



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

Road to Rio

IF you are a Premiership footballer, you and your sport receive the oxygen of publicity every week – and sometimes every day – on the back and sometimes even on the front pages of our daily newspapers.

Social media is full of the soap opera surrounding it. There is a constant 24/7 voracious news cycle all about football, the national game.

If your field of expertise doesn't involve trying to kick a pig's bladder into a fisherman's net however, then it's a different story.... You could be the world's leading exponent of archery, badminton or triathlon but you only get one chance every 1,461 days to be bathed in that golden spotlight of media attention – known as the Olympics!

In only a few short months from now, our Triathlon representatives from these islands will be proudly – and nervously – standing on the beach at Copacabana with a chance for life-long glory only two hours away. The GB Triathlon Federation has already pre-select-

ed Alistair and Johnny Brownlee and Non Stanford and Vicky Holland, with one other qualification slot available for each of the men's and women's teams and this slot can be selected right up at the end of the qualification period in May.

The situation is a wee bit different on the other side of the Irish Sea where we don't have quite the same strength in depth. How strong is the Triathlon scene in Ireland?

Well, Triathlon Ireland has the third highest percentage of participation rates worldwide after Australia and New Zealand – and we don't even have the same weather! While GB has a population of over sixty million and twenty thousand odd members, here in the auld sod, we have a population of less than five million but we have a membership of over 10,000. That is one of the very impressive stats emerging from an organisation now headed by former BTF Officer, Chris Kitchen. In 32 counties, (as we are a unified sport without

recognising any border), we have 87 clubs, over 200 sanctioned safe insured events and over 200 qualified officials.

All of these numbers mean there is a large base of participation and membership to represent a strong foundation. Any successful sporting organisation is built like a pyramid. It has a strong huge base but a very narrow top where only the elite may play.

Thankfully, our elite give us a chance to compete on the biggest dance floor of the entire sporting world – The Olympics.

SHOE IN FOR SELECTION

Head and shoulders above everyone else is Aileen Reid (formerly Morrison) and she is a shoe in for selection for Triathlon Ireland.

All that remains is for her participation to be ratified by the Olympic Council of Ireland (in the same way the Brownlees, etc will have to be vetted and sanctioned by the Olympic Council of GB). Aileen has finished in the top ten in the world after the last three years.

She is consistent with no weaknesses. Her strength is at the Olympic distance, not the sprint. A former silver medalist at the ITU Grand Final in London in 2013, she also finished 2nd in ITU Madrid in 2012 as well as finishing on the podium for the first time in ITU in Hamburg in 2010. Her other great results last season included 7th in the Gold Coast and sixth in Japan and she has had a strong finish at the Grand Final in Chicago.

A native of Derry, where her swimming prowess was noticed by the Derry swim club, she moved through University and is now based in Lisburn, Co.

Antrim where her husband David, is a highly respected coach with the Sports Institution of Northern Ireland.

This 34 year old athlete has made a major change in her preparation for the rest of her Triathlon career by leaving Darren Smyth's Gold Coast squad to return to the home and hearth of her native land, where she will be once again coached by the tried and trusted combination of Chris Jones and Tommy Evans.

"I enjoyed being part of the World Class D-Squad and learned a lot but the time is now right in pre-Olympic preparation to come back home. It was thanks to Chris and Tommy in the first place that I won my first major medal in Hamburg in 2010. I am coming back strong and focused and I feel that the time is right for me to make this big move. It's a crucial time for me and I'm already back into the swing of things. Whilst there won't be any more 5.30 a.m. open water swims in December, there are other consolations!"

Aileen, sponsored by Huub, racked up over 100,000 air miles in 2015 so there will be less trips to the airport this year as she is now based once again in the Northern hemisphere where she will be cherry picking her races to make sure that she is in the best shape of her life for 20th August.

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SHORTNESS OF CONFIDENCE

No top class athlete can afford to be short of confidence. As Aileen says: "Being in the top 10 in the world once can be seen as a fluke, but I have now established myself as one of the best triathletes in the World and I feel like I belong."

In the past Aileen has

won several WTS medals and has stood on the second highest step of the podium but says, "It would be nice to hear the anthem just for me! It would also be nice to pick up another few world Triathlon series medals before I hang up my goggles."

Aileen's biggest disappointment in 2015 was at the first ever European Games in Baku, Azerbaijan last summer. Going into the race wearing number 1, she had every intention of medalling, but couldn't hang on to Nicola Spirig's back wheel. That's no shame as Nicola is the reigning Olympic champion, but what are Aileen's aims for 2016? "To ensure that I will not be dropped from any more bike packs!" Her bike coach, Tommy Evans, will see to that. Tommy is a former Irish Champion who still holds the Irish record for the Hour on the Velodrome. Tommy rode a bike internationally for 17 years and has been coaching with TI for 5 years.

