

# **COULD IRELAND BE MORE SUCCESSFUL ON THE WORLD STAGE AT SPORT?**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Ask some people 15 years ago this question and they would be quite content to say that for a small country we have done well to have a couple of gold medals in the Olympics at track and field and boxing, a couple of medals in the world championships at athletics, the quarter finals of the World Cup, a couple of Triple Crowns, a Tour de France, a Major Golf Open, a World Snooker Title and a few other successes in some minor sports..

The Irish people of today demand a lot more success when our high performance athletes/players venture onto the world stage to wear the green jersey.

### **So how can we achieve more success?**

In the following document I have addressed some of the issues that I feel exist that have caused our International Performers to fail on the world stage.

I have also highlighted deterrents that can affect the promotion of sport amongst young people.

I believe that if the Government can develop a strategy to combat the issues it will help us to resolve not only some of the problems we have in sport but in society in general.

### **Issues**

- Physical activity starts at home
- Poor PE System in Irish Schools
- Obesity in Irish Children
- Drink Culture
- Peer Pressure
- Popularity of our 2 National Sports
- Celtic Tiger
- Good coaching makes a difference
- Integration of immigrants into sport

## **PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND A ROAD TO A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE**

In order to get on route to a healthy lifestyle or on the pathway to success as a high performance athlete/player, its important that a young child is brought up in an environment where the people around him or her possess the necessary knowledge to assist him or her to live a healthy lifestyle through participation in sport and in some cases to be guided through a progressive pathway to achieving International success.

A five or six year old child doesn't normally wake up one morning and decide he or she wants to become involved in a particular sport or any activity.

Children's desire to participate in an activity is usually prompted by people who have the most influence over youngsters.

In most cases, it's the parents or guardians who encourage their children to participate in activities. Music, speech and drama, ballet, Irish dancing, art, extra languages and of course sport are just some of the extra curricular activities parents encourage their young children to take part in.

The more privileged a family is, the more likely it is that children will participate in many of these activities on a weekly basis

The introduction of children to unorganized and organized physical activity is critical in order to start them on a healthy lifestyle.

With the changes in Irish culture, children are spending more sedentary lifestyles. More time at the computer, the play station, mobile phone and cartoon networks. In addition, because of security fears, children are been driven to and from daily activities. Fast and frozen food for meals are seen as a quick fix for households where both parents are successful in their jobs or are working because they need to make ends meet.

All of these contributory factors have caused more obesity to prevail in young children. Obesity in children, according to medical experts will lead to all sorts of medical problems when they become adults. Diabetes and heart disease are just two potential conditions that have been mentioned in the media.

When many of us who are now 40 years + were children, we didn't have the technological gadgets of today. We entertained ourselves with outdoor activities such as climbing, running, throwing, skipping, chasing, cycling and swimming as well as unorganized and organized sport. We walked and cycled to school, friend's houses and to sports. We ate more healthy foods which was mostly our mothers home cooking.

Another serious issue in the Irish sport system, that has partially caused Irish kids to be some of the most unfit in Europe, is the lack of PE at primary school level.

As a parent of two children who both attended the same primary school in Dublin, I quietly observed the schools performance over 12 years. The school got top marks on, academics, communication with parents, relationship between teacher and pupil, school play, extra curricular activity and its policy on bullying. The school also had a firm but fair Principal, who had respect from the pupils, the parents and the school staff.

PE as in every school was two days per week for 30 minutes each day. I made a point of asking my children how they got on in school each day and as a professional sports coach, I had a particular interest in what physical activities they were doing. On the PE day, I would quiz them about what was happening in the class and a lot of the time they would appear to be doing a good variety of activities.

Too often, however, they would tell me that some of the children were misbehaving and as punishment the teacher cancelled PE. Or, the school hall was been prepared for the Christmas concert so they couldn't do PE.

I was always disappointed at this attitude by teachers and the school management. And, through my experience of traveling and meeting parents from clubs around the country I discovered the same situation exists all over Ireland.

If Irish Parents heard that the teachers of their children were canceling the math or Irish lesson because children were bold, they would be up in arms and going straight to the school to complain. It's vital that parents understand that, just as numeracy, literacy, art and music are important for a child then so too is physical literacy.

**The current facts are:**

- PE in school is insufficient
- Irish children are less fit than their European mainland counter parts.
- There are more over weight children in Ireland now than ever before.

**WHO ARE THE BEST PEOPLE TO TACKLE THESE PROBLEMS?**

I know that there is a top class Irish PE curriculum developed for Primary Schools involving all the necessary motor skills for children in this age group. I also know that some years back there had been a similar paper developed but ended up been shelved at the time.

