



HOW SKIBBEREEN ROWING CLUB
CONQUERED THE WORLD

something
in the
water

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MERCIER PRESS

TO ALL THOSE ROWERS WHO HAVE PICKED UP AN OAR
FOR SKIBBEREEN ROWING CLUB AND WHO HAVE PROVED
THERE'S NO HARM IN BEING A LITTLE BIT CRAZY.

prologue

Paul O'Donovan couldn't see a clear path through the crowd. Everyone wanted a selfie or a handshake or a quick word. He needed to get from the far side of the banquet hall in the Celtic Ross Hotel in Rosscarbery to the Warren Suite on the opposite side of the building. He had to negotiate the hall, the bar, the reception and the stairs. It was a walk that should have only taken ninety seconds; instead, thirty minutes later, he was only halfway there.

Paul had tried to keep a low profile at the annual West Cork Sports Star Awards on Saturday night, 19 January 2019. He's not one to seek the light. But as soon as he got off his seat, fans were drawn to him. He is big news, after all. A genuine sports superstar. Internationally recognised. Incredibly talented and driven. One half of the O'Donovan brothers, who had won Ireland's first-ever Olympic Games rowing medal in 2016. The local lads who had transformed rowing in Ireland.

These two brothers from Lisheen, just outside the small town of Skibbreen in West Cork, caught the national spotlight in their heavily blistered hands and shone it directly onto one of the world's toughest and most demanding sports. They are the best thing that has ever happened to Irish rowing.

Paul's brother, Gary, had been forced to miss the local sports awards. He was training in New Zealand ahead of the 2019 season. So Paul flew their flag at the awards bash. Still, it had been a rush to get there. Earlier that day he had set a national record at the 2019 Irish Indoor Rowing

Championships in Limerick. Another medal for the collection of the twenty-four-year-old, a young man who is already a four-time world champion and is rightly hailed as Ireland's greatest-ever rower.

Before he left the banquet hall, the Drinagh Rangers soccer team, winners of the West Cork Sports Team of the Year Award, wanted a photo with Paul. Meeting him made their night. Fifty-two-year-old Drinagh goalkeeper Rob Oldham jumped in for a selfie to show his daughter at home, as she is a huge O'Donovan brothers' fan. A group of local road bowlers stopped in the middle of posing for a photo and insisted Paul join them. He did. Good man, Paul. Well done, Paul. Great stuff, Paul. Legend, Paul.

This is the life of Gary and Paul O'Donovan. Ireland's greatest rowers. West Cork's greatest-ever sportsmen. Skibbereen Rowing Club's best of all time. Lisheen's two boys who are the talk of world rowing.

But they are only two pieces of a bigger jigsaw.

A couple of years earlier, the evening after the Irish team finished sixth in the medals table at the 2017 European Rowing Championships in the Czech Republic, Paul grabbed the microphone at the homecoming event at Church Cross, a few miles outside of Skibbereen. He stood on a makeshift stage. Behind him hung a freshly printed twelve-foot-wide poster from the Ilen Rovers GAA clubhouse. In big, bold white letters, it shouted 'The Magnificent Seven'. On it was a photo snapped in the sweltering heat of Račice of the heroes and their medals.

Skibbereen Rowing Club had supplied the entire Rowing Ireland national team at the Europeans. All five medalled. Paul and Gary won

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silver in the lightweight men's double sculls. Mark O'Donovan and Shane O'Driscoll surged to gold in the lightweight men's pair. Denise Walsh rowed to silver in the lightweight women's single sculls.

Dominic Casey was their coach. The mastermind behind it all. He's one of this magnificent seven.

Only Italy, Romania, the Czech Republic, Germany and Poland won more medals than the Skibbereen team at those championships. Entire countries against a club with less than 100 members.

The poster also included a headshot of Aoife Casey, Dominic's daughter, who a week earlier had taken silver in the Ireland women's double at the European Junior Rowing Championships in Germany. It was the first time Ireland had ever medalled in this competition. More history.

