



Limerick's Ger O'Rourke last month became the first Irishman to win one of sailing's toughest tests, the Rolex Fastnet Race. The 46-year-old tells ANNE SHERIDAN his next big thrill will be the 2,225 mile Transpacific Yacht Race from San Francisco to Honolulu

## Ger views his next challenge from crest of a wave

**W**ILL you have a slice of bread? asks Ger O'Rourke, who for the first time in our conversation, eventually pauses for breath. The man who could be Nike's embodiment of 'Impossible Is Nothing', thrives on living the fast life, with a penchant for fast business transactions, fast cars, and even faster yachts.

He does not just leave others eating his dust, but leaves them gawping, open-mouthed and dumbfounded, at the pace of his life. "Go on, next question," he says, not for the first time that evening.

Our interview moves from his office on Upper William Street (the main base of Chieftain Construction), to his black Toyota jeep, to his home, back to the jeep and down to City Hall, where he is being honoured by the Mayor of Limerick for his recent high-profile sporting achievements. And not a minute is let go to waste.

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possible for the new vessel, but he insists that he is not trying to make money out of sailing. The new yacht will be in the region of two feet longer, will have a slightly modified rig and keel and will provide the perfect opportunity to tackle the Sydney to Hobart race again.

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did. So we decided to look further afield outside the country and set up offices in UK, South Africa, America, Budapest. We're now looking at Beijing."

Since its foundation the company has procured in excess of €1.5 billion worth of construction projects. Born in 1961, it has been a hop, skip and jump for the now 46-year-old South Circular Road man.

The company, he says, "started small, building ten or 20 houses and selling as we went." He learnt the ropes in Shannon Transport, a distribution company on the Ballysimon Road, where his father worked.

"I did most of my after school and college training there, in different disciplines from construction to mechanics, logistic management to whatever." He went on to do a marketing degree at night, dabbled in accountancy and mechanical engineering, and became distribution manager at Vandenberg Frozen



include a €75 million, 13-storey hotel in Liverpool, a 25-storey residential tower block in Chicago, as well as myriad other developments stretching from Johannesburg to Pretoria in South Africa.

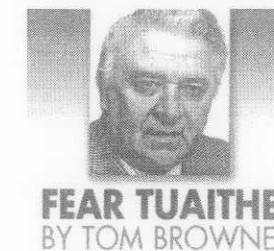
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back racing in some format. I'm not retiring at all. We're just taking a bit of time out to sail with the kids for a while and then take stock.

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**FEAR TUATHÉ**  
BY TOM BROWNE

## Seasonal insect has trout out and about for dinner

AT this time of year when many anglers are heading for the great Western lakes, Carraigh, Corrib and Mask for the last few casts of the season, they'll be hoping that the grasshoppers will be courting in the long grass. These little insects are the first choice of the big trout in September.

The trout in the Western lakes are renowned for their preference of a seasonal menu; the midge family, buzzers and chironomidae presented as duck fly in the spring of the year, ephemera danica at mayfly time and the very appetising grasshoppers before the rods and reels are packed away for the winter.

It is when feasting on these tasty insects that - like in May time - the cannibal fish are encouraged away from bottom feeding to seek a meal on the surface.

The grasshopper is a fascinating creature of which there are nearly 20,000 known species. Their clip clip music, while monotonous adds its own special enchantment to the autumnal countryside.

The grasshopper's appearance is a sure indication that winter days are ahead. It is a sign too to all other creatures of the great outdoors to prepare for cosier habitats; the field mouse, one of the first to react by taking up residence in the wheat stack. Like the creaking, old-fashioned mowing machine leaving the meadow for the last time, the chirrups of the grasshopper reflects a seasonal adieu.

Other members of the family abundant in this country are the large Marsh grasshoppers - the largest in this country and across Channel - the common green grasshopper, the field grasshopper, which after egg laying in September passes away something akin to the eels in the Saragossa, the mottle grasshopper and the meadow grasshopper, our most numerous, which cannot fly.

Sharp of hearing and movement, they are difficult to catch and even a weak disturbance from afar can set the alarm bells ringing. The grasshopper found beside the lakes in the West are known for their agility and they can take an enormous leap for their size. The largest type favoured by the

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# Change from crest of a wave

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"Ger, will you please sit down with the girl?" pleads his wife of 21 years, Majella. Finally, he does and the conversation only becomes somewhat deep and reflective when discussing the sale of his beloved boat, the Chieftain, which has seen him through numerous wins over the past two years.