Being aware of these problems and in the absence of the new curriculum been delivered immediately, it's important that parents either become involved in their children's activities or enroll them in sports that will enhance their physical development. If parents are to assist with tackling these problems, it's important that they gain knowledge and understanding of the skills and physical capacities that are important to help young children develop.

**MOTOR SKILL DEVELOPMENT**

Running, jumping, throwing, kicking and catching are very important skills to teach children at an early age. Balance, coordination, speed and agility are the most important physical capacities to focus on during pre puberty.

Sports science tells us that if these capacities are not trained well before puberty then performance athletes/players will fail to meet their full potential.

Recreational players will lose out as well as they may drop out of sport through feeling

incompetent as a result of not been exposed to these critical capacities at an early age.

## **HOW CAN PARENTS HELP THEIR CHILDREN**

During the toddler and pre-school years for 10 – 20 minutes per day have some fun with your child by trying some of the following activities listed below-

Use your imagination and come down to the child's level.

1. Climbing chairs, beds and the stairs with you behind them of course for safety.
2. Jumping on the bed like a trampoline or use an old mattress if you are concerned about the bed
3. Catching and striking balloons with the hand.
4. Rolling balls, starting with big light ones and varying the sizes.
5. Strike balloons with table tennis bat.
6. Roll ball along ground with a bat.
7. Strike ball along ground with a bat.
8. Kick a ball with both feet.
9. Catch a variety of balls.
10. Throw balls or rubber rings under arm into a container or at a target
11. You throw and he or she fetches a ball as fast as they can over short distances
12. Hopping, skipping and chasing games.
13. Over arm throwing skills

On the winter weekends bring the children to the Giraffe Center, the Leisureplex or its equivalent and let them at it. In the better weather, bring them to the park playground.

Continue on these activities until the child reaches 1<sup>st</sup> class in Primary school usually around 6 or 7 years of age. This is the time that you should be thinking about enrolling your child in sports or activities that will consolidate and build on what you have already developed.

## **WHAT SPORTS SHOULD YOU CHOOSE**

Research has shown that children who are exposed to multi lateral development will enhance their physical development and will have a positive effect on the sport of their choice in later years. Also children who have the correct progressive training in balance, coordination, speed & agility prior to puberty will maximize their potential. In addition, children who are exposed to these capacities have a much better chance of remaining in and taking up recreational sport as a result of feeling more competent.

Parents should look at a variety of sports from a young age. I've suggested some below that I feel are good for motor skill development and have more than one objective.

- Swimming - develops coordination, heart and lungs, body strength and water safety.

- Martial Art - develops balance coordination, dexterity, body speed, agility, self-defense and discipline.
- Football develops foot eye coordination, balance leg strength, speed, agility and team play.
- Hurley - develops hand eye coordination, balance, leg strength, body strength, speed, agility and team play.
- Basketball - develops hand eye coordination, balance, leg strength, body strength, speed, agility and team play.
- Tennis develops, hand eye coordination, balance, throwing skill, agility and speed.

There are other activities that help certain aspects of motor skills such as, gymnastics; ballet & Irish dancing and parents should explore these activities as well.

### **RECREATIONAL WEEKLY ACTIVITY PLAN FROM 6 YEARS OF AGE**

| <b>Monday</b> | <b>Tuesday</b> | <b>Wednesday</b> | <b>Thursday</b> | <b>Friday</b> | <b>Saturday</b>              | <b>Sunday</b> |
|---------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------|---------------|------------------------------|---------------|
| Rest day      | Tennis         | Football         | Swimming        | Karate        | Fun Competition in any sport | Basketball    |

A well-organized Child friendly Club should have a variety of activities from six years of age to teenage years. This should involve coaching, skill awards, supervised competition and social events. The Club should also have children’s officers and fully compliant with the code of ethics and good practice for children’s sport.

Junior club members if they are encouraged from parents, coaches and club officials they will eventually become senior members of clubs and will enjoy their sport as a game for the rest of their life. Some will also have the desire to become involved as a volunteer within their sport.

### **COMPETITION FOR THE EARLY YEARS**

- All competition should be FUN
- Start with self competition – Skill Awards, 6 -7 years of age
- Advance to Modified mini versions of the Sport up to 12 years of age
- Every one should be a winner. We don’t want club, regional or national Champions at this tender age. Every one should get a prize for participating.
- Every player should get treated equally
- The competition format should not be knock out but a format that provides the children with plenty of matches – Round Robin

As the players and athletes get older the talented ones who want to advance should progress to higher levels of competitions in a streamed structure.

