Cathal Dennehy

Think of it like *Tin Cup*, and that captivating climactic scene. Roy McAvoy (Kevin Costner) is in a three-way battle for the US Open and after a mediocre tee shot on the 18th, he faces a key choice between laying up, accepting a par for the play-off, or going for broke, trying to clear the water to snatch a birdie and the win.

Three days in a row, he'd gone for it and failed. "This is everything, ain't it?" he says. "The choice it comes down to — our immortality."

He hits the green, landing the ball a few feet from the pin, before it slides slowly, painfully, back down to the water, sinking his title chances. Instead of taking a drop from there, McAvoy goes for it again, uttering the film's immortal line: "Gimme another ball." Several more go the same way before he's handed his final ball, his caddy telling him to "quit f**king around" and that he faces disqualification if this goes in the water.

"I can make it across," he says. And he does.

Roy McAvoy, meet Rhys McClenaghan.

It's Tuesday afternoon in Newtownards. There are four months until the Paris Olympics and the 24-year-old is explaining why he won't play it safe on the way there — regardless of what happened at the last Games.

He and his coach, Luke Carson, have built a routine which, if executed correctly, will score a world record of 15.600 or 15.700. Does reaching for such heights increase the risk of failure? Of course. But a ship in a harbour is safe, and that's not what ships are built for.

"If we go for a lower difficulty, we're increasing the chances of us staying on [the pommel horse]," he says. "But we're also increasing the chances of someone else beating that. We're going for a gold medal. We're not settling for anything less."

From Belfast, it's a half-hour drive east to Newtownards, a town of 30,000 that sits on Strangford Lough. It's a beautiful, blue-sky morning, the spring sunshine bathing the locals sitting around the town's main square.

In front of the Arts Centre, there's a statue of Robert Blair Mayne, one of the British army's most decorated soldiers in World War II and an accomplished rugby player who was capped for Ireland. On the walk to the town's leisure centre, named in Mayne's honour, you pass bars with Union Jacks hanging above the doors, God Save The King emblazoned on them.

A stroll down John Street takes you past the PSNI station — a drab, austere, red-brick building that looks plucked from a 1980s crime drama, its 12-foot perimeter wall topped with another 12 feet of chain-link fencing. Just behind it, the £30m leisure complex rises into the sky with its slanted roof and sleek, modern design.

The old Northern Ireland. The new Northern Ireland.

Inside its entrance are plaques celebrating sporting greats from the area. There are golfers, hockey players, footballers. But McClenaghan is not among them. The lady at reception says the wall of fame was put together ahead of its opening, in 2019, before the Newtownards native won his first world medal.

"I'm sure he'll be up there soon," I say.

She smiles. "I'm sure he will."

Opposite her desk is the entrance to Origin Gymnastics, which Carson started last year. Inside the door, lying on a padded mat, is McClenaghan. He's got 20 minutes to kill before his midday session, so he's reading a book given to him by his sports psychologist, Jessie Barr: *Driven to Distraction at Work*, a self-help guide for maximising focus.

He's been up since 7.0am, but McClenaghan is one of the few members of Generation Z who won't look at his phone until mid-afternoon, whenever his session is done.

"It's a nice refresher," he says. "I've seen the opposite end, where I was on my phone in the morning and my brain's just gone for the rest of the day. Something happens chemically where it makes me sad if I'm on it too much."

On the path to Paris, every potential area of self-improvement has been excavated. It's why he decided that mindless scrolling had to go. "It affects my mood, and that affects my training. I mean it when I say I dedicate my life to gymnastics. Everything is connected. Everything is going towards this one goal — performing routines."

Today, McClenaghan will take on an especially tough task: performing his full routine twice with just 10 minutes recovery. He grabs a resistance band and starts his warm-up, which lasts 75 minutes. At midday, Carson bounds into the centre full of energy, smacking open the emergency exit doors. "Let the sunshine in, boys." As McClenaghan jogs a few laps, his coach shouts to no one in particular: "Who's ready for a day of gymnastics?"

McClenaghan does push-ups on the pommel, splits on the ground, then swings from the horizontal bar, raising his legs in a perfect straight line. He hops on the parallel bars, hoisting himself into a handstand.

Carson, who's coached him for the last 10 years, doesn't pay much attention to McClenaghan's warm-up. For years he used to shadow every move, perfecting every position, but the boy has become a man, his mechanics so well drilled that they no longer need policing. But once McClenaghan returns to the pommel, Carson interrupts his chat with a colleague and watches every move with a stalker's gaze.

It's go-time. McClenaghan starts his routine and, for 45 seconds, he swings his body around the apparatus — this world around which his life orbits. His feet draw out a giant O, his back rigid, his hands shifting delicately in a precise pitter-patter. He swings up into a handstand, then elegantly dismounts, nailing his landing.

