

# KINCORAN OPINION

## SEE HOW THEY RUN . . .

EOIN O'BRIEN

Exercise is *à la mode*. The American craze of running around the city streets in a brightly coloured tracksuit has come to Ireland, and men and women of all ages, among them many who when at school spurned all encouragement to participate in sporting activities, are now prepared to look ridiculous, presumably believing in Robert Louis Stevenson's adage that "it is better to be a fool than to be dead." Fashion is a curious phenomenon. Were it ten years ago, an obese, middle-aged, puffing, panting, sweating male in gaily coloured pantaloons in the environs of the quays would have been whisked without much ceremony to the establishment then known as Grangegorman. Jogging, it seems, is the elixir of life—indulge in a little each day and you will not contribute to the horrible cardiovascular statistics. Not everybody jogs, of course. There are those who prefer to take exercise in competitive sport, such as squash, golf and tennis. However, some of us, I suspect many of us, detest participating in (as distinct from supporting) competitive sport, and then there are those who refuse to run aimlessly about the public highways, whereas many who do so regard jogging as a tiresome chore. It is to these kindred fellow citizens that I direct my thoughts.

I do believe in exercise. I do not know if regular exercise prevents cardiovascular disease, but it certainly contributes to a general sense of well-being, and should, if only for this, be encouraged. However, I also hold that there is more than enough exercise to be had in our daily lives to keep us as fit and well as the most enthusiastic jogger, if only we were prepared

to dispense with the mechanical curses of the age. The folly of modern man is to be seen clearly at rush-hour. Lanes of cars, nose to bumper, fart noxious fumes into a poisoned atmosphere, while their proud lone owners waste more and more time (and money) crawling to and from their place of work. The same phenomenon is to be seen in our dependence on lifts and escalators.

The citizen in search of daily exercise must, however, be of stout heart. I do not know if our Minister for Health who, quite rightly in my view, is conducting his own campaign for a healthier lifestyle, ever sits down with his colleague, the Minister for Transport, and I very much doubt if either of these good gentlemen are faced with the practical problems of moving about on their own shanks. Let us take cycling to begin with. The bicycle used to be the chief means of propulsion to and from work for the Plain People of Ireland who were, as Flann O'Brien observed, themselves half bicycle by virtue of the passage of "mollycules" from backside to saddle "*pari passu* and vice versa". A year ago I took to the bicycle again, but reluctantly I was forced to abandon my steed believing it preferable to live a little longer and succumb eventually to the consequences of a sedentary existence, rather than be abruptly annihilated (or worse, permanently maimed) by the Dublin motorist or busdriver. The cyclist has much to endure; he is painfully aware of the atrocious workmanship of our roadbuilders who leave craters and bumps guaranteed to raise the male voice an octave or two, and he is often blinded and nauseated by the unforgivable and unnecessary pollution from our badly maintained state-run buses. It is time that our road and transport planners looked to other coun-

tries for inspiration in encouraging the bicycle as a means of transport; cycle lanes could be provided at little cost and many would use a bicycle if it were safe to do so, and would not most children cycle to school as in the recent past if it were safe to do so?

An alternative to cycling is walking, but one is now forced to rely partially on public transport which leaves much to be desired. The suburban trains are overcrowded, at times dangerously so, and filthy. (Dr. Noel Browne was not too far wrong when he likened them to cattle trucks in a recent Dáil debate.) Furthermore, they are falling to bits apparently because the authorities cannot decide on the development of this service. Our buses are in only slightly better condition, are unreliable and uncomfortable, and in addition one is forced to listen to banal pop music and advertisements—an assault on personal privacy which should not go unchallenged. Public transport does have its good points. The suburban trains are faster than the car, the paper can be read, a problem contemplated, or one can just snooze, and then there is the bonus of walking from home to bus, or whatever, and if one's work takes one around the city, few capitals offer such variety and pleasure for the stroller. Responsible Ministers could do much to encourage the citizen to walk by creating pedestrian areas, and removing those wretched obstacles to anyone in a hurry—the parking meter.

It is time for all of us to change our attitude to the car and get back on our feet, but equally important is the need for Government to stop pandering to the motor industries and the road builders, and to create a safe and pleasant environment for those who wish to improve their health by walking, cycling—or jogging.