Six of the seven were at Church Cross, Denise the only absentee. Paul, relaxed in a grey tracksuit and black top, took centre stage. Behind him Gary had a tricolour draped around his neck. Mark, Shane, Dominic and Aoife all stood in line. This was an intimate crowd. Paul knew them all. Family, friends, neighbours. Time to have some fun.

'It's fantastic to see the crowd out again tonight for this celebration of rowing in Lisheen and Aughadown and Skibbereen and Ireland, of course – but that's just Skibbereen again,' Paul quipped.

It drew a huge roar of approval from the home crowd under the dull grey sky.

This remarkable rowing club in a country town in West Cork, a club founded by a fisherman, a carpenter and a butcher in 1970, is tucked away from bright lights and fast cars in a small pocket of rural Ireland, but now punches well above its weight on the national and international stage.

This club creates Olympians, with five Olympic rowers since 2000.

It moulded Ireland's first-ever Olympic rowing medals at the 2016 Games in Rio. It shaped five world rowing champions inside four magnificent years between 2016 and 2019: Gary, Paul, Shane, Mark and Fintan McCarthy. Over 100 club members have represented Ireland on the international stage since 1976. The club has transformed Irish rowing, raising standards to new heights and making the world sit up and take notice.

Its clubhouse is built on the muddy banks of a farmer's field. It once used a dishwasher as a filing cabinet. Its main double door has splintered glass panels held together by strips of red insulation tape. Second-hand weights in a gym with no windows have been cut from sheets of metal. In other words, Skibbereen Rowing Club doesn't fit the normal profile of a rowing club. It's neither upper class nor snobbish. It's rough around the edges. This is a working-class club built on a foundation of simplicity, desire and, most importantly, its people. There's nothing fancy here. They rail against the rowing stereotype that the sport belongs to those up there who look down on the rest. This is a culture clash: the country folk against the privileged.

From rags have come magnificent riches. International winners. More national titles than any other club. Skibbereen is a town reborn because of its rowing club – a town which grasped the attention of a nation in the summer of 2016 and has held it ever since.

The club itself is shrouded in mystique and a secrecy that has never been about its physical structures but always about its people. Driven. Dedicated. Passionate. Half-mad.

They've broken down rowing, one of the toughest of all Olympic sports, to its basics. Get from A to B as fast as you can. Don't over-complicate it. Now they do it better than anyone else.

This is a country club from the back of beyond that has conquered

something in the water

the world, a club that defies logic and has changed an entire sport. It is the greatest Irish sports story of our time.

There really is something in the water in Skibbereen.

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THE ROAD TO RIO

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John Whooley stood at the water's edge, where the land gave way to another world, a utopian existence where it was simply rower, boat and river. He had stood here before, thousands of times, and always followed the same ritual. He looked to the sky, where, in this case, the clouds sat sullen. There was a faint outline of the sun behind them, a lowering grey shadow waiting for its chance to shine. The seagulls were in, which meant it must be rough to his left, the west, where the Ilen River introduced itself to the Atlantic Ocean.

The Ilen is the playground for Skibbereen Rowing Club, its boat-house and clubhouse sitting behind John on the riverbank. Just metres separate these structures from the river.

The Ilen had been home to fishermen for generations before the rowing club was formed in 1970, but as the fishing died away it was the rowers who reinvented the Ilen. They have it to themselves now, a ten-kilometre stretch from the clubhouse without having to stop. It's the envy of every other rowing club in the country. Every year 7,000 boats are launched by the club onto the river.

John had it almost to himself on this October evening in 2007. There were four young bucks, early teens, getting ready to go out in a quad scull. They were busy doing their own thing.

The Ilen was in a good mood – not too choppy, not lazy either,

but quite eager. The water rushed excitedly against his wellies, waiting to play. Its best time is an hour before high tide; that's when it's at its calmest as there's less current and flow on it.

