

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS delivered by: **DR PÁDRAIC CONWAY**, on 21 April, 2005, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, on **HAILE GEBRESELISSIE**



A Sheansailéir, agus a mhuintir na hOllscoile,

Born on 18th April 1973, Haile Gebreselassie is one of ten children born to a family in the village of Assela in the Arsi region of Ethiopia.

He is widely – and correctly - regarded as one of the greatest distance runners of all time, the most recent and most successful standard bearer of an outstanding Ethiopian Olympic tradition which stretches back to the achievements of Abebe Bikila and Mamo Wolde in the 1960s. We honour him today, however, not only for his sporting prowess but for the work which, increasingly in latter years, he has done for development in Ethiopia, with a particular focus on education.

Haile Gebreselassie's running achievements are topped by two Olympic gold medals, both in the 10,000 metres, in Atlanta in 1996 and Sydney in 2000. His last stride win over Paul Tergat of Kenya in Sydney was one of the most memorable races in Olympic history. His longevity and consistency are two of the hallmarks of his career; in a world where fame has become a synonym of ephemerality, it gives pause to reflect that he lost only two races of significance in the ten-year period after he won his first senior world championship medal in Stuttgart (1993).

Altogether he won four world championship gold medals in the 10,000 metres, four world indoor championship gold medals: three at 3,000 metres and one at 1,500 metres and one world half marathon championship. He launched his career with a 5,000/10,000 metre double gold at the world junior championships in 1992.

Apart from the 2000 Olympic final, his most remarkable races include: the 1995 Zurich Grand Prix 5,000 m where he knocked an amazing 10.91 seconds off the previous world record and the 1998 Helsinki Grand Prix 5,000 m where he ran the final mile in sub-four minutes to reclaim the world record from Kenyan rival Daniel Komen.

He set 18 world records in all and although he is no longer the record holder at any of the major distances, it is no exaggeration to say that he has inspired the next generation of Ethiopian runners. One of his protégés, Kenenisa Bekele has already surpassed many of the master's records. In 1999, Gebreselassie starred as himself in the movie "Endurance." The film chronicled his quest to win Olympic gold in the 10,000m metres.

His home village is 8,000 feet above sea level and he used to run 10km each way to school. He has a distinctive running style with one arm quite active and the other static and cocked – he explains this by saying that he used to carry his books under the static arm and the style was so ingrained that it couldn't be coached out of him. His mother was not formally educated but was very insistent that her children attended school and much of Gebreselassie's work for development is education-related.

Haile Gebreselassie has been working with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) since 1998 when he was first appointed to the prestigious role of Goodwill Ambassador. One of his key focus areas is HIV AIDS which is a significant problem in Ethiopia. He works with a program called 'Local Heroes' supporting Ethiopian orphans when they lose their parents to HIV AIDS.

His brothers and his wife are involved in various construction projects in Ethiopia including two schools which cater for around 600 students. I cannot do better to sum up the motivation and value of this work than to quote the words of Haile Gebreselassie himself:

“School is very important for everyone. Our main problem is to get the right school for children. If children get schooling we can eradicate poverty. That is all that matters in my country. When I am out training I think about this a lot when I am running it is going over in my mind. As a country we cannot move forward until we eradicate poverty.”

It is no exaggeration to say that, throughout his career but particularly in the never-to-be-forgotten final stride, gold medal winning moment of the Sydney 2000 10,000 metres final, he crystallised all that is positive and evocative about competitive sport. He helped - and continues to help - to remind us that the travails and negativities which sport in general, and Olympic Sport in particular, has had to endure in recent times are a stain on and distortion of something fundamentally good and beautiful, something which will always surprise and invigorate us, something which makes us all that bit more alive.

It is for all this that we honour you today, Jengaw, fearless hero, Haile Gebreselassie!

Praehonorabilis Cancellarie, totaque universitas.

Presento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.