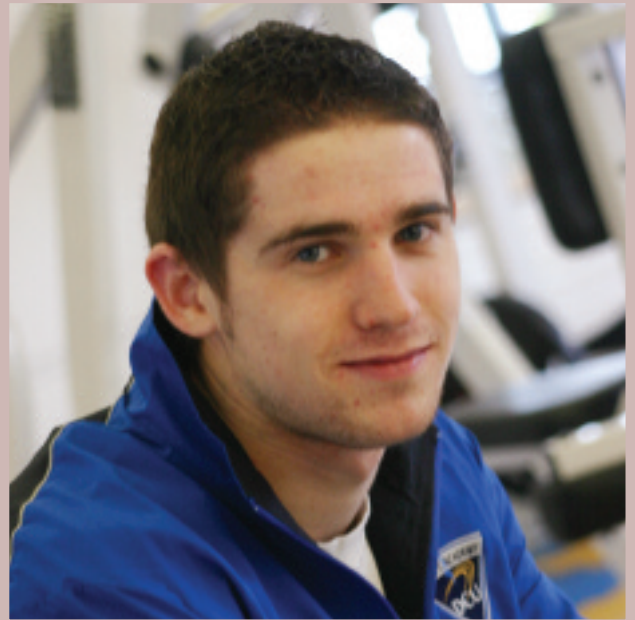


# Medals in mind

Cliona Foley speaks to three of the latest entrants to DCU'S Sports Academy who are pursuing academic and athletic excellence in three very different sports.



**EWIN HANNON**

**Course:** First year PE & Biology

**Age:** 19

**From:** Ballyskenach, Co Offaly

**Sport:** Long jump

**Sporting hero:** Michael Johnston

**Sporting motivation:** 'What I like most about athletics is that you get out of it exactly how much you put into it.'

COMBINING your first year at college with trying to qualify for the World Junior Championships this summer is a big ask, but long jumper Eoin Hannon, a leading talent in the underpopulated ranks of quality Irish field eventers, is not afraid of a challenge.

The reigning Irish Schools champion at both long jump and sprint hurdles, Hannon reached the final of the European Juniors (U20) last summer (finishing 10th), where he landed a personal best of 7.45m.

However, the five-times Irish Schools medallist from Tullamore Harriers AC, coached by his father, is not content to rest on his laurels. Not only has he taken up a scholarship at DCU but he also took the radical step of joining an elite training group in Manchester last autumn. His club mentor Robert Denmead had the contacts to hook him up with the UK Jump Squad's coaching director John Crotty.

Having access to DCU's high-performance gym, he says, and other support systems on campus for members of the Sports Academy, as well as being close to the indoor jump pit at Santry Stadium, has already brought improvements.

'With help from Enda Fitzpatrick and Ian Chaney at DCU, as well as my new coach, the access to facilities and being able to train seven days a week – compared to just three last year – I can already see the difference,' says Hannon. He jumped 6.99m in his indoor competition this year, which was way ahead of his season opener last year.

'I have some pretty ambitious targets set for this year, but to get 7.50m to qualify for World Juniors in Poland in July is the main aim right now.'



**KEVIN NOLAN**

**Course:** First year PE & Biology

**Age:** 19

**From:** Monkstown, Co Dublin

**Sport:** Gaelic football

**Sporting heroes:** Roy Keane and Dublin footballer Johnny Magee

**Sporting motivation:** 'The main thing is to give it your all and play every game as if it is your last.'

KEVIN Nolan's life could have been very different than sharing on campus with a group of other GAA scholarship students and intercounty seniors, like Cavan's Barry Watters and Meath's Shane O'Rourke. A talented centre-half with St Joseph's Boys, Nolan had soccer trials with Blackburn and Leicester City in his early teens.

Yet, at 16, when Leicester called him back for a second trial and it clashed with a league game for the Dublin minors, he opted for Gaelic, a decision he did not regret when selected to play U17 International Rules the following year. Even though Ireland lost both of those Tests in Australia, Nolan was actually named 'Player of the Series', an early indicator of the talented young centre-back's promise.

Since taking up his DCU scholarship, he is juggling more balls than ever before, all of them Gaelic. He captains the Freshers and is part of the Sigerson squad as well as training with the Dublin senior and U21 panels, on top of his club commitments with Kilmacud Crokes in both grades.

How does he do it?

'Thanks to Declan Brennan, DCU's GAA academy director, really,' Nolan says. 'He talked with the Dublin senior and U21 management and worked out a training schedule that tries to keep everyone happy.'

It is tough enough, Nolan admits, especially in the first few months of the year, which are very busy. 'But I'm living on campus and the DCU set-up is the most professional and organised system I've ever been in.'



**GER WARD**

**Course:** First year Accounting & Finance

**Age:** 21

**From:** Cabra, Dublin

**Event:** Lightweight rowing

**Sporting hero:** Ian Thorpe

**Sporting motivation:** 'When I'm struggling to get up at 5.20am for training, I remind myself that the opposition are probably up already getting the better of me.'

GER Ward admits that he doesn't fit the usual profile of a top Irish rower. Most come to this gruelling sport through family tradition or living close to water, so how did a Dub from the Navan Road get involved?

'Believe it or not, I first saw it walking in a park at Islandbridge with my dad. Then we got a flier through the door from Dublin City Council, who run summer rowing camps, so I tried it out.'

That started a career with Commercial RC, where coach Gerry Campion became his mentor, and quickly led to four National Championships by 2005, Irish selection and competing in several World Championships, both as a single sculler and as part of team boats.

If Ward's background makes him an unusual rower, he also admits to taking a circuitous route to DCU, having spent the past three years training full time at his sport. Getting into DCU, thanks to its direct entry system for elite athletes introduced in 2006, has, he admits candidly, 'given me a second chance at education'. Combining study with training and world-class rowing, currently in the U23 grade, is a new challenge he's enjoying, even having to rise at 5.30am to do his 12km morning runs in the Phoenix Park on the mornings he has a 9am class.

Ward's sporting priority for 2008 is to be selected for the World University Rowing Championships in Belgrade next September 'and we'll see what happens from there'.

Cliona Foley is a graduate of the MA in Journalism programme and writes for the *Irish Independent*.