



Rehab Foundation's Matt Browne pictured last July as he set off on his Jet-Ski Challenge across the Irish Sea. The marathon 250 mile round trip raised €30,000 for Rehab.

The Ultimate FUNdraiser

From sheep steeple chasing to daredevil jet ski rides across the Irish Sea, Matt Browne's fundraising exploits are legendary around Ireland. Aoife O'Connell discovers that even after losing a leg through illness, his passion for helping others remains undimmed

Fancy something a bit different this weekend? Try reversing a bus around Ireland, pushing a bog barrow nearly 3,000 miles or perhaps jet skiing around the Irish coast? You could always race sheep around Kildare or stage an all male beauty pageant, but could you do it on one leg? Matt Browne can.

Founder of the Irish Wheelchair Centre in North Kildare and Kildare Person of the Year 1989, Matt Browne has organised way-out fundraising events that those with two feet on *terra firma* would never attempt, but it's all in a day's work for this Kildare man.

As a child Matt vividly remembers trying to push his father's wheelchair to watch a football match in an effort to cheer up his house bound father; a neighbour stopped the ten-year-old Matt and asked; "How is he?" nodding to his father. "You can ask him yourself!" came the sharp reply..

Chronically aware of the lack of facilities and social outlets for disabled people, Matt never imagined that one day he might also be in a wheelchair. The injustice of his father's treatment stayed with him and he knew there was more to be done than

"wheeling people around in a circle on a dance floor or taking them on a day trip".

Matt started with 50 volunteers and in 1982 pushed a bog barrow of turf from Clane to Killarney 176 miles, the barrow continued for another 2,500 miles and three years fundraising with one well wisher dropping money in the barrow for the "Irish *Wheelbarrow* Association"!

Devising a ten-year plan for the development of key disability facilities Matt organised a 'bus reverse', coffee mornings, and American Tea Parties and in 1990 he and his team raised £50,000 through *People in Need* and established The Wheelchair Centre in North Kildare.

An entertainer for over 30 years. Matt gigged around the country lending his wacky ideas and sense of humour to good causes. As Matt admits he smoked, drank and partied hard. In 1990 he was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes: "I'm a diabetic, so what!" was Matt's reaction and he continued to drink and smoke. Matt developed pains in his leg and put it down to a back problem resulting from lifting work and an operation was arranged to ease the

continued next page

pain. The night before the operation Matt asked his surgeon “to have a quick look at that foot of mine” which had been oddly cold and a tiny black spot had appeared on his small toe.

There was to be no back operation for Matt, he had a chronic circulation problem related to his diabetes, Matt’s foot was literally dying. In 1999 a 16-hour operation resulted in internal stitches and 650 metal clamps to hold plastic veins in place to restore blood to his foot. Declared a huge success, the results lasted three weeks and Matt’s foot turned black.

Matt ignored the doctors when they told him his leg would be amputated until finally the surgeon told him; “you will beg me to cut it off”, and on New Year’s day 2000 Matt called his surgeon in agony begging him to cut the foot off; “if I could have got my hands on a hatchet I would have chopped it off...the pain was like fifty knitting needles stabbing my foot every four seconds, it was horrific.”

His foot started to rot; “I can still smell it.” Pleading with doctors for more morphine, Matt told them: “if you don’t get me more I’ll go out on the streets and get some lad to give me heroin.” You’re on more than any of those lads, came the reply.

Now with one leg and in a wheelchair, Matt also had to cope with withdrawals from cigarettes, alcohol, sleeping tablets and morphine. After unbearable night sweats, nausea, and sleepless nights, doctors told Matt he had become a morphine addict and his doses had to be reduced slowly over six months.

Adjusting to life in a wheelchair Matt recalls: “that first night I came home I must have fallen 15 times.” He found he was something for “every child” to poke fun at... “I know now what it’s like to be a monkey in a cage”. With no wheelchair



accessibility at home, Matt strove for independent living and pulled himself up steps or hobbled on crutches wherever possible. A local Traveller family, whom Matt has been kind to in the past, tried to rebuild Matt’s independence and clubbed together and bought him an old automatic car.

After six months Matt was fitted with a prosthetic leg and “being able to stand up and shave myself again” made the world of

difference to Matt, but he needed to get back working. Matt jokes: “A three-legged man wasn’t in big demand.” Friend, Vincent Kelly of National Learning Network told Matt to “work to his strengths” and as it happened they were looking for a fundraiser in Kildare. He’s never looked back since describing his work as definitely “not nine to five...its not about me, I’ll never make money out of



Above far left: Matt Browne, Rehab Foundation, pictured at the launch of Ireland's first ever Sheep Steeplechase Race Day with 'Ewe Bet!' the racing sheep and two-year old Cian Leigh from Kildare.



