



Team Ireland.

# Special Olympics Heroes

Ever dreamed of representing your country? Ever won an Olympic medal? Well, in July this year, Team Ireland athletes who attend RehabCare and National Learning Network services across the country arrived home to a hero's welcome in Dublin Airport after participating in the Special Olympics World Summer Games, held in Athens from 1 to 4 July.

Features

**T**HE SPECIAL OLYMPIANS from RehabCare and National Learning Network took part in a variety of events from boccia to gymnastics. The months of training and hard work paid off when each and every one of them won medals at the World Games. All the athletes showed a fantastic dedication to their chosen sports and there were some truly inspirational moments along the way.

Johnny McKiernan, from Bawnboy in Cavan, brought some of his family to

Athens to support him in the 100m walk and the softball throw. His sisters Ann and Noreen and sister-in-law Sheila cheered him on the track as he won a gold medal in the 100m walk and a bronze medal in the softball throw. The rules of the 100m walk are strict, as competitors must keep between the lines at all times. Johnny received two warnings but he concentrated really hard and stayed between the lines, walking his way to gold! Johnny said, "I did my job and it was all worth it. Even the training in the rain and snow! I had great craic in



Johnny McKiernan receives a hero's welcome on his return to Cavan.

Athens. Team Ireland all pulled together like a football team. Athens is beautiful, the weather was really good but the food was terrible! The sun was literally beaming down so we all had to drink loads of water to keep hydrated and load on the sunblock."

Johnny, who uses the RehabCare service in Bailieborough, Cavan, has become a local hero since he returned, even featuring in the local paper on numerous occasions! "I'm a bit of a celeb at home now! I had a great welcome home party in the town and recently I opened a boathouse in my local village. I'm open to any other offers!" Johnny is taking a well-deserved break from training at the moment, but will be back with his club, Special Olympics Cavan, soon.

For Michael Neville, who attends National Learning Network in Limerick, the World Games were a unique experience. Michael, who completed the Sporting Chance course in National Learning Network in Tralee, was part of the 11-a-side soccer team that won silver in Athens. He had never been outside Ireland before, so the trip was very memorable. He said, "Greece is a really nice country. It was really hot, though. When we played Turkey and Australia it was nearly 40 degrees. I couldn't take the heat at all!"

The soccer team had intensive training ahead of the games. Every Saturday the team members travelled from all over Ireland and met in Clondalkin, Dublin. There they had training sessions and challenge games to familiarise them with playing together. This was a great bonding exercise for all the players, who got on very well.

Ireland had four games in the preliminary rounds, against Denmark, Bangladesh, Greece 1 and Greece 2. In the next round, the 11-a-side team lost to Turkey (4-1) but went on to beat India 5-1. Ireland then took on Australia, with a bronze medal at stake. Michael scored the winning goal in a 3-2 thriller that put the Irish team forward to the finals. They took on Great Britain and the game, which ended in a draw, resulted in silver medals for the Irish team.

So what was the highlight for Michael? "It was definitely putting on the Irish jersey for the first time before we played Denmark in the first game. It was such a thrill. My family and friends kept telling me that going to the World Games would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and it really was. Representing your country really is amazing."



**Michael Neville, National Learning Network in Limerick, celebrates a win with the 11-a-side soccer team in Athens.**

Every athlete who participated in the World Games had to make sacrifices, none more so than Carole Ryan, who had to travel from her hometown in Wexford to Belfast for training. Carole, who attends the National Learning Network centre in Wexford, has been doing gymnastics since she was a young girl. She competes in four categories: floor, beam, vaults and asymmetric bars. Carole did much of her training with her local club, Special Olympics Wexford, but as there are no asymmetric bars in Wexford or Dublin, she had to make the long trip to Belfast once a month to train. But it was all worth it when she was chosen to represent Ireland in the World Games.

Carole said, "The World Games were amazing. It was cool to see Stevie Wonder at the Opening Ceremony. I was a bit nervous before my competition, but once I started I was fine. I was backstage when I found out that I had won two gold medals and three ribbons. I was so excited walking up on stage to collect my medals!" Carole came home to a great welcome with a reception held in her honour in her hometown, where she was congratulated by the Mayor and Irish boxer Billy Walsh, who, according to Carole, was "cool"!



**Johnny pictured with his sisters, Noreen McKiernan and Ann McKiernan.**

Carole would encourage anyone who has an interest in sport to join their local Special Olympics club and, who knows, maybe they could be heading to Los Angeles for the 2015 World Games!

Over 49 coaches and members of the backroom staff supported the 126 Team Ireland athletes during the Games. Meath woman Louise Tinne played a key role as Medical Co-ordinator for the Irish team, with responsibility for ensuring the health and welfare of everyone who travelled.

Louise is the Residential Services Manager with RehabCare's Children's Respite Service in Navan and her involvement with Special Olympics goes back to her early teens. "I worked alongside my mum for the National Games, getting people to hand out medals to the athletes. The Games were much smaller then but they have grown over the last number of years."

The role of Medical Co-ordinator involved months of preparation before the Games. Prior to training sessions commencing, the team got to know about each athlete by working with individuals, families, and services where necessary. This allowed them to put in the supports required at the earliest stage. Louise and her team also provided athletes and coaches/chaperones with training in relation to the Special Olympics code of ethics, nutrition and hydration, health and well-being. During the Games, the Medical Co-ordinators worked alongside the medical service



**Louise Tinne, Medical Co-ordinator with Team Ireland and Residential Services Manager with RehabCare's Children's Respite Service in Navan, meets President Mary McAleese.**

of the Games Organising Committee. Although the Greek Medical Services had ultimate responsibility, the day-to-day welfare remained with the team in terms of maintaining hydration and ensuring rest.

On her return, Louise said, "We were definitely kept busy during the Games! There were early mornings and late nights but it was all worth it. The sense of pride the athletes had in being part of Team Ireland was contagious. There were always laughs to be had, jokes to be told and I made great friends."

Team Ireland recorded a number of personal best records and won a total of 107 medals and dozens of place ribbons in 12 sports. All in Rehab are extremely proud of the achievements of all the athletes who use our services. Well done, everyone! ■



**Carole Ryan (centre) pictured with her coach Roy Surplus and Team Ireland volunteer Mary Staunton.**

## REHAB ROLL OF HONOUR

### **Carole Ryan**

National Learning Network, Wexford  
2 Gold medals, Gymnastic events

### **Johnny McKiernan**

RehabCare Bailieboro, Cavan  
Gold medal, Softball throw & Bronze medal, 100m Walk

### **Adrian Cornwall**

RehabCare, Sligo  
Gold medal, Badminton

### **Paddy Doyle**

National Learning Network, Portlaoise  
Gold medal, Soccer

### **Mark Whelan**

National Learning Network, Portlaoise  
Gold medal, Soccer

### **Gary Tobin**

Knocklofty Rural Day Service, Clonmel  
Silver medal, 7-a-side soccer

### **Keith Whelan**

RehabCare, Waterford  
Silver medal, 7-a-side soccer

### **Michael Neville**

National Learning Network, Limerick  
Silver medal, 11-a-side soccer

### **Denise Flattery**

National Learning Network, Galway  
Silver medal, Golf

### **Conor Ryan**

RehabCare, Kilkenny  
Bronze medal, Boccia

### **Robert McDonald**

RehabCare, Navan  
Bronze medal, Basketball



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