



MICHAEL FOLEY



Paul O'Donovan considers the mathematics for quantifying success and rolls it round his head for a second, like a magician moving a ball between their fingers. He knows where the question is coming from. Another medal this week in the boat with Fintan McCarthy at his third Olympics will make him Ireland's greatest Olympian, overtaking Dr Pat O'Callaghan's two hammer golds and boxer Paddy Barnes's pair of bronze medals, both won at two different Games.

But these soft, indefinable metrics make little sense to him. What is success? Define greatness? The data is incapable of delivering an answer.

"It's like a function of the time I exist in. Ireland has been competing at the Olympics for 100 years. Give it another hundred or 200 years, I'm sure we'll have a lot of people winning a lot more medals than what I've done. I don't think it's much of a point to base my success off: what other people have or have not done.

"I often think you probably don't get the satisfaction that people are expecting you get. I look at it from the point of view of just enjoying what you're doing while working towards those goals, to the point where you can say to yourself, I'm happy doing this. And even if I don't hit the goal that I've set for myself at the end of the four years, I'll be happy to say it was a life well spent anyway.

"It's only six minutes out of four years that you race the Olympic final. To define yourself when you cross the finish line doesn't make much sense. It doesn't say much about who you are as a person or what you did to get there. If you were trying to define yourself off achieving your goals, life would be fairly miserable. You'd think you've amounted to nothing at the end of it."

O'Donovan won't accept the calculations that come to this conclusion either, but whether he joins them or not, the parallels between him and O'Callaghan in particular are inescapable. O'Callaghan was the youngest

I don't define myself by medals. It's about enjoying what I do'

Paul O'Donovan, competing in his second Olympics, is one of Ireland's strongest medal hopes but insists he has a different measure of success

doctor to qualify from the Royal College of Surgeons. O'Donovan graduated from UCC last year with a degree in medicine.

Both submitted themselves to mastering supremely brutal athletic disciplines. Both were perfect physical specimens for their sports. O'Callaghan was already 6ft 2in and strong as a bull in his mid-teens. O'Donovan is small and broad shouldered with a huge ribcage housing the lungs to drive the boat, narrow waist and delicate pianist fingers, his hands cut and callused from the oars.

In the middle of their transformation in 2016 from unknown rowers to Olympic silver medallists and celebrity A-listers on the *Graham Norton Show*, O'Donovan and his brother Gary boiled down the essence of winning races to "pulling like a dog". Strip out the laughs and O'Callaghan's first gold medal in 1928 was an equal triumph of raw strength over technique.

Both won Olympic titles at their second games by leaning into four years of total dominance to handle the pressure and shatter the opposition. Both were reared in the farmlands of rural Cork, hardened by farmwork and the high-achieving competitors in their midst.

When Hollywood wanted to make O'Callaghan a movie star, he chose life in Ireland as a doctor. When O'Donovan was asked about specialising in

surgery last year, he expected to stay at home for his training. "I kind of like Ireland," he said. "And I like Cork."

Success was carving out lives shaped around things they love. O'Donovan was studying for a degree in physiotherapy when a visit to an operating theatre observing knee surgery put medicine on his radar. He moved into a student flat in Cork city near UCC and found a gym nearby with "a rowing machine and a few weights and stuff in there. It had all that I needed.

"It's been some of the best times in my life. There are times, say, towards June where you've got a lot of exams coming up and the racing season is starting to heat up a bit and you're under a little bit of pressure.

"If you get a bit of a cold or some bit of an illness or injury it could make a mess of everything because you mightn't be able to study as well as you'd like and you could end up failing your exams. Then you miss a week of training before an important regatta and you're doing awful in your grading and you have to do repeat exams and it's a couple of weeks before the world championships and stuff..."

Did these catastrophes come to pass? Not remotely. While earning his degree O'Donovan won Olympic gold, three world championships and a European title. One passion fed another.



O'Donovan has successfully combined his medical studies with elite rowing

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Even if I don't hit the goal I've set, I'll be happy to say it was a life well spent anyway

"People talk about sacrifice. The reason you end up choosing the thing you choose is because it's the thing you want to be doing. I've always been happy to choose rowing. But I've tried to live – I don't know is normal the word – but a non-high performance sports lifestyle as well. I go to college and hang out with some of my friends. Stuff like that.

"There are times when you're not around the town drinking the shit out of it but who wants to be doing that anyway all the time? If I didn't have the choice, you could see yourself kind of falling into that without actually choosing it, like drinking and just making a mess of your life. Probably most people would prefer not to be doing that."

He takes out his phone and presses play on a video of a stunning seascape. The sandy beach is pristine, the deep blue sky is cloudless and blends into azure sea. The boat O'Donovan and his father Teddy sailed to Horse Island is bobbing gently on the water. He is looking back towards Roaring Water Bay, back towards home in Lisheen. The scene is silent and utterly still.

