaraderie in the American college system, which is something special and not really replicated anywhere else.'

Mark Carroll is of a similar mind to Coghlan. The Corkman won numerous NCAA titles at 3000m and 5000m for Providence and remained in the States after his suc-



PIONEERS: Mark Carroll (above) and Eamonn Coghlan (below)



cessful track career to coach in the college system at the likes of Auburn and Drake universities. He has now moved away from the collegiate system, but keeps a close eye on what is happening, especially in relation to Irish competitors. And he feels the quality of facilities, coaching and training partners are key aspects.

'There is no right or wrong answer. In 10 or 20 years' time, we will probably still be having this debate,' Carroll said. 'What I will say is that the support, funding and facilities over here are second to none.'

'But it is up to the individ-

ual athlete and where they feel most comfortable. If an athlete feels it is right for them to stay at home – and some people are homebirds – then that is what is right for them. And you look at the Irish team at the worlds, the likes of Ciara Mageean and Andrew Coscoran, it has worked for them. So it works both ways.'

Having worked in the collegiate system in the US, Carroll has seen first-hand the enormous investment that goes into it and how the revenue earned from flagship teams in college football or basketball trickles down to all other sports.

'Football teams, especially, but also basketball teams, generate a huge amount of revenues. You are talking billions of dollars in television contracts, and there are the ticket sales, some college football teams constantly sell out 100,000-seater stadiums, jersey sales. All of that feeds all the other sports – and that includes track & field and cross-country.'

'No other nation on earth invests as much into their college sports as the United States does. And it is not just their football and basketball

teams. It is every sport. So, it means that one of the advantages of being over here is that you have the best of everything when it comes to coaching and training,' Carroll insisted.

'So, the level of support that you get over here is like nothing you will find anywhere else, just because of the sheer investment in college sports. And the fact is that you might have 15 or 20 training part-

'RHASIDAT WAS A GREAT ATHLETE EVEN BEFORE GOING TO AMERICA'

ners in your team and that does make a difference, especially on mornings when the weather isn't so nice, you have 15 teammates who are going to do it as well.'

Carroll knows the arguments against athletes going across to America. He has heard them from some Irish coaches for years. And he understands where they are coming from.

'There are some coaches in Ireland who are dead against it. They

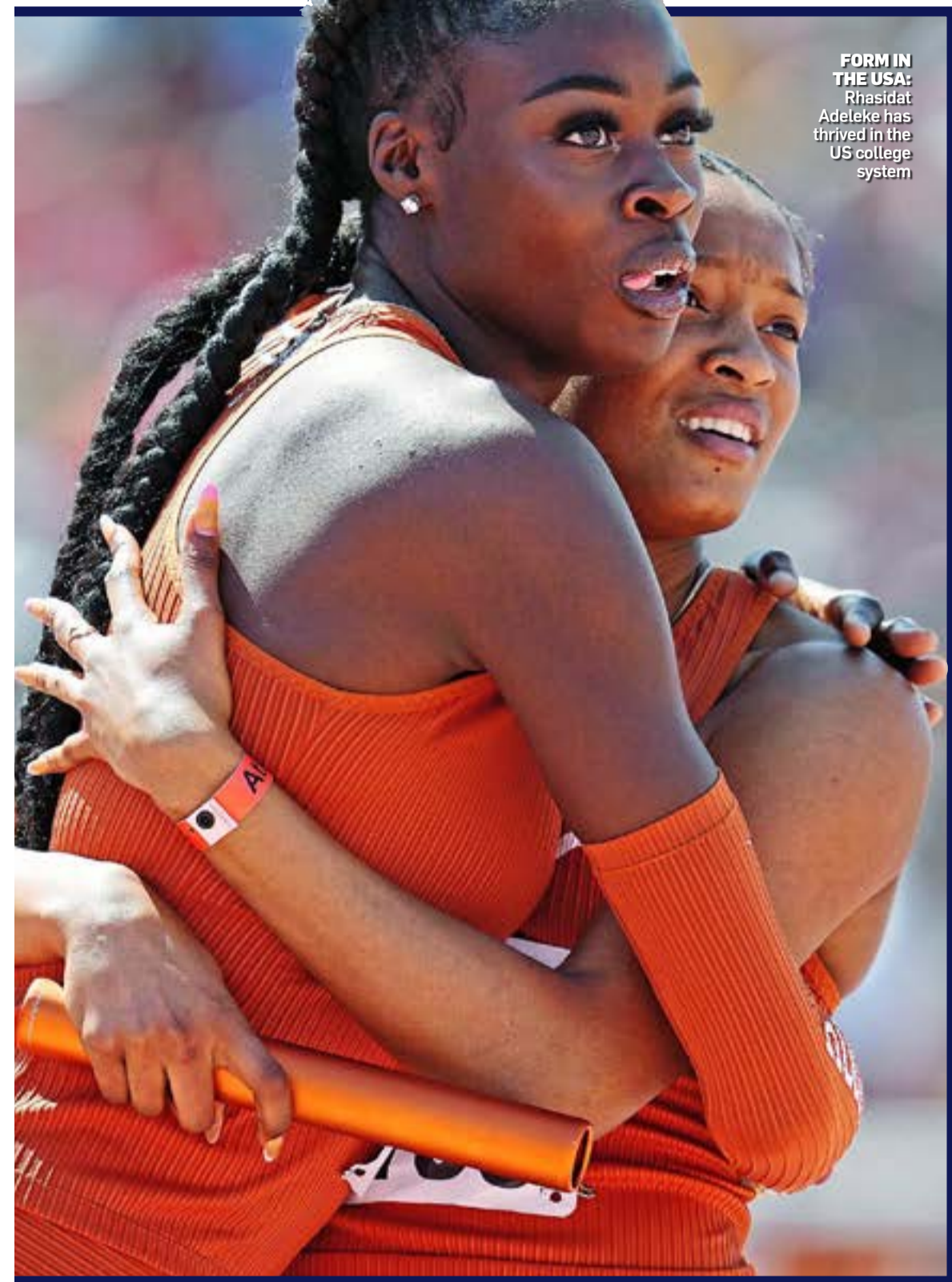
are worried that athletes will get over-raced and burnt out, that the cut-throat nature of the college system might chew them up. I've heard the arguments. But NCAA is a perfect bridge between junior and senior. Irish athletes at 17 or 18 are doing well at European junior level, but the NCAA can be used as a way to find out if they can make a mark at world level.