The wind was in impish form too. It blew from the south-west, racing in off the Atlantic. On its worst days it bullied rowers, daring them to take it on. However, the rowers never shirk a challenge. The wind was simply another competitor to beat and it could be like this on race day. Saying that, when it's in a real mood, they know better. It's not worth the hassle on those days. But this evening, with the nights shortening and the temperature dropping, it was calm.

John knew the signs were good. Most of the time he rowed downriver towards Baltimore, going with the current. Other days, depending on the strength of the wind and its direction, the height of the waves, the tide, the weather and the sunlight, he would row upriver, towards Skibbereen town, for its calm and sheltered water. On those other days, when the weather gods played spoilsport, he would stay on land and take out his frustrations on the rowing machine. This evening, though, he would point his boat west.

He headed out on the water in his single scull, a boat designed for one person. This was his familiar Filippi, white with its distinctive blue stripe, which he had bought two years earlier for just under €5,000. It was good value. John and two other Skibb rowers, Richard Coakley and Kenneth McCarthy, bought one boat each in a package deal that Richard organised after competing internationally. This was the first single John had owned. His pride and joy.

A heron across the water stared straight at him, waiting to see what John did next. The bleating of the sheep in Carey's farm on the far side of the river didn't stir the heron. Neither did the odd car passing on the road behind it. Instead the heron eyeballed John. It wasn't keen on

something in the water

sharing the Ilen today. But it knew the signs, so it ultimately spread its wings and moved on.

John had been looking forward to getting back out on the water. By day he worked locally at O'Donovan's boatyard whenever they needed him – the recession had cost him his job as a CAD & Design Technician in Galway in early 2007 – and in years to come he'd retrain to be a maths and physical education teacher, but on the Ilen he was a rower. Even better, a Skibbereen rower. That's a badge of honour. It means something.

He lived on the opposite side of town, a short drive from the clubhouse, but for these next eighty minutes he would be in a different world. He quickly ran through his checklist: hat, leggings, enough layers of clothes to stay warm, shades, water bottle. He was good to go.

His bare hands felt the slightest chill in the air. It wouldn't be long before the fading sun set behind Mount Gabriel in the distance and took a large splash of what little heat there was with it. His right hand gripped both oars, locked into their gates, to keep him balanced as he set about launching his boat on the river. He sat on the sliding seat. His left hand steadied the boat. One leg in, the other out, coiled to push the boat away from the slipway. He was almost free from the land. He used his right oar, as well as his free leg, to gently push his boat into the water. It looked easy now, but had taken plenty of practice in the early days.

Soon he was in deep enough. He was free. It was just him, his boat and the water. Wellies off. Feet into their straps. All set. A quick look backwards opened up a view of the Ilen that stretched for 800 metres. There was no one else there. He was pointed in the right direction and he had it to himself – for now, at least.

The rowers' code says that your right blade should always be closest to the bank. That's the simple rule to remember. A handwritten sign on a door in the clubhouse carries other rules:

You must have lights at all times on your boat.

Do not launch without lights.

Always paddle in groups and not alone.

Down – clubhouse side. Back – Schull road side.

Always stay off the centre of the river.

John was experienced enough to go alone. Soon, he was warmed up, the half slide of his seat gone to full slide as his hands felt the oars connect with the Ilen. He pulled in, down and away, and slid his seat under him to take another stroke. In. Down. Away. Reach. Slide. This was repeated, stroke after stroke after stroke. It's a delicate balance of power and speed. He was in rhythm and conducting his own one-man orchestra. He would take over 1,600 strokes during this training piece. Practice makes perfect in rowing. It's all about mileage and building endurance.

He was in the zone now, fully concentrating. The boat glided along the water. From a distance, rowing looks deceptively effortless and elegantly beautiful, but life in the boat is different. It hurts and burns and hurts some more, pushing the body and mind to their limits. It's a life choice. You commit or you don't. John had committed long ago.

He manoeuvred through the dogleg corners of Newcourt and Oldcourt. The boatyards in Oldcourt were crowded with summer sailing boats, resting for the winter, their masts clanking in the wind.

