

ROAD BOWLING

SIMPLY THE BEST | Mairead O'Driscoll has won All-Ireland U18 and intermediate titles

Two-time All-Ireland champion has risen to become one of the top bowlers in the county

BY GER MCCARTHY

WHEN Mairead O'Driscoll was in sixth class at Castletownshend National School she wrote down her dreams on a piece of paper and put it in a time capsule. Last November, the time capsule was opened and the teachers posted the profiles on social media.

'My aunt, Siobhan McCarthy, tagged me on the post to alert me. My profile stated that I dreamed of becoming an All-Ireland bowler. It was mad to think that was already a goal of mine despite being so young,' says Mairead, who, since she left national school, has gone on to win All-Ireland U18 and intermediate road bowling titles. She is now regarded as one of Carbery bowling's most talented ambassadors.

O'Driscoll (23) lives in Tragumna with her mother Paula and father John Joe, and is currently studying Earth Science at UCC. She doesn't have to look too far to see what sparked her interest in the sport.

'My love of bowling comes from my father, John Joe,' O'Driscoll says.

'He would have grown up alongside the main bowling road in Castletownshend. Bowling was always part of his life but he gave it up when he moved to England. It was only when he returned home and a new bowling club was set up that he got back into it and encouraged me to take it up. I'd have been around nine years old at the time when I started but took to it straight away.'

It didn't take the UCC student long to make her mark along the roads of West Cork. 2009 proved a significant year as O'Driscoll won county titles at both U12 and U14.

'The U12 and U14 finals were held within a week of each other and I'd have been 12 years old at the time,' O'Driscoll said.

'There weren't that many girls involved in the sport around that time. Ever since I started, in the Carbery region there would only have been a handful of girls competing against one another. It was the same ten girls that competed against one another in West Cork until I reached U18. Over the years, a couple of girls came and went but the line-up didn't really change a lot.'

Thankfully, a sustained effort by Carbery's bowling officers has resulted in an upturn in the number of schoolgirls taking up the sport in recent years. O'Driscoll has welcomed the influx of young talent.

'I have to praise the Carbery



Mairead predicted All-Ireland success!

bowling officers because they have always been brilliant at what they do,' O'Driscoll says.

'From day one, since I first started bowling, they were always helpful and loved seeing newcomers take it up. I would recommend to any young child that might be interested in trying to bowl to contact any of the Carbery officers as they are brilliant at what they do.'

'Thankfully, things have changed in the last couple of years and a huge number of young girls are now taking up road bowling. I believe the decision to introduce a bowling training area in the Skibbereen Showgrounds made a huge difference and encouraged boys and girls to give it a go.'

'I remember talking to someone not long after I started and being told "sure that's a boy's sport". So, it is fair to say that bowling has been dominated by boys and men throughout all the age-grades for many years. Things are changing though and more and more girls are getting involved and moving up into the intermediate and senior ranks. Nowadays, bowling has become a sport to be enjoyed by both boys and girls.'

If 2009 was a breakout year then 2014 announced Mairead O'Driscoll on the national



Mairead O'Driscoll with her parents, Paula and John Joe, at the homecoming in Castletownshend in 2017 following her All-Ireland success.

stage. Winning her first All-Ireland title was a dream come true.

'The village of Blackwatertown in Armagh is where I won my first All-Ireland as a 17-year-old,' O'Driscoll says.

'It was the August bank holiday weekend and a huge crowd travelled north to support me. I

know I'd been successful at underage level but honestly didn't think I had a chance of winning the All-Ireland U18 grade.

'From the moment I started bowling, my goal was to reach and win an All-Ireland final. When I look back at pictures or recall memories from that day in 2014, I still find it hard to

'More and more girls are getting involved and moving up into the intermediate and senior ranks' – Mairead O'Driscoll

believe it happened. To me, it's mad to think that after all the time and effort I put into bowling, I finally achieved the dream of winning an All-Ireland, defeating Sinead Kiernan from Armagh. Sinead was going for three-in-row of All-Ireland titles too so it was an unbelievable feeling to beat her.

O'Driscoll built on that All-Ireland U18 success and established herself as one of the preeminent bowlers in the ultra-competitive intermediate grade. Another All-Ireland title followed.

'There have been setbacks, including failing to get back to defend my All-Ireland title after losing the Cork county semi-final in 2015,' O'Driscoll says.

'It might not seem like a big jump from U18 to intermediate, especially when you have been facing the same opponents. I felt I was ready for the challenge but must admit that go-

ing up to intermediate was a lot tougher than I expected. Rightly so because it is one of bowling's toughest grades.

'That's what made defeating Emma Oliver in the 2017 All-Ireland intermediate final so special. I'd worked so hard to get there and defeated her on a road in Armagh that I wasn't familiar with. It was only my second time bowling up north. Bowling up there is always a challenge but I managed to get an early lead and held onto it.'

Nowadays, O'Driscoll is firmly established amongst West Cork's senior ranks. Competing in the top tier since 2019, she came within a whisker of defeating reigning champion Carmel Carey in a titanic county semi-final in Ballinacurra. Mairead also won a Queen of the Roads qualifying competition for the Gretta Cormican Cup that same year.

Away from bowling, O'Driscoll's decision to join the Castletownshend ladies football club has proved a positive move. Getting involved in a team sport and such a successful squad enabled O'Driscoll to keep fit and experience the benefits of another sport. Bowling remains number one however, and it is only a matter of time before O'Driscoll returns to the roads and starts hitting the headlines once again.