"The wind was coming from behind us," he says. "It was very sheltered and warm there. Just the best place in the world when you get weather like that."

They were eight and nine when Paul and Gary finally cajoled Teddy to bring them rowing on the River Ilan. The greatest wins? Still the earliest

ones. They travelled north once to Fermoy Regatta as under-14s with Skibbereen for the brothers' first race in a quad with their best friends Diarmuid and Shane O'Driscoll and Teddy as coach.

"For two or three years, we were being beaten by a good bit, but every year kind of getting a little bit closer. And then when it was our age to be under-14, we were finally the crew that was winning the races."

It was then the four of them committed to set childish pastimes aside and row for Ireland. They raced everyone back then: club veterans, international-class competitors, rowers that were years ahead of them in every way.

"When you're young and going out

to race, maybe a big international regatta for Ireland, you're probably less inclined to be nervous because they're the same age. All weekend I was racing Richie Coakley from Skibbereen who raced at the Olympics in Beijing. I have nothing to be afraid of."

In 2002 a British rower, Fred Scarlett, visited the club with his Olympic gold medal from 2000. Gary and Paul had their picture taken and O'Donovan slung the medal around his neck for the occasion. But their heroes were already around them.

"We weren't sitting around being like 'oh, we've seen Fred Scarlett and his medal. Because of that, we can go to the Olympics'. The guys in our own club won national championships, some world championship medals.

Some were on the Olympic team. We learn from them. It gives you a better path to the Olympics, rather than someone you know nothing about shows you a medal one day."

The morning after the brothers won their silver medals in 2016 their coach Dominic Casey wrote a message on the chalkboard in the rowing club.

Well done Gary + Paul.
Can you follow in their footsteps?
Remember it is in your hands

Having watched the O'Donovans win from a pub back home, Fintan McCarthy was among those who came forward. Five years later he was winning gold in the boat with O'Donovan. He was a neighbour's child, a few years younger, half-known but still needing to prove himself. That shaped their relationship for a while.

"You can see in the first few months he was almost questioning himself: 'what am I doing here? Should I be here at all?' Now he's not afraid to bring his opinion on technique and training matters or criticise what I say. When the two of us are doing that, we converge on the same ideas of training and technique. That's helped with our consistency and performance."

What McCarthy learnt from O'Donovan?

"My limits, for sure," he says. "How to push it to the max. A lot of people slate us for our technique, sometimes. We maybe do things a bit differently but that's actually really good. I learnt that from Paul. Before, I probably would've just tried to do what people say is good on paper instead of what's working well for me."

A year ago at the World Cup regatta in Lucerne they lost their first race since 2019. In April McCarthy missed the European championships through illness and when they returned to Lucerne in May, they finished third behind Italy and Switzerland. People wondered if Ireland's banker medal was at risk.

"You can say, at one point in time, we were behind the curve. If things go reasonably to how we think they could go, then, actually, we should be in a good position. We don't know if the Italians will get better or the French will be good or the Swiss will get better. We can't do anything about that. But we can kind of see a path to how we can get

better ourselves. So we're not overly concerned."

The training since has been good. McCarthy is recovered and O'Donovan's own numbers tell him he has never been fitter. A few months ago he visited a new climate chamber at the National Training Centre in Abbotstown where the humidity can be adjusted to replicate conditions in any part of the world. O'Donovan set up a rowing machine and went hard for 90 minutes flat, leaving four full buckets' worth of sweat on the floor.

He smiles. They have the same type of room in the national rowing centre, same cutting edge stuff. "Like, they didn't even think to put in a drain in the one up in Abbotstown."

This morning he steps into the boat with McCarthy for their final week as a lightweight pair. Normal life will intrude again after that but he will keep rowing in time as a heavyweight. There is no end and no beginning. No wild highs or crushing lows.

Just a lifetime of stories that will be told forever.



Doyle and Lynch step up the pace to make semi-finals

Michael Foley
Vaires-Sur-Marne Nautical Stadium

Under a leaden sky straight out of a wet weekend on Iniscarra Lake Daire Lynch and Philip Doyle reinforced their place in the conversation for medals with a hugely impressive performance in their opening heat of the double sculls, winning in the fastest time of the morning (6min 13.24sec), unperturbed by the flying Spanish in second or the scatterings of rain that drenched the place all morning.

Having watched Spain set a lightning pace Lynch and Doyle effectively won the race in the middle third, reeling the Spanish in by the halfway mark before hitting the front with 850 metres left and crossing the line more than a length ahead.

"If I'm looking down at the

computer on the boat and it tells me I'm going at a certain speed, there's no way they're [maintaining] that," Doyle said afterwards. "You know what you can do in training. We know that's not sustainable. If they're sustaining that there's a world record going to be broken today, and if someone breaks a world record, fair play."