He saw them first, in the distance. It was that Junior quad. Then he heard them, whooping and hollering, like Indians in a Western film. He was their cowboy. He shook his head. It was Gary, Paul, Shane and Diarmuid, four little terrors that were causing wreck on the river. He knew them all. They were four different bundles of energy, each more wired than the next, some cheeky, others quiet. But none of them ever rested. They were in secondary school now, in St Fachtna's de la Salle

something in the water

in town. Paul was thirteen, the youngest. The other three were fourteen years old and they were already fearless on the water.

John knew they wanted a race. That's what they did. It was time to teach these pups a lesson, again.

John was twenty-eight years old and one of the club's most experienced oarsmen, part of the Senior-level clan, along with Olympians Eugene Coakley and Timmy Harnedy, Richard Coakley (who was an Olympian in the making) and Kenneth McCarthy. Every weekend, when they were out in their singles, this Junior quad turned up and tried to beat them all. They trained all week for the weekend.

'Old man John,' broke the silence, carrying over the water. It was Gary.

It was time to race, to put them back in their box. All Skibbereen rowers are taught to race. Whether it's a training piece on the Ilen or an Olympic final, they all approach it in the same manner: first home, first past the finish line. First, first, first.

Concentration was key. He drove his legs down faster, keeping his balance, not letting his oars hit the water. One of the earliest lessons taught to him was that friction is wasted energy and leads to a slower boat. Those words came from Dominic Casey, who taught him everything he knew.

It was also Dominic who saw a rower in John when no one else did. This tall, gangly teenager was a late starter in rowing, almost seventeen years old when he was cajoled into a sport that he had no interest in whatsoever. But Dominic spotted that there was raw material to work with.

'One stroke at a time,' he told John, over and over again.

Always one stroke at a time. Stay in the present, John. If you pull a bad stroke, make sure the next one is better.

‘You can’t control what has happened but what you can control is what you do right now,’ Dominic advised.

John took it one stroke at a time from the very start. And he got better and better. Faster than anyone could have ever imagined, apart from Dominic. His progress was startling.

But so too was that of the Junior quad, who at the time were coached by Gary and Paul’s father, Teddy O’Donovan.

‘Go get those old fellas,’ he would tell the four boys, as they almost climbed over each other trying to get into the boat. ‘Show them no respect.’

John had his game face on. This could be a race day. The quad was a good distance away still. He just wanted to make one burst, one lunatic minute. He made his move, pushing his burning legs, straining his body. It was the same stroke he had used to win his first National Championship title in the men’s Novice coxed four in 1996, less than twelve months after he first picked up an oar. The same stroke that took him to the 1997 World Junior Rowing Championships in Belgium, where he represented Ireland in the Junior men’s quad less than two years after he started rowing. The very same stroke earned him a scholarship to the University of California in Berkeley and saw him excel there. That stroke saw John finish fifth in the world in the single at the Under-23 World Rowing Championships in 2000. That stroke served him well.

After his manic minute, he could tell that they were not gaining. Point proven, for now. He moved down from top gear and the prize was a few moments taking in his surrounds. Creagh, Inishbeg, forgotten churches and old landlord houses, a glimpse into Ireland’s past. This is a stunning backdrop for the rowers, a river with a variety of currents that prepare them for all conditions at regattas. It’s a setting straight from a novel.

something in the water

The river smelled different to John at this point, the earthy smell now salty. The Atlantic was closer. He heard it in the distance. The water looked and felt different. He was near the end of the river now, not too far from Sherkin Island, so it was time to turn around and head for home.

John took his time and let the quad catch up.

‘Take it easy, lads,’ he snapped, ‘it’s getting dark so quit the messing.’

They took absolutely no notice. Diarmuid just laughed.

‘We’ll race you back.’

He let them off, as the boats turned for home.