To the untrained eye, it looks perfect. But there were errors. Tiny ones. McClenaghan felt them. Carson could spot them.

"It's good to see when it doesn't go perfectly to plan that it can still happen," his coach tells him. "The endurance is there."

Carson starts a 10-minute timer and when it's up, McClenaghan steps forward again. Repeating the routine this soon is torture on his arms. But the idea is to put his technique under maximum pressure, knowing that if he can execute such absurdly difficult body positions while fatigued, well, it'll be a relative cinch to do them on the biggest day of his career.

On the second routine, his breaths are faster, louder, his technique starting to falter, but McClenaghan powers through the vast majority before his arms buckle as he tries to hoist himself into the final handstand. He falls off. "That's an improvement," says Carson, noting how much further he got than the previous day. McClenaghan takes a deep breath, climbs back on the horse, finishes his routine. He will practise this until he can't get it wrong.

"Are you a perfectionist?" I ask.

"Ehhh ... not outrageously."

"But you're very hard on yourself?"

"Yeah, most certainly," says McClenaghan. "Every day I put pressure on myself. But that works to my strength in competition. I feel the same amount of pressure. I was nervous today before I started that, I wanted to do a clean routine that badly. I don't think many other people do that, who care so much on a daily basis."

There are times that desperate want, that rabid need, can overwhelm him.

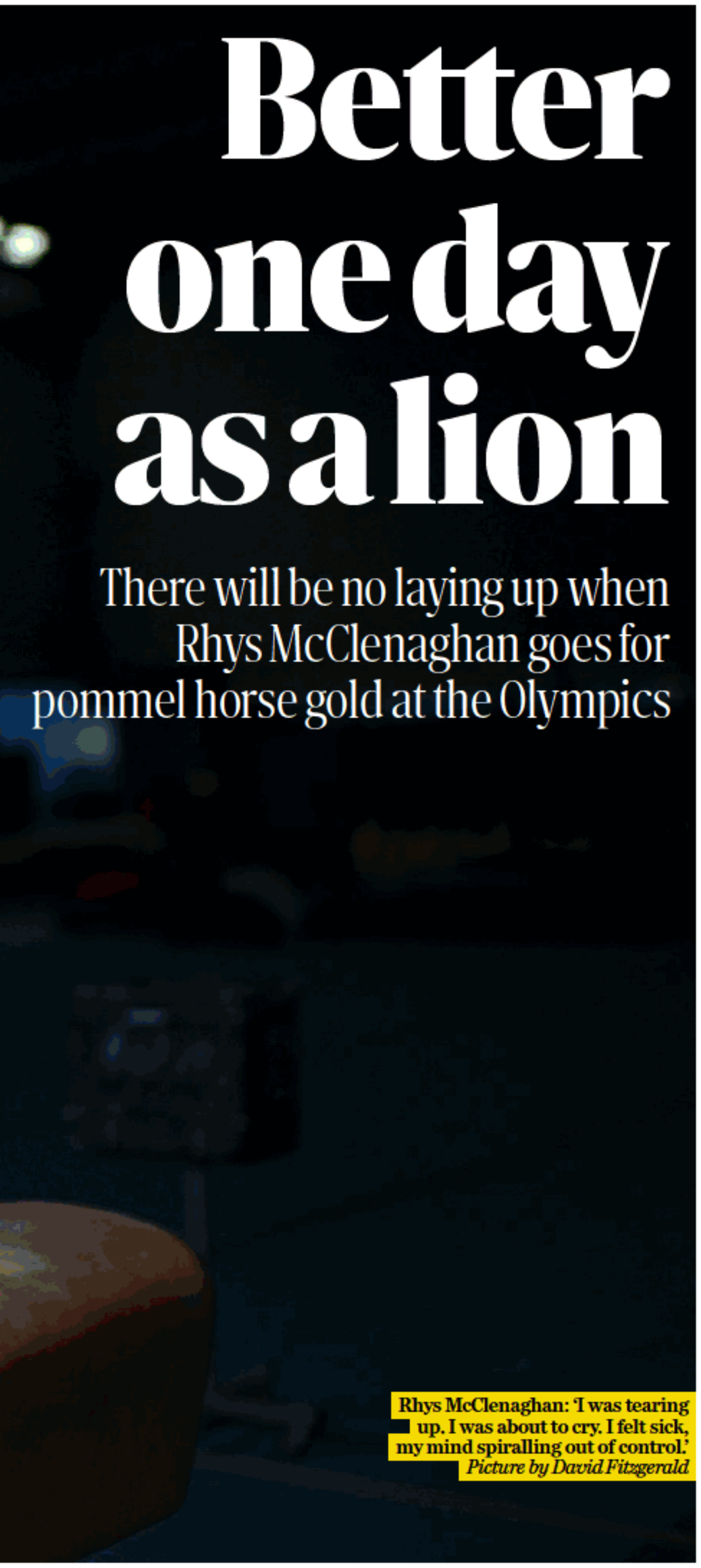
One of them was at the World Cup in Paris last September. It was just before the World Championships in Antwerp, where McClenaghan was bidding to defend his title and secure Olympic qualification. Big pressure. Just before his warm-up, the anxiety rose up and overtook him. He had a panic attack.