Over the aforementioned slice of brown bread and a cup of tea, he leans across the kitchen counter in the home in Ballyclough and pauses to reflect on parting from his great love: the 50-foot Cookson yacht built by the world-famous designer Bruce Farr in New Zealand.

"To be honest, I don't know what to do," he confides, when I ask of his next big adventure. Then, he breaks the news that the boat is up for sale.

"My heart will be broke. I've had a fantastic two years, the best two years of my life to be honest," he says of the impending sale. However, as a businessman O'Rourke is averse to being dominated by sentimental attachments. Later on he quotes a scene from Michael Mann's testosterone-fuelled 1995 film, Heat.

"Do not allow anything into your life which you cannot walk out on in thirty seconds flat," says Robert De Niro in the film. While Mr O'Rourke's own creed may not denote a total lack of emotional attachments, he has realised that now is the time to capitalise on the momentum of being the first Irishman to win the Fastnet race.

The yacht itself has also garnered a huge amount of column inches since it first hit the water in Sydney two years ago. The sale is now being handled by the UK firm, Ancasta International Boat Sales, where the guide price has been set at £470,000.

He is also keen to capitalise as much "branding" or sponsorship as

possible for the new vessel, but he insists that he is not trying to make money out of sailing. The new yacht will be in the region of two feet longer, will have a slightly modified rig and keel and will provide the perfect opportunity to tackle the Sydney to Hobart race again.

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ours has been growing steadily and this year he was named Cork Dry Gin Sailor of the Year.

"We came fourth overall, which was phenomenal," he says of the first big race. "It is one of the two iconic races in the world. It was a class win and then we had the Fastnet, so it was back to back."

He pauses momentarily and you can see his brain ticking over. "Actually, that might be a record," he queries, before departing to get the Fastnet Cup.

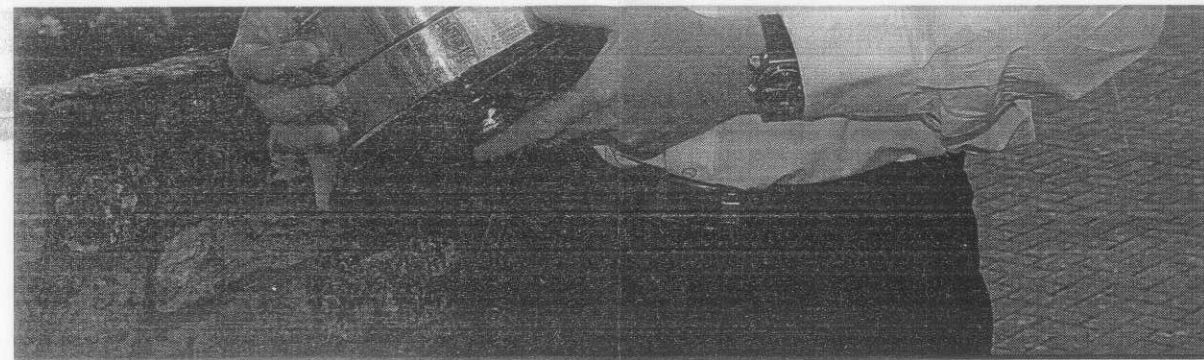
"Is it always like this?" I ask Majella. "Always," she beams, "he just never stops." And you have to marvel at her capacity to let it all wash over her; the media intrusion, the 60-odd days at sea and further time abroad tying up property contracts in America, South Africa and the UK, where Chieftain Construction has further offices.

"She's an absolute star," he says, after which Majella requests complete anonymity in the press.

Established 18 years ago, the construction company now has 200 members of staff, including 25 executives.

Seemingly, Ger O'Rourke has become to sailing and construction what another Limerick man is to gambling and horse racing. Like JP McManus, he too was convinced that success was lurking in the not too distant future.

"About seven years ago I saw the writing on the wall but I never thought that the economic boom we've had would last as long as it



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The company, he says, "started small, building ten or 20 houses and selling as we went." He learnt the ropes in Shannon Transport, a distribution company on the Ballysimon Road, where his father worked.

"I did most of my after school and college training there, in different disciplines from construction to mechanics, logistic management to whatever." He went on to do a marketing degree at night, dabbled in accountancy and mechanical engineering, and became distribution manager at Vandenberg Frozen Foods, before leaving to set up his own company, Chieftain Construction.

