

Sports Friday

Have women-specific awards run their course?

JOHNNY WATTERSON

Frisch relishes prospect of taking on Leinster

GERRY THORNLEY



War in Ukraine

US Patriots set to boost Ukraine's grid defence but will not be 'game-changer'
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Tech smart

Win a Google Pixel 7 smartphone in The Irish Times Christmas Tech Quiz
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Hilary Fannin

I wish the dead would show up for a slice of Christmas turkey
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In his life he has made me proud and in his death he has made me proud



Justine McCarthy
in Dundalk

A mother turning to her firstborn child's coffin and promising to stay strong for him. A little girl reaching out to her cousin's hearse crying: "I don't want to leave him. Mam, I don't want to leave him." A sister unable to utter the prayer for her brother's soul on the altar because her voice is strangled with grief. Milling young men and women with eyes reddened from sorrow. Soldiers wearing black armbands on the sleeves of their military coats and discreetly passing each other tissues for their tears. These are the harrowing imprints of a military funeral for a national hero.

Pte Seán Rooney made his final journey yesterday, eight days after he was killed in south Lebanon on United Nations peacekeeping service. It began just after 8.30am when his grandparents' front door opened across the road from the Church of the Holy Family in Dundalk and the sound of Paolo Nuttini singing Last Request flooded out.

Favourite song
Word ran softly through the crowds of waiting mourners that it had been the 24-year-old soldier's favourite song.

An Army piper led the cortege from Aghameen Park to the small modern church, the notes of Danny Boy and The Sally Gardens floating on the damp morning air.

The sad procession was led by Seán Rooney's parents, Natasha and Paul; his grandpar-



Members of the Irish Defence Forces carry the coffin of Pte Seán Rooney from Church of the Holy Family, Dundalk, Co Louth, following his funeral mass. PHOTOGRAPH: ALAN BETSON

diners for Seán to take back to Dundalk on his visits home to Newtowncunningham in Co Donegal, giving him instructions to put the food in the fridge as soon as possible. "But he took a little detour to the love of his life, Holly, and a lot of that food never made it," said the priest. "It was eaten in Derry by Holly and her flat-mates."

Heartbroken

Fr Ryan said Holly had asked him to read out a statement for her because she felt unable to speak from the altar. She said that until she met Seán, she could never understand why people called their partner their other half. He was, she said, her better half.

"He would have been a fantastic husband and an even better father. He could always protect me and make me feel safe.

"I am absolutely heartbroken that our life together has been cut short." But, she said: "I feel absolutely honoured that I have been afforded three wonderful years with him." Her words received more applause.

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ents Eugene and Rachel Rooney; his fiancée Holly McConnell from Derry; and his siblings, uncles, cousins and friends.

The parents of Trooper Shane Kearney (23), from Killeagh in Co Cork, who was seriously injured in the same attack, were also present.

"No one in this country would ever have thought your walk across Hoey's Lane would be such a difficult walk," said Fr Derek Ryan, the parish priest and chief celebrant, in his opening words.

Among the dignitaries were President Michael D Higgins, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar,

Tánaiste and Minister for Defence Micheál Martin, Green Party leader Eamon Ryan and Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald. Lt Gen Seán Clancy, the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces, and Eamon Martin, the Catholic Archbishop of Armagh, were also present.

Irish soldiers on UN service in Lebanon and Syria were among those watching the live television broadcast of the obsequies.

An unlit Christmas star hung poignantly outside the church where Seán Rooney was baptised on December 12th, 1998, and confirmed in March

2010 and which was too small to accommodate even half of the vast turnout of those wishing to pay their respects. In nearby car parks, vehicles bore registrations from all over Ireland.

Photographs

As the Mass progressed inside, two photographs of the dead young man gazed out through the side windows of the hearse. It was a lovely face that exuded vitality, embodying the words being spoken about him inside.

"Seán was placed in my arms when I was 16 years old and he gave me purpose," said his mother in a voice racked with

broken-heartedness. "I wanted to do better for Seán. I wanted to go back to school. I wanted to go to third level... so he could be proud of me. In his life he has made me proud and in his death he has made me proud. I promise my son that I will stay strong."

She said: "He was the most beautiful baby, the most gorgeous wee boy and the most handsome man you'll ever meet but that was only a fraction of what was on the inside.

"I could stand here all day telling you all the different nice things that Seán did for people," she said. "I don't have the

words to express my love for him and my pride as I look at everybody here today for Seán - not just because he is a national hero."

At this, applause filled the

church, at the centre of which lay the coffin draped in the Irish and UN flags. On top lay the young soldier's army beret.

Fr Ryan told how Natasha used to pack lunches and

Girls in State care 'targeted by abuse ring'

Tusla and gardaí investigating alleged exploitation of underage girls in Dublin

JACK POWER

Authorities are investigating an alleged child exploitation "ring" that targeted teenage girls in State care, who were brought to hotels and allegedly sexually abused.

The girls were living in group

homes or hostels for children taken into care by Tusla, the child and family agency.

Several girls were allegedly groomed and taken to Dublin city hotel rooms, where they were given alcohol and drugs before allegedly being sexually abused by men.

Social workers in Tusla became aware in late 2020 of concerns that several girls were allegedly being exploited by a group of individuals. Gardaí were notified and criminal investigation is ongoing.

It is understood staff working in residential hostels for under-18s in care alerted Tusla to the potential exploitation and alleged abuse in one case, after which several further alleged victims were identified.

At least five underage girls are believed to have been target-

ed by an "organised" group or "ring" of alleged perpetrators, a source said.

In several instances, the girls were picked up in taxis from their accommodation and brought to hotels in Dublin under the pretext that a party was taking place, the source said.

Child protection authorities believe that during the alleged incidents the vulnerable girls were provided with alcohol and drugs and later abused, before being returned to their accommodation by taxi. In a number

of cases, it is understood the girls were later given gifts, such as expensive clothes.

In a statement, Tusla said it "does not comment on individual cases and/or investigations".

A spokeswoman said young people placed in care have to be allowed a "similar level of free time/opportunities to do normal activities as children and young people (where appropriate) who live at home with their family". This creates potential risks such as exploitation or assault, she said.

Weather

Fog will linger in some areas in the morning, followed by scattered showers and sunny spells. Highs of 5-10 degrees.

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New Year's Eve
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