"I was emotional. I was tearing up. I was about to cry. I felt sick. It was my mind spiralling out of control. My breath was increasing, I was sweating. It was shocking. Something like that never happened [before]."

Carson told him he could withdraw, but McClenaghan didn't want to quit. He ended up winning silver. In the days after, he had several conversations with Barr and Carson and realised he was framing things wrong, thinking too much of the big picture and not enough about

Better one day as a lion

There will be no laying up when Rhys McClenaghan goes for pommel horse gold at the Olympics



Rhys McClenaghan: 'I was tearing up. I was about to cry. I felt sick, my mind spiralling out of control.' *Picture by David Fitzgerald*

the minutiae of the process. Three weeks later, with a calm mind and the simple goal of a clean routine in Antwerp, he nailed it, claiming his second world title.

Carson knows how the mind can sabotage a performance. A former gymnast, he'd gone close to Olympic qualification but could never quite produce his best when it mattered. "99.9 per cent of the time I got in my way through my psychology," he says. "I choked, fluffed all my performances. I didn't know how to think correctly. I'd think too much about negative outcomes."

When he first came across McClenaghan, he knew he had a diamond on his hands and was adamant he'd steer him down a different path. He made sure humour was a part of the routine, that the youngster would always associate international events with enjoyment, fun. "Some people can have those negative experiences young and it emotionally scars them for life," he says. "They have negative connotations to performing."

At the age of 20, McClenaghan had one on the biggest stage of all. The thing about the build-up to Tokyo? It was perfect. Almost too perfect. Carson says the typical success rate for a routine in preparation is 85-90 per cent. But with the routine they used that year, McClenaghan nailed it 100 per cent of the time.

"I've never seen it since and I've never heard of it from anyone I spoke to," says Carson. McClenaghan had no fear in predicting he'd win an Olympic medal. Carson had no fear in thinking it. After all, everything pointed to that. But then their world fell in.

In the final, McClenaghan snagged a finger on the pommel horse handle and it threw him off balance. He fell, and that was it: seventh place. His score from the previous year's world final would have won silver.

"That's stuck in people's heads now," says McClenaghan. "'Ah, he's the guy who messed up at the Olympics.' But that's the way of it: it comes down to one tiny moment and it can go one way or another. That's the beautiful side of gymnastics, and the ugly side."

Years later, the pain has passed, with two world titles and a European gold proving a powerful sedative. The temptation, the danger, is allowing a mistake so small and finicky to metastasize into a Big Thing, signifying anything about his skillset or mentality. The reality? It's one of countless things that can go wrong in an event with a ruthless dichotomy, where winners and losers are separated by tiny margins.

"Sometimes you just catch a hand," he says. "It happens all the time in training, but you don't think about it as much then. It made me realise things can just go wrong in gymnastics, and when you put the gravity of the competition behind it, it gives it too much power, too much of a story."

Carson, too, learned something important that day. Something he always knew but never so viscerally understood. This isn't life and death. As Sonia O'Sullivan's dad put it following her failure at the Atlanta Olympics — nobody died.

In the days before, Carson let himself become consumed by the outcome. He was on a plane recently, scanning old photos, when he saw one of himself in Tokyo the day before that final. On his face, he could see the stress, the weight he was carrying. The morning of the final, an Irish manager had told him he seemed so relaxed. But that was all an act.

"Inside, I was an oil rig of insanity," he admits. "I think now that's gone. I realised it doesn't serve me. It puts my blood pressure at dangerous levels. Before, I'd wake up and almost have a panic attack. My heart rate would go really quickly because for a second, I thought of him [McClenaghan] standing on the podium and I'd be like, 'Jesus, don't think of that, don't jinx it.' Now I'm like, 'Yeah, we'll see what happens.' Maybe it'll happen. Maybe it won't."

It all began on a trampoline. McClenaghan's family had one out the back and as a kid, he'd bop around on it, teaching himself back-flips. His parents, Danny and Tracy, saw his enthusiasm and figured it'd be best to get him down to the local gymnastics club, which had only very basic equipment.

Still, he loved every minute, juggling it with football, swimming and hockey before jettisoning all of them to devote himself fully to his first love. As he progressed, the coaches encouraged his parents to get him to a proper club and it was at Rathgael Gymnastics Club in Bangor that he started working with Carson. McClenaghan was 14. Carson was 24.