Above left: 'Fast Fleece' comes over the last fence ahead of 'Baa Ram U' to go on and win the big race at Ireland's first ever sheep races in Kildare last August. Over 5,000 people turned up for the event which was organised by Matt Browne and raised a staggering €30,000 for Rehab Foundation and the Conor Leigh Fund.

Left: Enjoying all the fun of the fair at Ireland's first ever Sheep Steeplechase Race Day.

this but the pleasure I've got out of this job over the years, money could never pay for that."

Every year Matt brings a people with disabilities on inspirational fundraising trips all around the world from Brazil to Boston. His most recent challenge was 'Sheep Steeple-chasing' which raised funds to send four-year-old Conor Leigh to America for special medical treatment.

Born with only one ear, Conor's treatment was due to cost thousands and in true Matt style, he got behind the cause and organised the first Sheep Steeple chasing in Ireland. With over fifty sheep and 150 volunteers they raised over €30,000 on the day.

Matt firmly believes that things have improved since he was a ten-year-old boy trying to make life better for his disabled

father, who remains the inspiration for his work; "I'd like to give what he didn't have." He believes a lot good has been done in the disability sector that people often ignore. "A lot has happened in thirty years... a fool can knock a wall but it takes a good man or woman to build a wall." From Sheep-Steeple chasing to who knows what next, but one thing is sure, if Matt is involved, it's going to be different!

Workability

International world

president Frank

Flannery on the rapid

rise of what

is now a global

organisation dedicated

to the cause of equality

in the workplace for

people with

disabilities

Workability International's spectacular growth rate continued unabated throughout the last 12 months as the quest continued to establish a truly global organisation championing the right to work of people with disabilities.

Membership passed the 100 mark for the first time during our annual conference in Edinburgh, up from a total of just 60 the previous year. Because this includes a large number of umbrella bodies representing similar service providers and direct employers, the full extent of the Workability network now extends to more than 2,000 organisations, representing some two million workers in 31 countries around the world.

Most of this growth has been achieved in Oceania which already has the largest membership of all Workability's regional groups within a year of being established in New Zealand in October 2004. Having come into existence with just four members, Workability Oceania now comprises 30 organisations, including ACROD – the national industry body for service providers in Australia, which represents more than 550 members and VASS, its equivalent organisation in New Zealand. Meanwhile Workability Asia's progress has also been extremely pleasing, with four substantial new members joining during the last 12 months, whilst another important landmark was the signing up of our first member in Africa.



Workers of the World Unite

All of this represents remarkable progress in the blueprint we have set out to become the global force representing providers of work and employment services to people with disabilities. Over the next few years our regional groups need to apply themselves to the search for new members in parts of the developing world where the sys-

tems and services our members have built up over many years have the potential to deliver massive social dividends. Particular efforts need to be made to develop the organisation across Africa, Central and South America and the Middle East. We should also aim to be represented more heavily in Eastern Europe and to carry the



Workability International world president Frank Flannery

Workability banner into more Asian countries, especially China. Of course our development plans don't merely involve increasing the size of the organisation, but also the

scope of its activities and therefore its benefits to its membership. Our considerable success to date in achieving global reach means that the time has now arrived for Workability International to broaden its focus so that it can help its members throughout the world to capitalise on transnational and global business opportunities.

Up to now, organisations like ours have existed to protect their members' interests and to help them gain political influence on an international level, as well as acting as a valuable means to exchange expertise and to develop best practice. But globalisation has provided a more tangible reason for the best and the biggest organisations in our field to band together.

The challenge we must set ourselves in

the years ahead is that as well as being a representative body in the traditional sense, Workability International evolves into a genuine international business organisation that becomes a valuable part of the strategic development of each of its member organisations.

By pooling our expertise and developing our business to business capability, we can capitalise on business opportunities on a scale that is currently beyond any one of our member organisations. We can also use our joint purchasing power to gain significant savings for us all.

Already much is happening within various regional groups in this business to business arena. Workability Europe has developed a purchasing consortium among its members that has already had in-depth discussions with so of the world's largest multinationals such as Microsoft, Dell and Hewlett Packard on areas such as software licencing and discounted purchasing. The Workability Electronic Recycling Partnership has also been established to enable members to capitalise on an EU directive which makes manufacturers responsible for the disposal of electrical and electronic waste. Meanwhile in the US, document destruction networks are being developed by member organisations as well as co-operation on contracts to dismantle old computers and recover parts for multinational manufacturers.

Now is the time to raise the bar on all of this activity, so that as well as continuing to provide the supports that come from membership of a representative body, we also provide the benefits that being part of a genuinely international business organisation can bring.

Already our members provide work and employment services to two million people with disabilities. By developing as a business organisation that is capable of dealing with the world's largest companies across national and even Continental boundaries, we can create work and employment opportunities for people with disabilities on a huge scale throughout the world.