

SPOKE OUT



SPOTLIGHT ON:

IWA Women in Sport

Help shape inclusive cancer care

OTHER FEATURES:

Accessible adventures, Beating the January Blues, plus lots more.

SPOKEOUT January 2026

Happy New to all our readers.

As we begin 2026, we are delighted to welcome you to the first edition of the year and to share the many positive developments happening across Irish Wheelchair Association.

A new year offers a chance to reflect, reset, and look ahead, and at IWA we are entering 2026 with renewed energy, ambition, and a continued commitment to supporting our members and advocating for an inclusive society.

This edition brings together a wide range of stories, updates, and opportunities that reflect the strength and diversity of our community. Inside, you'll find inspiring personal achievements, important advocacy work underway to ensure that people with disabilities are not left behind, and practical advice from members on how to beat the January blues.

We shine a spotlight on IWA's Women in Sport, celebrating their achievements and hoping to inspire others to try something new this year. For those seeking adventure, we have just the article for you especially if you'd like to explore new experiences outdoors in a supportive and inclusive environment.

Finally, we are asking for your support with a vital piece of research focused on improving cancer care for people with physical disabilities in Ireland. Your voice and participation can help make a real difference.

Until next month, happy reading.

Marie



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Spotlight on IWA Women in Sport

Bright future for IWA's female athletes



2025 was a phenomenal year for IWA-Sport's female athletes across various Para Sports, from League Championships, European promotions, Irish and European records broken and a growth in participation too.

As we celebrate the success of our female members across the four Para Sports governed by the organisation, everyone is very excited about what this year will bring as IWA-Sport continues to strive to empower women in sport and give those with a physical disability the opportunities to compete and participate.

Shannon Pollock, IWA-Sport's Women in Sport Co-Ordinator, said: "2025 has been a year of remarkable growth for our female members in IWA Sport, not only in performance, but in confidence, community, and leadership. Their success reflects the strength of their ambition and the power of creating spaces where women and girls can thrive.

"IWA-Sport encourages anyone with a physical disability to get involved and find their Para Sport heading into 2026."

Emerald Rollers are ones to watch

One of the success stories last year was Emerald Rollers – Ireland's all-female Wheelchair Basketball Squad – who competed in the Great British Wheelchair Basketball League's 3rd Division, were crowned Champions in April and promoted to Division 2. And this in just their second season since forming!

Emerald Rollers team captain Sophie Denieffe told *Spoke Out*. "We were delighted with our success last season. After a lot of hard work put in throughout the season, it was nice to see it had paid off. Although we know Division 2 will be tougher, we have been continuing to work hard in preparation and are hoping for a similar result as last season."



Sophie Denieffe holds the trophy aloft after Emerald Rollers fantastic season that led to promotion in the GB Wheelchair Basketball Women's League.

Promotion for Irish Wheelchair Rugby Team

Meanwhile the Irish Wheelchair Rugby team also gained promotion. The team travelled to Skien, Norway for the European Championships, Division C. This was the first international tournament Ireland had competed in since 2023 and featured two well-experienced female players in Cork native, Jade Flynn-Hurley and Wicklow's own Ciara Staunton.



Hard work to earn European promotion for Irish Wheelchair Rugby paid off, explains Jade-Flynn Hurley.

In a tournament where they were made to work hard right to the end, the side claimed second place and promotion to Division B.

Reflecting on their success, Jade Flynn-Hurley said: "It feels great to have been promoted to Division B. It really shows that our hard work as a team paid off."

Teenager Isobel Twomey setting new records

Irish female Para- athletes' success continued when Isobel Twomey competed at the Activity Alliance Games in Coventry, UK, in the Running Frame event. The 13-year-old blazed to glory in the 100m event, setting a new Irish record with a time of 37.03s.

Just two weeks later, she claimed another Irish record in the 200m event at the Irish Nationals in Santry with a time of 1.25.55s.

The teenager told *Spoke Out*: "I am happy and proud of my achievements."

Proud mum, Rowna added: Following the race when she got her times she was thrilled, going around beaming and telling everyone she had two new Personal Bests!"

Rowena also shared how invested the local community was in Isobel's progress and how even the post ladies were eager to find out how she performed over the summer.

"All the practice around the estate each morning weaving in and out of the post ladies' way paid off. She even called to our door to find out how she got on."



A special delivery for Isobel Twomey, who set two new Irish Records in Running Frame this summer and had her community rooting for her.

