



Born to **PERFORM**



GERARD HARTMANN'S NEW AUTOBIOGRAPHY TELLS THE STORY OF HOW HE BECAME ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST SOUGHT-AFTER SPORTS INJURY SPECIALISTS. WRITES **JASON HENDERSON**

I FIRST met Gerard Hartmann exactly 11 years ago and I would describe him as one of the most intriguing, successful and, above all, charismatic people I have come across in athletics. His job – a physical therapist – does not sound glamorous, but his sixth sense for pinpointing injuries and guiding athletes back to full fitness has made him nothing short of a legendary figure in elite sporting circles.

During the past 20 years he has treated more than 60 Olympic medallists, plus world champions and record-holders such as Paula Radcliffe. Kenyan athletes simply refer to him as their "Daktari", which is Swahili for doctor. Douglas Wakiihuri, the former world and London Marathon



champion, once sent him a thank you message which read: "I will always run to your healing hands."

I first started writing full-time for AW in mid-1997 and soon started to hear about a mysterious Irishman who, it seemed, was a secret weapon employed by many of the world's top athletes. Curious about why his small clinic in Limerick had become a magnet for injured world-beaters, I began a somewhat lengthy process of trying to arrange an interview.

Maybe it was my imagination, but Hartmann seemed to spend the next few months sussing me out. Then, finally, I was given an invitation to go over to see him. There would be no rushed phone calls with this particular interview, for I would later discover that when Hartmann does something, he does it well.

From the moment I arrived in Limerick, it was a fascinating adventure. The taxi driver who Hartmann had dispatched to meet me at Shannon Airport told me tales of all the Olympic champions who he had regularly picked up. Later, I saw Hartmann at work as he literally reduced Colin Jackson to tears with intensive therapy on his legs.

Searching for answers, I asked him what his secrets were. "There's no magic," he told me, "I'm here working 10 hours a day mostly and athletes get very good results out of me."

However, he added: "If I had to pick on something, it would be that I have energy, like a Duracell battery ... the highest power you can get ... and this energy is infectious and spreads to the athletes."

The ensuing article, printed in AW in January 2001 under the headline "The Irish Midas", also quoted Radcliffe as saying: "I believe he has a special gift or sense that enables him to identify and treat injuries and problems." Irish running legends such as Noel Carroll and Marcus O'Sullivan have also described Hartmann as having



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"missionary zeal" and of having a "healing power", while the Portuguese distance runner Domingos Castro once said: "When I arrive in Shannon and I know I'm seeing Gerard, I'm getting better already."

Since then I've watched Hartmann from afar as he became, in my view, a key factor in turning Radcliffe from an excellent distance runner into a truly invincible marathoner. His talents were also spotted by Nike, who asked him to help promote their barefoot-based FREE concept (his 'plaster cast' analogy remains, to me, the best description of why barefoot running is beneficial). In addition, while his bread and butter business is track and field athletics, he has also treated some of Ireland's top sportsmen, plus Hollywood actors like John Travolta and world-famous rock stars such as U2.

In 2003 I was daft enough to enter the Hawaii Ironman, with Hartmann also entered in what was the race's 25th anniversary. There, I witnessed his positive energy first hand as he put my terrified mind at ease shortly before the start at 7am and then, close to midnight, came out on to the roads a couple of miles from the finish to spur me on (he had finished several hours earlier despite using a borrowed bike!).

From my experience on that day, he was as inspirational as any coach could be. It made me realise that his energy, motivational ability and general knowledge of training and racing means that when he

takes athletes under his wing in Limerick he becomes far more than a mere therapist to them. He is, at the same time, a coach, motivator, healer of injuries and, sometimes, even a training partner.

In 2005, I returned to Ireland to see the opening of a museum in his new clinic at the University of Limerick. Guests included Ron Delany, the 1956 Olympic 1500m champion, and items on

ABOVE (right to left): Gerard Hartmann, Olympic 1500m champion Ron Delany and University of Limerick president Professor Don Barry at the opening of the 'Hartmann Collection' in 2007

ABOVE LEFT: Winning team - Hartmann with Paula Radcliffe moments after she had set the amazing world marathon record of 2:15:25

OPPOSITE: Gerard Hartmann with the many Kenyans who have just one name for him - 'Daktari'

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Hartmann with one of his most successful athletes, double Olympic champion Dame Kelly Holmes