"We look at the topography of the course several months beforehand as well as the likely temperature and humidity and we plan accordingly. Rio has several testing hills on each of the bike laps. I can promise Aileen lots of lung bursting efforts on hills of the same gradient and distance before then!"

This coach works his athletes as hard as he used to work himself and Tommy will leave no stone unturned in perfecting the preparation of one of Ireland's leading gold medal hopes for Rio.

The concept of the WTS is, of course, based on consistency over the course of a nine race long season. It is technically possible to win the title without ever standing on top of the podium if other results go your way. T

he date with destiny however on the 20th of August is a one off. It's all about being absolutely in peak condition for "The race of your life". Gwen Jorgensen has a target on her back and her winning streak must end sometime, surely? "Absolutely", says Aileen, "If I didn't think I would win a medal in Rio, I wouldn't be going, I am even more focused now in making sure that my preparation is absolutely tikityboo. When I qualified for London in 2012, I had an injury, but I also didn't have

the confidence and belief that I could win on race day. It's not rocket science, if I can swim with the leading pack (which I do in most races) and bike with that group (I have done that many times), it's going to boil down to the run and as I have produced the second fastest run split out of the entire field in the past, I have every reason to feel confident.

"I am not being arrogant, I just know that I will be ready and in with a shout."

LEADING HOPE

So Irish selectors' eyes may well be smiling safe in the knowledge that Aileen is nailed on for a place in the starting line, but what about the men? Our leading hope is Bryan Keane, from Cork. He is currently ranked in the top 55 in the world.

Bryan's 2015 season started well with a 5th place in the World Cup in China and thirteenth in Yokohama (where he was only 8 seconds off a top ten finish). This, along with being selected by the Olympic Council of Ireland for the Olympic Solidarity Fund, gave him a big vote of confidence.

Bryan has had a great season, racing with distinction on several different continents in high class races and it all boiled down to the last qualifying race in Yokohama. He had to finish in the top 20 and also beat two international rivals for the last qualifying spot. Lying 40th after the bike, he had work to do but he succeeded in catching and passing 20 world class athletes to finally nail down his Olympic spot.

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"I want to finish top ten in World Cups and top 20 in the WTS," and he knows that he doesn't have the luxury of having a break if injury intervenes.

"I picked up an Achilles injury in July 15 and hobbled round the test event in Rio, being passed by athletes that I know I can beat. I then had to sit out four races with the injury, however, I simply used the time off to improve in the water and in the gym. One door may close but another door always opens. I always look on the bright side and with my top class physio and back up team in the Irish Sports Institute, they will help me get in the best possible shape of my life for Rio. I am so pleased to have finally qualified, I will be able to call myself an Olympian."

"There won't be any pressure on me in Brazil. I am determined to give it my best shot on Copacabana Beach and when I do, all the attention will be on Gomez and the Brownlees etc. so perhaps I might sneak under the radar like I did in the Sprint World Championships in 2010 where I finished 7th."

Shortly after that brilliant performance, Bryan's season – and nearly his career – was over when he was knocked off his bike by a careless driver. Major knee reconstruction followed and if there were any medals handed out for bravery, this proud Cork man would be on top of the podium every time.

Last week Bryan ranked 21st, raced in Yokohama and finished 20th. As a result of that, he beat his two nearest rivals for the last qualifying

slot. His race was watched by at least one Limavady lad, Patrick Jack, currently teaching for one year in nearby Tokyo.

With the growing recognition of the Para-Tri movement, hopes are high in Dublin for Aidan McGlynn to make it to Rio also. Aidan has knocked 6 minutes off his Olympic time in a year and his coach Eamon Tilly says: "If Aidan keeps progressing the way he has done, then I have every confidence that he will be on the plane to Rio. His talent is evident but his determination is even more amazing. He has a real shot of qualification and we in TI are backing him 100 percent."

The elite of Irish Triathlon scene is not just about Aileen, Bryan and Aidan however. Russell Whyte from Banbridge and Con Doherty from Westport have already raced internationally and exceeded expectations and in 16 year old James Edgar from Lisburn, we have a real shooting star in the firmament.

Remember the name, because he is a near certainty for qualification for 2024 whilst Russell and Con are targeting Tokyo in 2020. The Triangle's very own James Walton has already represented Ireland in an International competition in Holland and is also destined for a very successful triathlon career.

The future for the healthy triathlon scene in Ireland is as bright as the August noon day sun over the sparkling waters in Rio de Janeiro. The red, white and blue of the GB athletes better look out for the green and white army from across the Irish sea!



Cork's Bryan Keane atop his bicycle. NCL23-13s



Bryan Keane has done well to battle back from serious injury to qualify for Rio 2016. NCL23-17s



Aileen Reid is hoping to get on the podium at the Rio Olympics. NCL23-15s



Bryan Keane is currently ranked among the top 55 triathletes in the world. NCL23-14s.



Aileen Reid plunges into the water. NCL23-12s



No holding back. Triathletes descend on the water. NCL23-16s