'If the athlete does their homework, chooses the right school, chooses the right coach, then I think there are far more advantages than disadvantages,' Carroll added.

Athletics Ireland's high performance director Paul McNamara was in the US college system himself and he has reservations about sending the top Irish athletes across the pond.

'It is a fallacy to say that an athlete needs to go away to compete at the highest level,' McNamara said from Ireland's training camp in Slovakia this week.

'We have brought 24 athletes to Budapest and 16 or 17 of them are what would be considered home-



FORM IN THE USA: Rhasidat Adeleke has thrived in the US college system



FLYING THE FLAG: Ireland's Ciara Mageean

Athletics leads the field in the ongoing battle against doping

#justsayin...

SHELBY Houlihan should be in Budapest this week. She should be one of the medal contenders in the stacked 1500m event that includes Ciara Mageean. Instead, last month the American set a new world record for the beer mile classic – a race where athletes must chug a 12oz can of beer, of at least 5 per cent alcohol volume, every 400m.

Houlihan is currently serving a four-year ban for testing positive for nandrolone. The US 1500m and 5000m record holder insists she had never heard of the performance-enhancing drug before being told the news by the Athletics Integrity Unit. The athlete appealed her suspension to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), but it was upheld.

The middle-distance runner claims she ingested the anabolic steroid from eating a burrito 'from an authentic Mexican food truck that serves pig offal' near her home in Oregon. This had echoes of Tyson Fury blaming a failed test for nandrolone on eating castrated wild boar or Canelo Alvarez insisting that his two failed tests for Clenbuterol, a fat-burning substance, were down to contaminated beef.

Alvarez, of course, is the biggest star in boxing. It can be argued that he is so big that the sport couldn't do without him in its struggle with Mixed Martial Arts. The Mexican simply got a slap on the wrists, a lenient six-month suspension. His rather flimsy excuse was accepted.

No such charity was extended to Houlihan. The two sports appear to have two very different attitudes to doping.

The starting gun was fired for this year's World Athletics Championship yesterday and Houlihan isn't the only prospective contender missing.

Luvo Manyonga, the long jumper whose extraordinary feel-good story of how he came back from crystal meth addiction to become world champion and Olympic silver medalist warmed everyone's hearts, is currently serving a four-year ban for repeated whereabouts failures – basically, not being in the place where he should be for a drug test. Brianna McNeal, the 100m hurdles champion in Rio, is in the midst of a five-year ban for 'tampering'.

While Seb Coe talked once more this week about track & field's tough job of staying relevant in the modern world, there is one thing that the sport must be commended for and that's the way it has fought against doping.



HARD LINE: Shelby Houlihan is banned

No longer can it be accused of being soft against the scourge that has clouded the sport in public cynicism. If anything, other sports, including the world's biggest and most popular, football, could take a leaf out of their book. After years of complacency, athletics is the one sport determined to tackle the problem.

The Athletics Integrity Unit came into existence in April 2017 to oversee drug testing and investigations. And they have taken their role pretty seriously. At present, according to its website, there are 570 athletes or support staff serving a suspension. Russia is clearly the biggest culprit with Kenya next,

THERE are extenuating circumstances around the doping problem in Kenyan athletics, given the grinding poverty that many of its athletes are trying to escape through the prizes on offer for various marathons and road races. But that the AIU are comfortable in suspending 64 Kenyan athletes, shows they are going to do the best job possible.

While other sports remain asleep at the wheel – or even blind to what is going on beneath their noses – athletics has taken the initiative. And for that, the sport and its administrators should be applauded.

Perhaps we can't believe everything that we will see in Budapest over the next week or so. But we can believe in it a lot more than we once did. It is not something that can be said of other sports.