



Irish Sailing Association

Facilitator: Prof Craig Mahoney

Annalise Murphy became the 1st Irish female to win an Olympic medal in Sailing

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report should be read in conjunction with the summary of survey findings completed for Sport Ireland by a range of athletes and personnel linked with the Irish Sailing Association and involved with preparations for the 2016 Rio Olympic Games.

The Irish Sailing Association (ISA) has developed and delivered an incredible programme from participation to performance, linked not only to the four-year Olympic cycle, but also to the development of elite performance and relevant results at age group, intermediate events and across the four-year period leading up to the Rio Games.

The ISA plan to deliver excellence at Rio 2016, resulted in a Silver medal performance in the Women's Laser Radial class following a 4th place finish in that class at London 2012, by the same athlete.

Of the six athletes in four classes (Women's Laser Radial, Men's Laser, Women's 49er FX, Men's 49er) who represented Ireland at Rio, two classes performed at or near expectations including one winning a silver medal. The other two classes produced credible results that were part of a development plan that was designed to enter the class for the first time at an Olympics or to enable a young new athlete to gain Olympic experience in preparation for a longer term campaign.

Given it has been 36 years since Ireland last won an Olympic medal this is an extremely exciting achievement and provides evidence of the success of the longer term strategy that ISA has been following for many years now.

Sailing has a very professional programme and structure in place. The Performance Director and the ISA CEO have a close working relationship and along with the Chair of the Olympic Steering Group, form a compelling team.

METHODOLOGY

Sport Ireland survey results were obtained from four of six athletes, 10 of 17 coaches involved in the Olympic cycle, nine of 10 CEO/Board/OSG members and the Performance Director. These results provided a rich source of evidence for aspects of the Olympic programme that had worked well, areas of concern, a summary of the Games experience and clarity to future considerations for the next Olympic cycle.

With a desire to gain more insight into the ISA programme a series of 1:1 meetings were arranged to meet with athletes and staff linked to the Olympic programme. Meetings took place with the following;

- Finn Lynch, Laser
- Harry Hermon, CEO for Irish Sailing
- James O'Callaghan, Performance Director
- Mark McCabe, physio plus strength and conditioning lead
- Ryan Seaton, 49er
- Matt McGovern, 49er
- Colm Barrington, Chair of the Olympic Steering Group (OSG)
- Annalise Murphy, Laser Radial sailor
- Saskia Tidey, 49er FX
- Stephen McIvor, sport psychologist (49er FX and Laser)
- Rory Fitzpatrick, Academy Manager and coach to Annalise Murphy

FINDINGS

Games Performance

The six athletes agreed their games performance was as expected. Whilst some level of disappointment exists for all classes, the evidence is clear that each of these classes produced credible and expected results based on performance history from the prior period.

By self-report it appears nothing could have been done to improve the Games performances, though undoubtedly each class can identify races in Rio during which they made mistakes and other in-event situations where they could have taken different decisions which may have led to alternative outcomes. I am satisfied, from the survey data and the 1:1

interviews that this has been a very successful Games for sailing.

The Performance Director, who has played an intimate and extremely valuable role throughout this preparation period, has enjoyed strong support from the CEO and the Board overseeing the Olympic preparation.

Games Experience

The athletes, coaches and support staff stayed in accommodation separate to the Games village. This is normal and typical for sailing in Olympic Games due to the estranged nature of the regatta venues typically used. The prospect of a 1.5-2.0 hour bus journey from the village to the race venue each way, each day, would have been debilitating to the athletes and they were right to opt for accommodation arrangements close to the regatta site and dingy park.

The team could have benefited from additional accreditations given the complexity of sailing which is supported by coaches, science personnel, medical staff and technical teams. In future games it would be important for the OCI to give greater support on accreditations for a sailing team. Survey responses suggest there is a desire to have more psychology support at Games along with expert food preparation.

Despite the lack of accreditations, the athletes were able to gain access to experts in tidal patterns, rules, coaching, psychology, physio and medical needs. However, this was often off the dingy park which added to the complexity of getting support as and when needed.

There were learning points from the games, which included taking care to get the right mix of team members in the respective accommodations available. Ensuring that nutritional support, including cooking arrangements, are appropriately developed to allow athletes to re-load effectively throughout the regatta.

Consideration of how best to use downtime, including rest days, could probably be improved for the future, but this is also dependent upon venue, national culture, safety considerations and accessibility.

Strategic Reflections

To allow athletes to prepare effectively and deliver their best performance, their needs must be prioritised. It seems unfortunate that communications between the ISA and the OCI on logistics was not as transparent as possible. The booking of travel arrangements by the OCI, which were tedious, convoluted and failed to take account of pre-performance needs, was highly inappropriate. This also included return travel arrangements which involved a ridiculously long bus journey to a neighbouring airport, seemingly to save costs.

