

Swim. Bike. Run. Repeat

2024 olympic hopeful Erin McConnell gives an insight into the world of triathlon.

France, 1934. San Diego,

1974. The Skerries, Ireland, 1983. Sydney, Australia, 2000. One might ask; what connects these places, these divisions of time?. The answer is thousands of athletes, one event and three sports. Triathlon - the ultimate trial of endurance. Since its debut in 1974, the event has certainly left an indelible mark on the sporting world, leaving a legacy of historical contests, athletes and human achievements. The roots of Triathlon can be traced back to twentieth-century France, where competitors canoed, biked and ran in an event hailed for 'the sportsman of the time'. The year 1974 marks its modern debut. The event consisting of three sports - swimming, cycling and running, is backed by Jack Johnstone, Don Shanahan and the San Diego track club. Two participants

of this original race - Judy and John Collins would go on to

Develop the Ironman, the much-publicised iteration of the sport.



Competitors entering the water at the first Ironman event, 1974.

Triathlon has remained well and alive in Ireland since the 80s, when Maurice Mullins, a local endurance runner, organised an event in Skerries, Dublin. The Irish Triathlon Association was established in 1984, after which subsequently followed several local affiliate groups who organised races and events. Today, Triathlon Ireland fosters the

development of elite and upcoming athletes, one of whom is Erin McConnell.

The sun was just beginning to set when I sat down at the

computer and logged onto zoom. Erin was immediately apologetic, despite being perfectly punctual, 'Sorry about this, I've just come in from a run, there was a sandstorm outside!'. Outside her hotel room, a vast Saharan dust cloud engulfs the Spanish skyline with swirling clouds of sand. While the rest of the locality was sheltered inside from the storm, McConnell, accompanied by fellow athletes, braved the elements beneath the red sky.

We begin by briefly discussing the origin of her sporting career.

‘I was always a sporty child, I was involved in everything at school’

McConnell’s dimples emerge as she recalls an active childhood with great enthusiasm. She describes swimming as her first love, a sport that has been in her life since the age of four. In addition, she also competed in Irish dancing, participating in the 40th World Irish Dancing Championships in Glasgow, 2010.

A member of an ETP talent squad in her mid-teens, McConnell was a successful swimmer. However, she recounts her passion for the sport decreasing as she grew older, **‘I found myself chasing times’**, or in other words, continually pushing herself in the discipline but not seeing desired results. Erin craved something new and exciting, which is exactly where Triathlon came into play.

The sport was introduced to her in a rather unorthodox way. McConnell was late for a swimming gala; **‘someone saw me running across the car park of the NAC [national aquatic centre] ‘It all started from there.’**

‘I think it [triathlon] appealed because It was something I didn’t know a lot about

Attending her first training camp in Dublin at the age of 15, McConnell progressed quickly in Triathlon. Some of her greatest achievements as a junior athlete include; 3rd at the junior European cup in Bucharest, 2nd in the Irish sprint national championships, first in the 2019 Sprint Triathlon National Championships and Junior triathlete of the year.

When asked as to which discipline she preferred, McConnell hesitates. **‘I don’t really have a favourite discipline, you have to like them all really’**. Certainly, an advantage of Triathlon is the variety of sports and training activities an athlete can participate in. McConnell comes from a swimming background but states that **‘following a black line up and down a swimming pool’** grew boring. Instead, Erin enjoys a **‘good open water swim’**. Regarding the bike and run, she enjoys a ride on her turbo trainer and a track session or two.

McConnell also introduces a fourth discipline, strength and conditioning

‘People think triathlon is swim, bike and run and that’s it. But, you have to remember how important strength and conditioning are for your body to recover.’

She also emphasises the importance of endurance in triathlon. One of the reasons McConnell has excelled in triathlon is her excellent endurance base, which comes from a background of swimming, cross country running and years of consistent training.

‘No matter how hard it gets, you can’t just give up then and there’

Balancing college, social life and a twenty-hour plus training week is no easy feat. McConnell’s dedication to success is certainly admirable. However, she expresses that her personal drive and motivation is fueled by those around her

‘ It’s the people around me that support me, like my parents and my coaches.’

A brief anecdote summarises this belief

‘My best friend is a Paralympian swimmer and she reminds me all the time that if there’s a day that - and, everyone no matter how good or bad an athlete- has bad days- if there’s a day that you think “I don’t want to do this session”, she always says to me, what happens if you couldn’t do it tomorrow?’

This philosophy has certainly stuck with McConnell, who made her elite debut last year in the European Triathlon Aquathlon Championships, winning a bronze medal and competing with some of the most prestigious triathletes in the world.



Erin at the European Triathlon Aquathlon Championships (image credit- HER sport)

This advice has certainly fueled the ambition of Erin, who made her elite debut last year at the European aquathlon triathlon championships in Austria, placing third in the Elite womens and second in the under 23s.

As for the future, there is certainly no stopping this steely young athlete, whose determination and drive is accompanied by a clear passion for triathlon. With the commonwealth games and 2024 Olympics firmly in her prospects, We can bet on success for Erin McConnell!