Soon, heading back up the river, he caught a glimpse of Dominic’s house to his right. He was only in there a couple of years at this stage, but this beautiful, stone-clad, two-storey building perched on a hill in Ardralla that overlooked the Ilen from the north side was already the watchtower that cast its eye over the river. It has a magnificent view from Dominic’s open-plan kitchen, sitting room and the glass-windowed conservatory that wraps around the far end of the house. They are all vantage points offering a different angle, upriver towards O’Donovan’s boatyard at Oldcourt where he worked, downriver towards Inishbeg, an island, and directly across the river, where Lough Hyne hill rises in the distance. If a boat moves on the Ilen, Dominic knows who is in it, what they are doing and how well they are doing it.

He has binoculars upstairs and downstairs. And a megaphone too – his trusty messenger that has gotten wet more times than some boats. If he spots a boat on the wrong side of the river, they will hear about it. Or if he has advice, he will offer it too. He never switches off. Ever. He either stands on the picnic bench outside the front of the house or appears out through a gap in their hedge. Dominic, his megaphone and his words of wisdom.

There were plans to trim the hedge at one point but his wife, Eleanor, prefers nature's own look, no straight lines, so Dominic let it grow. It was over six-foot high now, as John passed it, the perfect camouflage to hide Dominic until rowers heard his voice bounce across the river.

Luck would have it, too, that his home is in line with 'the first slip', that is the starting point for Skibbereen rowers' 'pieces', which are training races. From this point the river runs straight for almost three kilometres down to Inishbeg.

But this evening there was no megaphone. There were lights on in the house, but there was no Dominic to be seen or heard. That meant he was at the clubhouse, making sure every boat that went out had come back in.

The wind was at John's stern now. This spin home would be faster, as he was on a speed-assisted tide. Daylight slowly fading, he rowed hard but steady, wanting to make sure that his time back to the clubhouse was minutes faster than the first half of the training spin. Stroke after stroke after stroke repeated. Before he knew it, and with a quick glance behind, he caught sight of the distant lights of the clubhouse as he rounded Newcourt corner. The Junior quad had already pulled in. Good, they're home, he thought. Not long for him to go now. A look at his watch showed his time was quick as he eased his way into the slip. Good job. Good row.

Gary, Paul, Diarmuid and Shane were cleaning the quad. Dominic was there, all right, checking in. So was Teddy, their coach, who sensed something about his two boys. They were catching up with the Seniors all the time. And they were always hungry for their next feed of rowing.

Finished, John lifted his boat out of the water and around to the side of the boathouse. Then he rested it upside down on waiting stands, washed it with soapy water and rinsed it off with the hose until it was

something in the water

sparkling again. Next he carried it over his head into the boathouse and perched it in its familiar spot, inside the door to his left, on the rack closest to the water. This is where the Senior rowers keep their boats, closest to the doors. Junior rowers' boats go to the back of the boathouse. You earn your spurs here, and the little perks that come with it.

'We got you this evening, John; we were in first,' Gary laughed, those wild eyes darting in John's direction.

He smiled back. Tomorrow was another day.

about the author



Kieran McCarthy is the long-time sports editor of *The Southern Star*, West Cork's weekly newspaper. A Kerry native, he won the Local Ireland Sports Story of the Year in 2016 for his coverage of Skibbereen Rowing Club. He was also awarded the title of Ladies Gaelic Football Association Local Journalist of the Year in 2018. This is his first book.

‘A club shrouded in mystique and a secrecy that has never been about its physical structures but always about its people.

DRIVEN. DEDICATED. PASSIONATE, HALF MAD.’

Skibbereen Rowing Club is home to Ireland’s first Olympic medal winners for rowing, the O’Donovan brothers. Furthermore, it has developed several other Olympians, as well as World, European and a record number of National champions. From humble beginnings, Skibbereen has risen to become Ireland’s most successful rowing club. This is its story, told from the point of view of the members who founded the club in the 1970s, those rowers who first put the club on the map in the 1980s and 1990s, all the way up to the current members, coaches and rowers, who have taken the club to new, previously unforeseen heights. After reading this book you will surely believe that, when it comes to rowing, there must be something in the water in Skibbereen.

Front cover image of
Gary and Paul O’Donovan
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