In a sport like sailing, which has massive logistical requirements for some classes, such as the transport and collection of boats, sails, technical gear and equipment, this cannot be arranged without the input of the ISA who are hugely experienced in ensuring such athlete needs are optimised.

The performance programme has a very comprehensive support system in place. All athletes had access to coaching, technical support, sport science, medicine, physiotherapy, logistics knowledge and the personal support of a Performance Director who remains fully committed to achieving results at all levels and all pathways leading to an Olympic effort.

Other countries with larger fleet competition will often preselect teams earlier than Ireland. Late selection processes, once a class has been qualified, is useful in enabling some athletes to represent the country who might not earlier have been ready to secure selection (cite Laser men for Rio) but this could sometimes result in athletes focussing too much on winning selection rather preparing for the Olympic regatta. There is no ideal system, this is merely an observation.

NGB Governance of High Performance

This is a sport with highly developed oversight to a High Performance programme. As part of the review process I met with the Chair of the OSG and confirmed the manner in which this expert group was close to the performance programme, monitored the spending plans, encouraged pursuit of sponsorship and philanthropic giving linked to the Olympic

cycle and profiled the athletes to the sailing community and beyond.

During the last four-year period some challenges between the OSG and the Board created complexities that are now being resolved. Whilst this was an internal matter it was challenging to the Performance Director and CEO and distracting from their respective core business activities.

The governance structures within the sport have been developed over successive Olympic cycles and I am satisfied the performance structures are both effective and fit for purpose. The responsibilities given to the Performance Director to plan and prepare athletes for competition is carefully monitored by the OSG but the boundaries between governance and leadership have been clearly demarcated and are understood.

SAILING RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Despite success in winning a medal for sailing, the programme can benefit from changes and developments over the coming four years. The reliance on Sport Ireland funding to underwrite the performance programme is both a strength and a weakness. Work is underway to **diversify income to support the performance programme**. In sports like sailing with significant capital needs, allocating funding on an annual basis is unhelpful. The sport and the athletes would be far more able to launch and deliver credible and performance based campaigns if funding was known over a longer period. All athletes accept the card funded system and are comfortable that funding should follow results, but the dips in continuity have caused some challenges for class campaigns over this period.
2. Funding available over the period has been generous, if considered against other sports of with a similar participation base. However, sailing has a real chance to deliver Olympic medals and success in recent Olympiads demonstrates the plan in place is producing positive results. **Care must be taken by the NGB to remain within their budget allocation, or to consider how difficult decisions might be made to invest in classes with realistic chances of medalling or achieving particular levels of success e.g. top 10 finishes in major events and Olympic competition**. For future cycles however, consideration must be given as to how the ISA can secure available resources to supplement the funding provided through Sport Ireland. Direct NGB investment and OCI support were two areas where the Performance Director was frustrated with the support given.
3. Communication channels in all sports are crucial but can be challenging. Because of the pressures of campaigning, linked with income generating activities, travel and competition, athletes are sometimes not able to communicate freely or easily with the support staff or ISA personnel associated with the performance Programme. This was evident between physio staff and athletes, though **an internet based monitoring and development system is being trialled which if instigated properly will overcome some challenges** evident as a result of athlete's travel needs.
4. The lack of contact between OCI and the NGB is not in itself a problem, but recent circumstances and publicity linked with OCI has not been helpful to Irish sport. All respondents felt over the cycle OCI contact was less than ideal, some having no contact at all. Yet at the point when the Rio pre-performance needs are most critical, the OCI took responsibility for logistics and equipment transfer without any expertise or appropriate interaction with the governing body. Whilst the athletes in this sport were able to reconcile the challenges created by OCI, this is just totally inappropriate. The majority of coaching and support staff felt that the elements of the programme were either "effective" or "very effective". The one exception was the "Overall preparation of the OCI's support" which the majority of responders rated as "ineffective" or "very ineffective".
5. The sport would benefit from **more class competition within Ireland**. This is not easily managed for newer or more expensive classes, but to have only one boat in a class competing from Ireland will result in the athletes having to live away and not be very visible within the country.

7. Post Games preparation was noted as an area of low satisfaction by all groups responding to the survey. However, when questioned this was not something that could be explained easily. It is unclear what expectations were in place, but note was mentioned of unacceptable return air travel arrangements, and errors made in flights which for one class had them booked to leave before their regatta had finished. It will be important for future Olympiads for travel arrangements to be overseen by the NGB, not the OCI.
8. Finally, whilst it may seem minor, many respondents to the survey and all interviewed personnel felt the absence of Team Ireland team building or a proper send off when leaving Dublin was a significant deficit in giving a sense of achievement to represent their country and perform at an Olympiad.