

Diving in....

The murky truth of abuse in Irish swimming – Lucy Crean

When my family and I first dipped our toe into the swimming world we were taken back by the level of commitment, involvement and presence demanded of us all. My involvement was a given but what we hadn't legislated for was the level of time my parents would have to commit. This was new. We were very accustomed to other sports where there was less of an expectation to be "hands on" (or off...) where parents were not obliged to chaperone our sessions, whose presence was not a necessity for training to continue and to generally keep a watchful eye on us while we swam. Swim Ireland was strict on this. Insistent actually. I was interested so my parents were invested. We were in this together apparently and they were happy to get involved.

As time passed, they were garda vetted, they did the safeguarding training and after many risk assessments, the veteran parents, who had waded in the deep for longer than they had, explained the basis for these seemingly excessive regulations. Swim Ireland were responding. Reacting. They were putting measures in place so history would not be repeated. They were careful and particular about how swimming sessions were managed and how everyone who interacts with young swimmers were properly vetted and educated. They were reacting to many high-profile scandals that had taken place in the swimming world.

One of these cases involved George Gibney, who was accused of sexually abusing multiple young swimmers under his supervision, during his coaching career as a Irish Olympic Swimming coach and his tenure as coach in Trojan Swimming Club. The allegations against Gibney span several decades and involve incidents of sexual misconduct and abuse of power. In the 60's reports started to emerge of the abuse, but they were often silenced or overlooked due to the societal taboos and power dynamics. Despite numerous accusations and investigations, Gibney left Ireland before charges were made and he has never been convicted. These accusations and those associated with another coach, Derry O'Rourke, rocked the world of swimming in Ireland. O'Rourke was accused of 29 charges of sexual abuse against 11 young swimmers, on numerous occasions between 1976 and 1992. These men, in positions of authority, lauded for their experience and expertise were using these positions to exploit children and young people.

Speaking to the "Where is George Gibney Podcast" presenter Mark Horgan, ex competitive swimmer Trish Kearney said that Gibney "almost groomed the parents before grooming the children" by charming the parents into trusting him so he could have access to their children. She added that "the last time she saw him she truly believed that he would kill her" such was the fear and control he exerted over her. Kearney was just 13 and a promising swimmer when George Gibney, began to abuse her. This sexual abuse lasted for years. She finally managed to escape him and silence her experience. That was until a letter from fellow swimmer Gary O'Toole caused these memories to resurface. This letter detailed how his friend Chalkie White had suffered at the hands of Gibney. O'Toole had decided to reach out to ex swimmers he thought may have suffered at the hands of this predator and others. Gary became the whistle blower. He gathered these experiences with a view to bringing the coaches to justice. He can be credited with the start of change in the world of swimming.

The Gibney and O'Rourke cases as well as many other in Ireland and other countries not only highlighted the challenges victims faced in seeking justice for abuse but also made a strong case for developing and implementing safeguarding practices within swimming to prevent similar incidents from occurring ever again. So now Swim Ireland's rigid adherence to child protection policies makes sense. They can never go back.

Opinion Piece by Lucy Crean, Colaiste Muire Ennis.

A harsh learning curve for all meant that the protection of children in swimming necessitated significant changes across various aspects of the sport. All coaches would now be vetted, reference checked and trained appropriately. The same measure would be applied to volunteers, and anyone associated with a club or who has access to children or young people. Swim Ireland and their clubs developed codes of conduct and ethical guidelines for all participants in swimming, they insist on completion of safeguarding courses for all and have clear protocols for how sessions are run.

So, does it all work? Have we left all this behind? Have the measures eliminated abuse? The simple answer is no. In November 2023 Matthew Coward, a Swimming Coach from Dublin was jailed for three years for recording young swimmers changing after training.

However, it is definitely worth nothing that this case is rare, these situations are extremely uncommon. Lessons were learned and clubs applying the guidance and regulation as set out by Swim Ireland and national policy are better places.

I have been swimming happily and safely for years. My club saw to that.