

COACH IN THE CORNER

WOMEN IN SPORT EDITION-INTERVIEW SERIES



Women in Sport Edition





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Groups: Raheny Shamrock Athletic Club and St. Fintan's High School in Sutton

Coach in the Corner- The Women in Sport Edition aims to recognise the contribution, commitment and dedication of some of our female role models and leaders. The unparalleled commitment given by these women must be recognised and celebrated, because without them, we would have no athletics. Over the next number of weeks, we will showcase some of the most influential coaches who have made enormous impacts on their local, provincial and national communities.

We hope this interview series will encourage more females to get involved, create an understanding of the pathways that exist for personal development and highlight the opportunities the sport can give us!

How did you get involved in athletics?

I got involved in athletics through my secondary school in the Convent Of Mercy in Roscommon. Sr Patricia rounded up a group of us as we lazed about on a sunny day and got us to race against one another, I won the race and in no time at all I was on a bus to Ballinasloe with a track team to compete in the Connacht Schools. Over the next few years we found ourselves at the All Ireland Schools Championships. By 6th year our small group after years of dedication on the part of our teachers Anne Kerane and in particular Pat Finneran who was also my camogie coach culminated in us winning the Connacht Senior Girls Shield, the Connacht Senior Relay Trophy. We went on to win the All Ireland Senior Girls all round Trophy. On that day we won the hurdles and the 800m. We came 2nd in the long jump, 3rd in the 400m and relay and 5th in the shot. It was such a confidence boost for a rather shy country girl at the time. It's also worth highlighting the role the mercy nuns played in fostering the love of sport, having built a large sports hall in a small country town in 1971 with Lord Killanin, the then olympic president, in attendance for its opening. They were women ahead of their time where sport was dominated by males and especially track.



How did your coaching journey evolve?

On completion of secondary school I headed for London, I joined London Olympiads Athletic Club. My coach Mr Chick taught me a lot about the sport. I got involved in leagues. I appreciated the club support and the structure of training with a group. I discovered the joys of being part of a relay team and also the bickering that goes on when the squad and parents take over (a lot of coaches out there will empathise with that one!). It was interesting observing the different training groups, **all part of what was even then my ever growing admiration for the dedication of the coaches.** It was a very enjoyable part of my time in London.



Returning to Dublin in the eighties I joined Dublin City Harriers Athletic Club who were at that time the top club in the country. My squad of athletes which included Patricia Almond, Maria Heatherington and Mary McKenna who was part of the distance group. **All three are now coaching at international level.** In my time there we competed in three European club championships after having won the league finals on a number of occasions. It was an exciting time to be in the club and indeed for athletics in Ireland.



My husband's job took us to Washington D.C in 1986, I wasted no time in joining a club called D.C Capitol. I had a wonderful time travelling around the D.C area, Virginia, Maryland and a couple of trips to Knoxville, Tennessee. I got to run a relay on the boards in the Meadowlands in New Jersey and also in the Penn Relays in Philadelphia. I was blessed to be coached by a wonderful coach called Mike Smith where I learnt a lot about different cultures through both Mike and the athletes. I was in awe of Mike's dedication to his athletes and as women's captain it was all a great learning curve for me later as a coach in dealing with athletes in Ireland



Returning to Ireland in the 90's our children joined Raheny Shamrock Athletic Club. My first success as a coach at national level was my now friend Fiona Ryan finishing 2nd in the senior 200m in the All Ireland Schools. However just as my coaching career was taking off with a gold medal in the 4x100m relay juveniles it was time to up sticks once more and head for Brussels. We joined Forestoise Athletic Club in Brussels. I sat mostly in the stands watching athletes train where I observed what the better athletes were doing differently. I also noted the different styles of coaching.

We returned to Dublin in 2010. I found it difficult at first to find my feet coaching wise, I seemed to have lost some of my confidence and as a result I didn't see a future as a coach however I found myself helping out in St. Fintan's High School in Sutton with Paddy Noonan. I had no real plan but Paddy is quite persistent and all those years later I am still coaching with Paddy in the school.

Advice for newcomers..

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Athletes will often tell you years later the significance you made to their lives and quite often it's the athlete who hasn't necessarily excelled on the track but have become more rounded individuals because of their involvement in the sport. At the end of the day that becomes more important as we negotiate our way through life..

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What has helped you develop as a coach?

All of the above experiences as an athlete and the successes and disappointments as an athlete and coach have helped me in my coaching career.