"To be honest, I had high hopes for it all the time. I tend to be very optimistic person, so I think we can shoot for the stars all the time and still make the business a lot bigger than it is globally."

"It's about delegation and proper management and control and having the proper criteria in place for making quick business decisions. I think we have that; the model works and can be reproduced in most successful economies, so long as we get the fundamental criteria right. I think I instil that in all the executives and directors we have."

Beijing, he believes, is another step towards becoming a global property player and feels its economic climate is ripe for the picking. Ambitious overseas projects undertaken by the company in recent years

include a €75 million, 13-storey hotel in Liverpool, a 25-storey residential tower block in Chicago, as well as myriad other developments stretching from Johannesburg to Pretoria in South Africa.

But as master of the helm, he can now afford the time to cut back on his workload - from 80 to 50 hours a week.

"I guess I'm taking the leg off the pedal a little bit but that's due to very good staff and directors that take a lot of the burden off me. This allows me to do a bit of sailing and spend time with the family," he says.

His motto, if he has one, is 80 per cent pain, 20 per cent gain. "It carries through life, you get out what you put in. Your personal life, mentally, physically, socially, you're going to have to suffer. There are no freebies. A lot of the sailing community use the phrase, 80 per cent misery, 20 per cent highs. It's not really a motto, it's more of a fact."

So where will his pain threshold be pushed next? Acquiring a pilot's licence is one dream and the race to top them all would be the 2,225 mile Transpacific Yacht Race from San Francisco to Honolulu. But plans to build a new yacht have put his ambitions on terra firma back further.

"I want to see where this development will go, if it goes at all. I will be

back racing in some format. I'm not retiring at all. We're just taking a bit of time out to sail with the kids for a while and then take stock.

"I don't want to go back and do all the very same races again. What I love doing it going to new locations. I want to do the most competitive events."

One of the problems with the Transpacific, he acknowledges, is the expense of getting the boat to San Francisco and then back again from Honolulu.

"It's something I don't see myself doing for a good number of years, until my youngest, Sean, is about 17 and I can get off for longer periods of time. It's one of the biggies. It's just out of my range at the moment in terms of costs, logistics, time."

In the meantime, he is still getting over last month's exhilarating win at Plymouth. Half of the 300 boats that entered the race pulled out, winds of up to 40 knots were endured and even before the get-go, he had to gather a crew just 24 hours before the race began.

In the days following their victory, the YouTube video that was forwarded throughout the world captures a slice of the action. "It gives you an idea of that feeling," he says, "but it still doesn't capture a third of it. The Fastnet would have to top it all."

## PERSONAL FILE

**Home:** Ballyclough, Co Limerick

**School:** The Model School, O'Connell Avenue, Crescent Comprehensive, School of Professional Studies and Limerick Institute of Technology

**Family:** Wife Majella, daughters Deirdre, 18, Gillian, 13, son, Sean, 11

**Favourite book:** The Street Lawyer, by John

Grisham, or Richard Branson's autobiography, Losing My Virginity

**Favourite Film:** Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, or Heat

**Favourite holiday destination:** The Great Barrier Reef, Australia

**Favourite food:** A prime rib of medium rare steak

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Sharp of hearing and movement, they are difficult to catch and even a weak disturbance from afar can set the alarm bells ringing. The grasshopper found beside the lakes in the West are known for their agility and they can take an enormous leap for their size. The largest type favoured by the Corrib trout measures just over a dozen cms in length.

The clicking sounds are made by a series of pegs on their legs, being rubbed by the forewing, similar to the action of the drumming snipe in the sky in a summer's twilight when the sound is made by the switching of the wing and the outer tail feathers.

Although well camouflaged in their lakeside environment and often heard but seldom seen, they have an attractive olive green colour that is sometimes mottled. There are different mating calls and very often the male that sings the loudest is the first to attract a willing mate. Sometimes these calls are made by the vibration of the male wings.

Another fascinating feature of their make-up is that some species, having five eyes, have full circle vision allowing them to see straight ahead, sideways, left and right and nothing escapes the eye at the rear end.

While it's known that Mayflies have existed for 325 million years, scientists say that grasshoppers have been around even longer. Trout, of course, feed on many other of the lake's offerings during the year: shrimps, snails, small frogs, earthworms, caterpillars, beetles and daphnia (water fleas). But it is at banquet time when the seasonal fare is abundant that they lose all control and, in their greed, offer hope to the anglers who provide a tasty grasshopper bait.