Organisers should cater for the less talented players who want to play for fun or exercise

purposes by organising graded leagues and events.

## **TALENTED CHILDREN**

Talent can be identified at an early age and if parents have aspirations for a talented child to lean towards a particular sport, a number of things need to be considered.

1. Make sure the child is as enthusiastic as the parents are about the sport and prefers it more to other activities
2. Make sure one of the parents has time to commit to transporting the child to extra Training and other related activities that will increase, as the child gets older.
3. Choose a club that is child friendly and has a proven track record on nurturing and developing talent

## **WEEKLY ACTIVITY PLAN WITH A CHOSEN SPORTS AS THE MAIN FOCUS FROM 6 YEARS OF AGE**

| <b>Monday</b> | <b>Tuesday</b> | <b>Wednesday</b>                                    | <b>Thursday</b>  | <b>Friday</b>   | <b>Saturday</b>                 | <b>Sunday</b>             |
|---------------|----------------|---|--|---|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Rest day      | Chosen sport   | Soccer or other sport if soccer is the chosen sport | Swimming or other sport if swimming is the Chosen Sport + Chosen Sport | Martial arts or other sport if Martial Arts is the chosen sport | Fun Competition in Chosen Sport | Basketball + Chosen Sport |

As children get older and progress and develop the skills of their chosen sport the intensity of the training will increase relative to the pathway of the sport.

### **Do good coaches make a difference?**

I believe that, good coaching really does make a difference. Good players/ athletes or good parents don't become good coaches automatically.

Quality coaches have to be trained and gain appropriate experience with various age groups and levels to find where they are best suited or if they are suited at all.

Many of the National Governing Bodies, of Irish sport, in conjunction with the NCTC have developed a player pathway for recreational and performance players. The Sports have linked the pathway to Coach education and consequently a Coaches pathway has developed as well.

The sporting associations organize and deliver coaching courses with a view to the newly trained coaches going back to their clubs and raising the standard of play with the participants from their sport.

Unfortunately, not all clubs take advantage of this service and in some cases it's whoever puts their hand up or gets their arm twisted, gets landed with the job of taking a team. In many cases it's a parent who has had no formal training or who may not have even played the sport in question.

On the other hand it's a coach who has been working with teams for years and who may have got their qualification years ago and is set in his or her ways and not willing to accept modern trends.

Think about any sport. Let's take soccer, rugby and tennis as just three examples. Would Stanley Matthews, Mike Gibson or John McEnroe be able to compete in the same arenas as their counterparts of their sport today?

If they were brought up in the same environment as the modern players, yes of course they would. If, however, they were zoomed in from their era into the present, I think not.

Why? The training programs involving sports science, nutrition, biomechanics, strength, power etc were nowhere near developed in their day to the stage they are at in modern sport. As a result the speed of play and the physical demands are far greater.

The same applies to modern teaching methodologies versus old styles or approaches to coaching. Many of us who are 40 years plus have become accustomed to the Command Style adopted by many of our school and sports teachers.

Children and youth of today are educated in school with a much more Cooperative Style of teaching where they are involved in their own learning and encouraged to give their view on the world.

They don't, however, in many cases, experience this approach in the sport of their choice. All you have to do is walk into any Park in a Saturday or Sunday morning and all you can hear is abuse been roared at children from their coaches/managers and in some cases, their parents.

I am very aware that the Governing Bodies are addressing this issue through their Coaches Education Program's and their Child Protection Policies.

It is, however, an issue and it's time that sports clubs insist that their Sports Leaders, Coaches and Managers have formal training and their established ones go through Continuous Professional Development by insisting that they attend refresher courses organized by their governing bodies.

Think about it. Would parents send their children to a school that employed teachers with no qualifications? Or, to a Doctor who qualified 30 years ago and didn't keep up with modern medicine?

## **INTEGRATION OF IMMIGRANTS INTO SPORT**

**What have the following Legends of their Sport got in common?**

Pele  
Thierry Henry  
Ronaldino  
Paul McGrath  
Arthur Ashe  
Venus Williams  
Serena Williams  
Kip Keno  
Karl Lewis  
Flo Jo  
Daley Thompson  
Joe Louis  
Muhammad Ali  
Sugar Ray Leonard  
Tiger Woods  
Jason Robinson  
Jeremy Guscott  
Jonah Lomu  
Bryan Habana  
Gary Sobers  
Brian Lara  
Magic Johnson  
Michael Jordon

None of them are white. In fact they all are either full black or half black. And of course, they are legends and arguably the best athletes/players of their generation in their particular sport.