It's also interesting and worth noting that you don't have to be a top class athlete to enjoy the trimmings that comes with track and field, the sport can take you wherever you want as you can see from my experiences as an athlete and a coach.

Recently I found myself on the **high performance mentoring program** which was setup by Daniel Kilgannon of Athletics Ireland, Daniel also a very successful coach has brought in international coaches as well as some of our own and **for me it has been invaluable.**

One of the mentors, the distinguished Belgian coach Jacquie Borlee encouraged us to find the magic and that if we don't believe we will never find it. Paddy Fay, former Irish Olympic sprints coach, had a big influence on me in my early career, I always admired his professionalism. Despite now residing in Spain, Paddy is always on hand to give advice and support. **There are also many coaches here in Ireland at the moment that have also helped me as a coach and are highly supportive when the going gets tough.**



How do you remain so involved?

The love of the sport keeps me involved and the friendships I have formed.

I enjoy the challenges of coaching, it's also a great feeling when an athlete fulfils their goals and the satisfaction that you both have achieved.





WHAT DO FEMALE COACHES BRING TO COACHING?

Female coaches tend to be very supportive of one another and they don't tend to bring an overly inflated ego. Anna Botha who coached Wayde van Niekerk's to an olympic gold medal in Rio happens to be a 74 year old woman. Her athletes say her success is down to discipline with a caring and no nonsense approach. I would certainly concur with that having observed female coaches over the years.

ANY STAND OUT COACHING MEMORIES?



Most of the students who were successful in Fintan's High School found their way to Raheny Shamrock, Sean O' Driscoll being one of them. Sean was the first athlete I coached to a gold medal at national level in the 200m U19, he caused a bit of a stir winning a national 60m junior title unexpectedly in Athlone a year later. Michael Farrelly, also a student in Fintan's, joined Raheny from Portmarnock Athletic Club, his then coach Simon Archer having had splendid successes with Michael as a young juvenile. Michael is now part of the national junior relay squad that competed in the European Junior championships last year in Sweden. His club and school mate Sean L'Estrange finished second to Michael in the inter 200m in the All Ireland schools in 2018, a stand out moment for Fintan's High School.



Matt Cotter, another ex pupil also joined Raheny, and is now medaling at national U23 level in the long jump. Kim O' Hare who went to Sutton Park High School also joined Raheny and is now medaling at senior level in the triple jump. Sean Thompson, coached for some years by Gerry Martin in Lucan dips in and out of our group also had success in the triple jump at national level.

Stephen Gaffney from Rathfarnham medaled in the national Seniors in the long jump, having coached Stephen for a short period it was also one of those memorable days. At juvenile level Luc Bellantani a talented juvenile had many success in the long jump at all Ireland level and was part of a 4x100m relay squad that medaled at senior level.



Mark Smyth's success has been outstanding and had it not been my persistence in rounding a number of the Fintan boys up on the stands in Santry to run a 100m Mark's athletic career might not have taken off, not too unlike my own introduction to the sport! In his Leaving Cert year Mark won the 100m and 200m in the All Ireland schools, made his first senior international debut, and won an indoor 200m junior title. He capped it all by getting to the final of the 200m in the European junior Championships in Italy finishing 6th. He has had many other successes since, including reaching the semi final in the European U23s in Sweden. However his biggest success to date was winning his first senior indoor 200m title in 2020.

It was also the highlight to date of my coaching career.

What is your coaching philosophy?

My coaching philosophy is to keep it simple, do the training, have a good sleep pattern, good nutrition, have excellent holistic therapists especially massage therapists for both athlete and coach.

Remember the incredible power of the mind, the biology of belief as it often carries more power.

Instill a sense of gratitude and have a good awareness of self however challenging that might be, I've heard it described as being aware of awareness!!

I have had the pleasure of coaching many athletes over the years. Not all of them have reached the heights of the above but they have contributed highly to the sport and to my education. It has been a struggle sometimes managing time, disappointments and there have been tears, however I've learnt the hard way to calm the emotions and realized the importance of one day at a time.



I have been able to manage all of the above with the support of my husband Denis, my son Liam and my daughters Maeve and Ellie. **I treasure the moments travelling to the different meets with Maeve in the early days & especially to the Irish schools and no wonder as it was my introduction to track and indeed for many of the athletes that I have coached.**

Thanks for the memories so far and in particular the Mercy Roscommon for paving the way, to Paddy Noonan who introduced me to coaching in St Fintan's High School and for his encouragement and support. To all the athletes that I have coached, my own coaches and finally to all my friends in Raheny Shamrock athletic club and the wider athletic community, it's been a blast.