"We kinda reined it in a bit because we knew we were going quicker than we normally would in training and we've been going well in training over the full distance," Lynch said. "As we started moving through the second 500 we knew we'd get through them."

A gutsy reaction in the middle third of their race also ensured safe passage to the semi-finals for the

women's double sculls Zoe Hyde and Alison Bergin, gradually overtaking an experienced Lithuanian boat to secure third place having trailed in fourth at the halfway stage.

"I think our field is really tough and every race is down to the line so it's exciting just to get the confidence up, get the first one done and move on," Hyde said. "For our first Olympic Games we were a bit nervous. But I think it was a good race and we learned a lot, which I think is really important, and we know now what we need to work on to step up for the semi-final: obviously have a good second half. We're going to try to replicate that in the first half and then we'll be laughing."

The key to qualification was resisting any potential panic as the

Australian and French boats threatened to pull away after an even start. The Irish initially looked in danger of getting dropped by the halfway stage and facing into the repechage heats tomorrow, but the Lithuanians flagged, Ireland surged and eventually finished third with clear water between them as the French pipped the Australian boat on the line.

"We know our event is really competitive," Bergin said. "It's always been like this. It's nothing new. We've been racing now for the past year so we're sticking to a plan and taking every race as it comes. I just said to Zoe a while ago, 'We're Olympians.' It's exciting and it is a special moment. We're delighted to be here."

Semi-finals on Tuesday. Possible finals on Thursday. The week is opening up for all of them.

IRISH STARS TO WATCH THIS WEEK

TODAY

The rowers **Paul O'Donovan** and **Fintan McCarthy** are among potential medalists competing in their opening heats. The **women's rugby sevens** team start against Great Britain and South Africa while the boxers **Jack Marley**, **Daina Moorhouse**, **Grainne** and **Aidan Walsh**, **Aoife O'Rourke** and **Jude Gallagher** enter the ring and **Mona McSharry** swims in the 100m breaststroke heats.

MONDAY

Daniel Wiffen (right) starts

his bid for gold in the 800m freestyle heats and **Kellie Harrington** defends her lightweight boxing title. The **women's sevens rugby** team have a potentially crunch game against Australia while the **three-day eventers** compete in the jumping. **Liam Jegou** competes in the canoe slalom semi-final with the final on that evening.

TUESDAY

Rowing semi-finals for **Daire Lynch** and **Philip Doyle** in the men's pairs and **Zoe Hyde** and **Alison Bergin** in the

women's pairs. Possible 800m freestyle final for **Daniel Wiffen** and medal matches in the **women's rugby sevens**. The boxers **Michaela Walsh** and **Jennifer Lehane** are both in the ring.

WEDNESDAY

Semi-final day at the rowing, potentially featuring the **men's and women's coxless pairs** (**Ross Corrigan/Nathan and Aifric Keogh/Fiona Murtagh**) along with the **lightweight pairs** **Margaret Cremen and Aoife Casey**, and **Paul O'Donovan** and **Fintan McCarthy**. The boxers **Jack Lynch** and **Philip Doyle** in the men's pairs and **Zoe Hyde** and **Alison Bergin** in the women's pairs.

round and quarter-final action while **Mona McSharry** swims in the 200m breaststroke heats.

THURSDAY

Rory McIlroy and **Shane Lowry** start the men's golf tournament and potential rowing finals for the **men's and women's double sculls** (**Daire Lynch and Philip Doyle**, and **Zoe Hyde and Alison Bergin**), and the **women's coxless four**. The boxers **Jack Marley**, **Daina Moorhouse**, **Aoife O'Rourke** and **Jennifer Lehane** in potential second

round and quarter-final action and the men's hockey team face Argentina.

FRIDAY

Another finals day in the rowing event. **Paul O'Donovan** and **Fintan McCarthy** will almost certainly defend their lightweight pairs title with **Aifric Keogh and Fiona Murtagh** and **Ross Corrigan** and **Nathan Timoney** in the coxless pairs, and lightweight pair **Margaret Cremen and Aoife Casey** hoping to make their finals. The hotly-tipped **equestrian team** compete in

the jumping final, boxer **Jack Marley** has a potential 92kg quarter-final with a second round bout for **Michaela Walsh**. **Andrew Coscoran** runs in the 1500m heats before **Ciara Mageean** at 800m.

SATURDAY

Rhys McClenaghan bids for pommel horse gold. **4x400m mixed relay team** possibly bid for gold. **Ryan Mullins** and **Ben Healy** in action in cycling road race. The sailors **Eve McMahon**, **Finn Lynch**, **Robert Dickson** and **Sean Waddilove** compete. **Daniel Wiffen** lines up in the 1500m freestyle heats.

