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Meath Chronicle

Published: Wednesday, 16th March, 2011 4:57pm

Kilbeg woman on thin ice

by Conall Collier

Kilbeg could hardly be described as a hot spot for ice hockey, but that hasn't deterred local woman Keira Keenan from reaching the pinnacle of the sport in Ireland.

The Meath woman plays for the national team and this week will be pulling on her blades as the Irish, coached by Vytautas Lukosevicius, from Lithuania, debut at the 2011 World Women's Championships in Sofia, Bulgaria until Saturday of this week.

The Irish girls will make history when they become the first Irish ice hockey team to compete in the World Championships.

They departed from Dublin airport at the weekend and face a tough group which includes Poland, Turkey, Bulgaria and Spain.

Ice hockey, like many other minority sports, faces a tremendous battle for survival, never mind aspirations of international success.

It would probably be fair to say that for most of the so-called minority sports, actually surviving from year-to-year could be described as success.

Talk to anyone about the Irish ice hockey team - reminds me of a comment when I stopped in Omagh to get directions to Healy Park many years ago (1998 to be exact) on the way to report on a NHL game between Meath and Tyrone, the local man said "I didn't realise we had a hurling team" as he provided accurate directions.

Several members of the current Irish team were also members of the Dundalk Bulls women's team that travelled to such ice hockey strongholds as Sweden, Czech Republic and Latvia to compete in tournaments

"I'm very proud to have been chosen to represent my country and to have experienced first-hand the development and progress made in women's hockey here over the past four or five years," the intrepid Kilbeg woman told the Meath Chronicle last week as she packed her bags for Bulgaria.

That's the PR comment out of the way, the probing questions followed, I was searching for something more than just pride in the national jersey. Is there a tradition of sport in the Keenan clan?

"Well, I went to school in Kilbeg, there was no real interest in ice hockey in Kilbeg, after that it was Eureka in Kells, but I wasn't interested in sport," she suggested.

"My sister Lisa plays soccer, rugby and also Gaelic football with St Michael's and has played with both the Meath ladies and the Republic of Ireland soccer team.

"My brother Donal played with St Michael's, but he is now living in Australia where he has discovered a surfboard.

"He also did his first triathlon before Christmas, he lifts those big weight things! and hopes to do an Iron man in the next year or two.

"My other sister Aine plays sport for pleasure and likes to run, she is a BootCamp Ireland fanatic and she also skis," she added without revealing too much more information.

"My parents are very supportive. I played a little bit of Gaelic football, soccer and basketball, but it wasn't until I went to university that sport came into focus," was all she would say.

So where did this interest in ice hockey come from?

Eventually, the truth emerged - the boyfriend.

"I lived in the Alps for a while and I got into snowboarding and then got interested in hockey, my boyfriend is from Morzine, so I go there a lot to improve my skiing technique," she admitted. Morzine is a traditional ski resort in the French Alps.

Ireland only affiliated to the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) in 1996 while the opening of the Dundalk Ice Dome in 2006 was also a boost for the sport.

The Kilbeg woman has been taking to the ice regularly, however, the Dundalk facility was closed on a temporary basis last summer which meant even more hardship for ice hockey enthusiasts.



Kiera Keenan (left) and Lorna Hoey will be in action for Ireland this week in the ice hockey World Championships.
Pic by=: 97

"Playing ice hockey in Ireland is never easy, there are relentless issues with finding ice and the associated expense, but the speed and excitement of the game make it all worthwhile," according to Keenan who is undertaking her PhD studies at University College London to become a Child Psychologist.

She plays ice hockey in Ireland and also in England, unusually, with a men's team in London.

"The diversity in playing approaches, together with the added physical element of the men's game, has helped develop my skills," she said.

"We have also been lucky enough to secure some ice-time at the Odyssey which is the home of the Belfast Giants' ice hockey team.

"Despite the complications, individual members of the team have managed to access ice several times a week by travelling to join in open training sessions.

"The level of commitment of the girls is unquestionable, there are late nights, early mornings and long distances in order to skate.

"It all helps to build core strength and fitness off the ice," she concluded as she checked her boarding pass for the journey into the unknown.

The Irish panel is: goalkeepers - Seanna Conway, Rebekah Burke; defence - Sonya McEaney, Cherise McCaughley, Elaine McCann, Edelle Doherty, Jessica Natalie Forde; forwards - Keira Keenan, Emma Fletcher, Clara O'Reilly, Lorna Hoey, Aine Morris, Avril Ni Mhathúna, Gemma Gorham, Caoimhe Lynch, Rebecca Callan, Fiona Ryan, Beatrice Hosgood; management - Gary Harvey, Vytautas Lukosevicius, Gabriela Vlasankova, Roman Grobarcik, Aoife Greene.

Follow her progress on <http://www.iihf.com/channels1011/ww-v>

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