Champion swimmer 'Aimee' for the stars

Richard Bullick of the **Belfast Newsletter** talks to east Belfast swimmer Aimee Louise about her Paralympic dream. (Published 24 May 2007).

Aimee Louise McCullough hasn't allowed physical disability to stand in the way of her pursuit of sporting success.

The 23-year-old, who won two gold medals and two silvers at the Cerebral Palsy World Championships in the USA in the summer of 2005, has her sights set on an appearance at the Paralympic Games.

Athens came too soon in her development – at present it's looking like a long shot for Beijing next year and London 2012 remains a long way off – but you suspect that Aimee Louise won't lightly abandon a long-standing ambition.

"I remember when I was in first form at Saintfield High School turning to the teacher and saying, 'Miss, I'm going to be in the Olympics one day' and she was 'yeah, of course you are' without taking me too seriously," she recalls.

As a young girl growing up, she "always loved watching sport on television, particularly my football, and was also very into the Olympics," but because of her disability, taking part at a high level always seemed out of the question.

She started swimming at the age of three and, as well as it helping her mobility, soon found that the pool afforded more of a level playing field for someone with her condition – Aimee Louise has a weak left leg which makes walking a much tougher task than it is for the most of us.

McCullough went weekly to the pool but it wasn't until the relatively late age of 15 that she started swimming seriously.

Since then, there has been considerable success in return for the constant commitment given not only by the girl herself but her family too.

Like able-bodied swimmers, early morning pool sessions have become a way of life for Aimee Louise, so proud mum, Jayne, who was present when we chatted at the family home in east Belfast on Monday evening, is also used to being up at the crack of dawn.

"It's a big family commitment but we're delighted that swimming has given Aimee Louise such positive experiences, enabling her to travel extensively, represent her country, achieve as an individual and develop her confidence and social skills in the process," says Jayne.

The involvement in swimming built up gradually as Aimee Louise's potential became apparent and coaches encouraged her to take the sport seriously. It wasn't as if the Paralympics were a conscious goal from early on.

"When Aimee Louise was young, we lived out in the country and she went to a fairly small school in Ballygowan which was very good for her. As a mother, I tried not to make a difference because of her disability but organisations like the Girls Brigade are very focused on competitions which require physical prowess, so it was difficult.," added Jayne.

Through the Association of Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus, the family became aware of pool sessions at Templemore Avenue every Saturday afternoon and Aimee Louise went along from the age of nine.

Then, in 1999, the coach Mark Cummins suggested that she should take things further. From that point, swimming started to become a way of life for the family.

"Initially, I was glad that Aimee Louise liked swimming but never thought about anything coming of it in terms of international competition or the Paralympics or anything like that," says mum.

"But it soon started taking over and it wasn't long before everything revolved around swimming and not going wasn't an option. It was like, 'oh, Thursday too?' And then Mondays. And then mornings. Like any working parent, you're stretched but it's been brilliant and I don't begrudge any sacrifices we've made."

Aimee Louise's first competition was the Disability Sports Northern Ireland Championships in Lisburn eight years ago and although she was doing a lot of different events in those days she soon started getting great satisfaction from it.
"As a child, I'd have been used to sitting things out or coming last and any attempt to take part in sport was fairly frustrating for obvious reasons so finding something I could do pretty well was enjoyable and fulfilling," reflects Aimee Louise.
Disability Sports NI is the umbrella body but there's a sense that we tend to focus here more on the Special Olympics than the Paralympics and the McCulloughs have found that there is much more support available in the south of Ireland.
Swim Ireland now has a dedicated paralympic group and that link has helped Aimee Louise, not only in accessing specialised coaching at the National Aquatic Centre in Dublin, but also taking part in mainstream galas against able-bodied swimmers.
She finds that competing in this environment tends to produce personal best times and even though it might mean coming last, the clock is everything in terms of the bigger picture. It is good to hear that there is no shortage of non-patronising encouragement from fellow competitors who are able-bodied.
There are training camps for the Irish squad and it is all a big improvement from the days that the family had to pay for Aimee Louise to go to England and tag onto the British set-up without being a fully-fledged part of it or having the same support.
One complication with disability sport is that there are so many different disabilities, resulting in several separate categories in each event. This is logical given the great disparity between, for example, performers who have cerebral palsy, amputees and those with visual impairment. However, this can cause confusion and a watering down of the sporting spectacle's impact as a number of adjustments have to be made in determining an overall result rather than using the more transparent first-past-the-post type system we'd be used to in 'mainstream' sport.
The proliferation of medals might make some sceptics suggest that there's one for everyone but this is insulting to those who work so hard to be the best that they can be and beat everyone they come up against.
Aimee Louise is rightly proud of her achievements in America at the Cerebral Palsy Worlds where her golds came in the 400 metre freestyle and 50 metre freestyle, with silvers in the 100 freestyle and 100 backstroke.
Another highlight was qualifying for the International Paralympic Committee World Swimming Championships in South Africa last December, "the first time I've crossed the equator.
"It was massive for me – I was really chuffed. A few years ago I couldn't have imagined I'd ever be competing at this level. My friends are all very supportive and I've had some recognition as well, for example a television interview, a Northern Ireland Disabled Sportsperson of the Year award and an invitation to give a talk at the Odyssey."
Even though Aimee Louise now has a job and also assists as a coach at Templemore, she still has a rigorous regime with swimming sessions on Monday mornings, Tuesday nights, Wednesday mornings, Thursday nights, Friday mornings and two on Sundays.
She just arrived back from England on Sunday night after winning two silvers and a gold – the medals are sitting on the table as we talk – at the British Championships and is off to compete in the Czech Republic next week.
Jayne shakes her head at the thought of Aimee Louise targeting London if Beijing doesn't happen, but shares her daughter's hope that she can inspire other young people with disabilities to challenge themselves and achieve success, be it in sport or other areas.
McCullough has a strong commitment to Templemore Swimming Club and is grateful to those who have helped her along the way, including the late Victor Glenn of the ASBAF group, coach Mark Cummins and Irish Paralympic team manager Geraldine Conway.
She is certainly doing her bit to put the club's name up in lights with her exploits in pools around the world.

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