

THE LIGHT SHINES ON

In recent months Bandon AC and the sport of athletics lost a beloved figure in Catherine Duggan, whose commitment to the sport knew no bounds. Her son, Ronan Duggan, remembers the woman she was.



Catherine Duggan (right) with young friends Niamh Callanan, Laura Nicholson, Moira Barrett and Grainne Mulcahy. Photo: Ronan Duggan

It's a memory that will stay with me. At a hospital in Cork in early June, she was busy scribbling notes on the back of menu cards – jotting down names and events and moving them around like a jigsaw, preparing the Bandon teams for the upcoming National League. Just days later cancer would finally take my mother's life, but even in those moments, after 50 years as a member, she was preoccupied with the future of her club.

She joined at the age of nine, in 1967, and five decades on was still turning out to earn a few points and help bring a team title from the Cork County Masters back to Bandon.

But it was off the track that she shined brightest; a devoted club member who did the unseen work that every club needs done but few want to do. If she had one talent, though, it was making you buy into what she spent a lifetime selling: the sport of athletics.

For some athletes, beset by teenage distractions or laziness, she found creative ways to barter for their talent. Turn out in

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the Munster Championships and she might bake you an apple tart in return.

Before they knew it hesitant teens would find themselves embedded in this thing, relied upon by their teammates, finding that they suddenly had no way out and soon realising they no longer wanted one.

One morning ahead of a national championships, she called to visit a girl who had said she couldn't make the trip after a heavy night on the town. Most coaches would just curse their lack of commitment, but not my mother, who knocked until someone answered, then waded upstairs to her bedroom, not taking no for an answer.

Heaven and Earth

She paid club memberships for those who couldn't afford them and when some of our members who were asylum seekers faced deportation, she moved heaven and earth to stop it happening – organising everyone to write letters to the Department of Foreign Affairs to explain their contribution to the club and the community.

She coached international athletes, but as much effort was ploughed into those without any trace of talent. Her guiding principle was always to coach the person, not the event, and her finger was kept on the athletes' life as a whole, aware that guidance was often needed more off the track than on it.

She never saw colour, except when it

was red tape, which she hated. She cut through it to ensure a fair result whenever she saw it in sport. On one occasion, as I was collecting my number for a national underage race, my biggest rival was being told he couldn't race due to a late entry. Overhearing this, my mother marched to the front of the line and refused to yield until the official allowed the other kid to enter on the day.

He won the race, demoting me to second, but that was Mam – more concerned with what was fair than what benefitted her most. She didn't see other clubs as enemies, but would co-ordinate joint training sessions in Cork for certain disciplines, where coaches and athletes could share ideas and spur each other on.

At her funeral, it was no surprise to see threads from across the Irish athletics community knit together in Bandon. I spent several hours shaking the hands and hearing the stories of the lives she touched.

The death of one so loved can be impossibly tough to bear, an irreplaceable void, but there is comfort in knowing that a life hasn't really ended when its legacy lives on.

Remember in November

Catherine Duggan and many stalwarts of Irish Athletics and the Running Community who have passed in the past two years will be remembered in a special way at the Remembrance Run 5K in the Phoenix Park on Sunday, November 12. The list includes: Catherine Duggan Jun 2017, Mary Doyle May 2017, Michael 'Curley' Cunningham May 2017, Joanna Duignan May 2017, Rita Brady Apr 2017, Aine Pobjoy Feb 2017, Hugh Gallagher Feb 2017, Noel Henry Jan 2017, Jimmy Douglas Jan 2017, Matt Rudden Jan 2017, Frank Murphy Jan 2017. If clubs or training groups would like to add names for Remembrance, please email: editor@irishrunner.ie putting the word Remembrance in the subject.