



Limerick's world champion lightweight sculler Sam Lynch

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Scullers Sam and Tony our newest world stars

By AIDAN CORR

WHEN Limerick's golden rower, Sam Lynch, walked onto Thomond Park during the half time break of the Munster versus Connacht game last Tuesday, he realised how much his success in world rowing championships in Lucerne meant to Limerick sports-lovers.

The response from the 3,200 rugby fans was spontaneous. An acknowledgement of an achievement by a totally dedicated sportsman whose sheer commitment to rowing has now reaped the highest award.

It has not been all plain sailing for the Limerick rower. There have been tough times. Periods when illness threatened to ruin his training programme, times when balancing his medical studies with his strict training regime were difficult and the mental battle in a sport that is one of the loneliest in world competition.

Sam decided to concentrate on lightweight single sculls following the disappointment of the Atlanta Olympics in 1996. He was a member of the Irish four that was cruelly denied of a medal when they finished in fourth place in the final. That was hard to take.

While many would have lost heart, Lynch became more determined than ever to succeed following that low point in his career. Working closely with Irish coach, Thor Nielsen, a complete new training programme was prepared with his goal, a gold medal at the world championships.

Last season, Sam again met disappointment when he was pipped by Czech sculler, Michal Vabrousek, in the world finals. This season was pay-back time. Lynch beat the Czech in Seville in June and in Munich in July and again left clear water between them in last Saturday's world final in Lucerne.

In an era when sports-people reap substantial financial rewards from their involvement in competition, Sam Lynch stands as an example to every young person who sees sport as a personal challenge and a battle for perfection.

Rowing is far removed from the high profile sports of rugby and soccer in these islands and the monetary rewards are almost nil. When Sam Lynch called into these offices some months ago the welts on his hands told their own story. Long hours on the water and on the rowing machines, almost non-stop training in pursuit of achieve-

ment.

When Sam passed the finishing line ahead of both Italian Stefano Basalini and Michal Vabrousek of the Czech Republic the realisation of his achievement eventually hit him. From his beginning as a youngster who wandered into St Michael's Rowing Club on summer afternoon, he had become world champion and brought fame to his country and city.

Limerick rejoiced and rowing in this region is bound to reap the rewards of his achievement.

Sam's preparations for the event have taken him to the Sierra Nevada in Spain, imposed a regime upon him akin to a monastic vocation and with twenty eight scullers entered for these world championships the task of winning it was a mighty one.

His success culminates a year in which, at last, everything appeared to go right for the Limerick rower. Unlike previous seasons, he succeeded in avoiding sickness and injuries, he trained in Seville in May and spent two periods of altitude training under coach Nielsen. This time, Lynch was leaving nothing to chance. Only disaster was going to deprive him of the gold medal. Sam, of course, was

not the only Irish success in Lucerne at the world championships with his girlfriend, Sinéad Jennings, taking the gold in the ladies' single sculls and lightweight coxless pair, Gearóid Twohey and Tony O'Connor making it a golden hat-trick for the Irish team.

After his success on Saturday, Sam Lynch said that it had been a lifetime achievement to win the world title and now that he was champion, he was having difficulty taking it all in:

"All the hard work has been worthwhile and having won the world gold now I'm finding it hard to let it sink in. I felt great during the race and I knew I could win from the start. This is the moment that I have been waiting for all my life."

It is always nice to welcome a world champion back to his native Limerick. In Sam Lynch's case, it is particularly pleasant so let's hope that his achievement is fittingly acknowledged by our city fathers.

On the local scene St Michaels are holding a BBQ in the club on Friday, August 31 at 7.30pm. Training for next season at the club starts on September 2. New members are welcome any evening.