

# Teenage Kicks

By Aine deCoursey

Playing sport is crucial for teenagers' physical and mental health. Being part of a team and experiencing the ups and downs with them, is something all teenagers deserve to experience. The feelings of togetherness, the sense of belonging and the resilience it fosters all make it incredibly worthwhile.

I grew up playing Gaelic football, my dad played county for Galway and he still always has matches on TV. So many of my favourite childhood memories have a commentator in the background, analysing matches on the radio, I remember being brought to matches all over Galway with my dad and siblings. I first started playing in the Clifden Under 6's. We then moved to Donegal where I started to play in Muff.

However, COVID affected my sporting life just like it did for many others. I also had an injury before COVID, so I found it especially hard to get back into sports after all that time away. Subsequently I decided not to go back to Gaelic at all.

Then I signed up to do the Pope John Paul Award at the beginning of TY and started to help my dad coach the under 12 boys- my little brother's team. The other two coaches I met there encouraged me to go back to training and I'm so glad they did. The reason I hadn't gone back before that was because I felt it was too late, a lot of people quit at my age, but I was being asked to start back, I also felt that my teammates would be so much better than me, but that wasn't the case at all though, I just needed to believe in myself a little more.

I felt physically sick on that first night of training that I very nearly didn't go, but I was so happy I had afterwards though. Everyone was so nice to me and playing football came back naturally to me, it was just as if I had never stopped. I met a lot of new people there and returning really helped develop my self- confidence. Sometimes I feel way too tired or can't be bothered to go to training, but then I realise I will be glad I went afterwards. Finding the motivation to go can be hard sometimes, but I feel sport helps me to find motivation for other aspects of my life also.

My first match was a senior match, I didn't think I would be playing, because I had only been training for about a month and I'm just fifteen. So I went to the match mainly to get used to the team and watch how they played. The coaches had other ideas however, because I played the whole match, apart from the first two minutes. Playing again felt great, but I felt a strong need to prove myself to

my teammates, coaches and most importantly my dad. Initially I felt quite stressed about it all, but eventually I just focused completely on the ball, until I forgot about the spectators.

We didn't win that match in Dungiven, however I came away from it smiling, along with everyone else. Playing football or a sport you love is so good for your mental health. It has made me so much happier and it distracts me from things going on at home and at school, but most especially it removes me from my phone. It just completely switches my mood. I now play under 16s, minors and seniors, which might sound like quite a lot, but the coaches understand and together we make it work.

There's one final reason why I returned to Gaelic and also why I love it so much; it is because of my dad. He was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. This has had a huge impact on our family. But he lives and breathes football, he coaches two teams and he is always down at the club. Having that sporting connection with my dad and having the best talks and training with him and my brothers is something I wouldn't change for the world. Playing a team sport is one of the best things a teenager can do to build mental and physical strength and to develop their social networks, in the real world.

Sport provides the ultimate Teenage Kicks. So if you have turned your back on sport, maybe you should consider your return. You definitely won't regret it.