Back then, he was a "shy, introverted young boy," says Carson, who knew that had to change for McClenaghan to excel internationally. "I don't think that works with you as a performer," he says. "When you put your hand up to the judges, it's you and you only. My belief was he needed to believe in himself to understand he could be the best in the world."

Carson had just returned home after five years in England, where he learned his trade under Paul Hall, one of the world's top pommel horse coaches. He trained alongside Britain's Louis Smith, watching and learning exactly what it takes to win Olympic medals. Then he brought that knowledge back home. In McClenaghan, he had the perfect protege to apply it.

"He was spectacularly talented," says Carson. "He taught himself the hardest skills on pommels and I knew if he could teach himself this, surely I could help and, together, we could do something special."

Carson crafted a 10-year plan, one that would culminate at the 2024 Olympics. He got in touch with Gymnastics Ireland and Sport Ireland. "I said: 'Listen, there's something in this kid, please come with me on this journey. If I ask for something or suggest something, believe me. I mean everything I'm going to say for the next 10 years.'" He says both governing bodies have been "fantastic" ever since.

There were many specific milestones in the plan and McClenaghan achieved them all ... except one.

But to make him an Olympic medallist, Carson knew he first had to go back to basics. At the age of 14, McClenaghan was a trickster — a gymnast who could pull off stunning, showy moves that masked his technical imperfections. Carson forced him to start over on the programme his seven-year-olds did, re-learning fundamentals like a simple circle or a handstand until they were perfected. "He hated it. But he'll say now: that was single-handedly the most important part."

Two years later, at 16, McClenaghan won bronze at the British Senior Championships behind Louis Smith and Max Whitlock — two Olympic medallists — then silver for Ireland at the European Juniors. As a Northern Irish athlete, he had a choice about which country to represent.

Newtownards is a town where the majority identify as British, and then Northern Irish, with just five per cent identifying as Irish. But having come through the Irish underage system, it was natural to stay that way as a senior, McClenaghan noting it's the done thing in gymnastics. Did it lead to criticism?

"I've seen comments on social media," says McClenaghan. "But they're not real people saying it to your face. Not one person has said one negative thing to my face around what country I should represent."

In Newtownards, he doesn't sense any stigma of him wearing green, just a deep-seated pride that one of their own is the world's best. Soon after he moved back last year, an old man came up to him on the street and said "welcome home, Rhys" while a woman approached him to say thanks for getting her daughter into gymnastics. "No matter what background I'm from, they're supportive," he says. "It puts a huge smile on my face."

> *Not one person has said one negative thing to my face around what country I should represent.*

The next big target is the Europeans in Italy in late April. Carson says there's often "a bit of geopolitical judging" at the Olympics and so going there as continental champion could slightly sway their scoring, whether subconsciously or not. Either way, the outcome in Paris won't consume them. A clean routine is what counts, then the cards will fall where they may.

Tokyo hurt McClenaghan. Of course it did. But it did nothing to blunt his resolve.

"I still thought I could be the best in the world, so I just kept going," he says. "That belief stayed with me, and we made it happen the following year."

The clock has ticked past 3.0pm. The centre, which for most of the day was an oasis of calm, is filling up with pre-school kids, screaming and jumping and laughing as they start their beginners' class. Carson chose to call this place Origin Gymnastics to signify the platform the sport offers for all-round athleticism. He invested a fortune to get it off the ground, making sure it had Olympic-grade equipment and employing a rake of staff so he could focus his energy on McClenaghan.

"I made a promise to him 10 years ago," he says. "And I'm sticking to it."

McClenaghan smiles as he watches young kids encroach on the mat where we're sitting, the two-time world champion asking the instructor if we're interfering with a four-year-old's session.

Last June, he decided to move back home along with Carson, who faced pressure from Sport Ireland to stay based in Dublin until after the Paris Games. But they'd spent five years in Abbotstown, away from their loved ones. The time was right to go. Ever since, McClenaghan has been back under his parents' roof, making polite suggestions to his mother about her cooking, given his dietary needs, and spending lots more time with his girlfriend.

Carson could have picked a spot in Belfast for this club, but he wanted it in McClenaghan's hometown, knowing what it could do for kids to see him here each day — the world champion who grew up around the corner. The best Irish sportsperson of 2023.

McClenaghan shakes my hand and thanks me for making the trip, then heads off into town to grab some lunch. There's work left to do. Strengthening exercises. A physio appointment. Every day, from the moment he wakes up to the time he nods off, he's doing all he can, hoping, believing, it will be enough.

But the standard is rising. Olympic year has that effect. Last month a Kazakh gymnast, Nariman Kurbanov, set a world record of 15.600. That's the standard now, so there will be no laying up. The risk he's taking is calculated, but it's based on what they see in training. It tells them to go for it all.

"You saw me today doing two of the most difficult routines in the world — back-to-back," he says. "Doing a programme like that, it's a statement: we're going for a gold."