Ireland is not the same Ireland it was 15-20 years ago.

I am 50 years of age and when I was a kid the only foreign people I can remember seeing were the Italians who owned the Fish 'n' Chipper in my area.

Now like many successful countries, Ireland is a Multi Cultural society. Immigrants from Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Europe have arrived on our shores in thousands.

It's only right that the immigrants and indeed their children be given the same opportunities to participate in all sports available in Ireland.

By facilitating and encouraging our new citizens to participate in sport it will help integration and may even help Ireland to produce an Irish Pele or Venus Williams.

## **Drink Culture**

Unless we have all been living in a bubble we should be well aware that there is a serious drink and drug culture in Ireland. All one has to do is go for a walk in the evening on the weekends or during school holidays in any town or village in Ireland and the evidence is there to see with our own eyes. This begins for some children as early as 1<sup>st</sup> year of secondary school or younger in some parts of the Country. Unfortunately, because a large percentage of the population drink and have a relaxed attitude towards the issue, parents can turn a blind eye towards the problem. Some parents allow their children to drink as young as 15. This anti social behavior and peer pressure contributes to drop out of sport among other issues such as vandalism and truancy.

## **The GAA**

The GAA has thousands of voluntary coaches and administrators all doing an incredible job to maintain and develop the extraordinary interest that prevails in both Hurling and Football in every county in Ireland. Local parishes and the GAA itself have provided top class facilities for all the young people of Ireland to participate in and develop their skills in both codes. Fair play to them and long may it continue.

While so many children and adults nationwide competing in GAA at all different levels get the necessary amount of exercise towards maintaining good health and the talented players get an opportunity to represent their county and in some cases win an All Ireland medal. We cant, however, get away from the fact that so many of the top class athletes/players who have put so much hard work into achieving what they have achieved in either codes will never be heard of outside of their own country.

Many of the players might not be bothered by this fact and the ultimate goal for them might be to raise the Sam Maguire or the Liam McCarthy cup.

That's great and to those players, I take my hat off to.

In my opinion, however, I think it is a shame that the other sports that are played in Ireland and on the world stage like soccer, rugby, golf, tennis, track and field are losing potential athletes that could be developed into world class players.

The staunch GAA fans might take exception to me raising this as an issue but I do feel that it is a contributory factor and with such high participation levels in both codes it's inevitable that International sports will have a smaller pool of talent to draw from.

**What can we do as Coaches, Parents and Officials to influence change and increase participation levels in sport and raise Irish standards on the world stage?**

I believe if we can convince the government to put the following proposals into action, we will go a long way to improving our performance at International Level and we will have a much healthier nation in general.

Wouldn't that be so much better than been perceived as an easy-going nation of piss artists?

## **PROPOSAL**

### **To Lobby local Government representatives to put in place the following:**

- The PE Curriculum to be implemented as soon as possible
- The implementation of the Buntús Generic Program in schools to support the PE curriculum
- A policy in primary school that will ensure that children have an opportunity to play all sports
- Train selected sports coaches to deliver the Generic Buntús Programme and set up extra curricular programs for primary school children with the coaches conducting motor skill development fun sessions in Leisure & Community Centres and School Halls
- Introduce Workshops and training for parents on how to develop their children's basic motor skills
- Educate parents on a healthy lifestyle for their children
- Further develop the Niall Quinn Sport Conditioning Project
- Further Develop the Buntús Program that has been introduced in Crèche facilities to more Crèches, Montessori Schools and other pre-school activities
- Install multi-purpose all weather floodlit facilities in all villages in Ireland
- Build more multi purpose sports halls around the country
- Employ young graduates from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Level & PLC sports management courses to work in the multi purpose facilities
- Organise and conduct Multi Sports Camps during school holidays and as extra curricular activities
- Introduce Sport and Sport Science as a Junior and Leaving Cert subject
- Introduce a Third Level Degree in Sports Coaching
- Introduction of Mandatory Training for those adults who wish to coach children and youths
- Plan, devise and implement a strategy to integrate foreign immigrants into all sports in Ireland
- Take alcohol out of sports sponsorship
- Take alcohol advertising off TV before 9pm
- Increase the drinking age to 21
- Introduce a law to hold parents responsible for underage teenagers caught in possession of or under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- Introduce Curfews for underage teenagers caught in possession of or under the influence of drugs or alcohol

## **Benefits to society**

- More Healthier Children & Adults
- Money saved on Health Care
- More people playing sport for recreation purposes
- Pressure off A&E
- Less vandalism and public disorder cases for the police and society in general to deal with
- Less Racism
- Higher level Club, Provincial, National & International Performers

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