Para Powerlifters making their mark

The incredible feats of IWA-Sport's members didn't end in the summer either. With the journey to LA 2028 well underway, Para Powerlifters Niamh Buckley from Cork and Casey Fitzgerald of Cavan looked to edge closer to following in the footsteps of their teammate, Britney Arendse. This began with the World Championships in Cairo, Egypt this October.

Niamh Buckley blew everyone away when in the Junior Championships, she set a new European Record that had stood for 11 years. The Para Powerlifter successfully lifted 73kg for the record and a gold medal in the Up to 61kg Category. Her joy continued when in the Senior Championships, where she set a new Lifetime Best when lifting 78kg. She finished fourth overall in her category.

Meanwhile, Casey Fitzgerald finished second for total lifted and third overall in the Junior Championships, setting a new Lifetime Best of 87kg in the Up to 73kg Category. Her senior competition had her place fourth overall with both athletes making a good start in their quest to reach the Paralympic Games.

Casey's incredible year started with her being nominated for a HerSport Award for personality of the year and attending the awards ceremony in January.

Pure determination, commitment and hard work is what has led to Casey's huge success in 2025. She explains how her journey to LA is shaping up after a memorable year.



Casey Fitzgerald keeps LA2028 in her sights after claiming a silver and bronze medal at the Para Powerlifting World Championships in Cairo, Egypt.

"I will make it happen" - Casey Fitzgerald

"My journey towards LA2028 is shaping nicely and there's bigger things to come with the Europeans in March 2026. I'm training hard to meet a particular target which I hope to achieve then. Representing Ireland in Los Angeles in 2028 would be a dream come true and I will make it happen!"

January is usually a time for new beginnings so why not consider joining one of our Sporting Clubs. It's not just a great way to keep fit but you'll also make a whole bunch of new friends and become part of a whole other community.

To find your nearest IWA-Sport club, visit the [Find Your Club page and register your interest.](#)

"We felt able-bodied on that trip"

How one man is enabling people with disabilities to access outdoor adventures.

Paul Kellagher is an outdoors enthusiast who specialises in helping people with disabilities access the natural world through Accessible Adventures, a community interest company he set up.

Speaking to *Spoke Out*, Paul says that he was always passionate about inclusion and social justice – but it wasn't until he had a serious climbing accident 15 years ago where he broke his pelvis, elbow and wrist that he started thinking seriously about accessibility in the outdoors.

"I spent quite a bit of time recovering in hospital and in rehabilitation, and when I was back home I used a wheelchair. That really made me think about the fact that there were places that I loved to get every day that suddenly I couldn't get to," he said.

Paul – who is a fully qualified mountaineering instructor, canoeing coach and social worker – fully recovered from his injuries and no longer uses a wheelchair. However, the experience pushed him to think about ways to make activities he loved such as kayaking and rock climbing accessible to people with disabilities.

In the years since his accident, he has become a go-to coach for people with disabilities who want to try rock climbing on climbing walls. Then, he decided to set up Accessible Adventures with the goal of enabling people with disabilities to get into the outdoors.

He references a recent expedition he organised on Lough Erne in Northern Ireland as an example of the kind of thing Accessible Adventures offers.

"I ran a two-day wild camping expedition on Lough Erne and I think six of the group were wheelchair users. That was a completely self-supported expedition – we carried all our own kit in the canoes for two days, landed at the Devenish Island Monastic Site. We're probably the first group to ever land on Devenish Island from canoes with wheelchairs. We then spent the night camping on this beautiful island among the bluebells."

He's currently in the process of planning two expeditions for 2026.



Paul Kellagher, founder of Accessible Adventures, pictured on a canoe on one of his expeditions.

"I kind of see being in the outdoors as play; I basically get to work and play in the outdoors every day, and for me it is about the joy of being in the outdoors. There are huge benefits to our physical health but also our mental health in being outdoors. My vision is to make the world a really accessible place, or at least the little patch of it that I can work within, for everyone," he told *Spoke Out*

"It gives you such a freedom of movement"

Nathan McCabe was among those who went on the Lough Erne expedition last year. The 22-year-old tells *Spoke Out* that the experience made him feel that "disability doesn't matter".

"We felt able-bodied on that trip is the only way to put it in words, it gives you such a freedom of movement," he tells *Spoke Out*.

Nathan's mother, who is also a wheelchair user, joined the expedition too. While Nathan is an outdoorsy person who loves kayaking and camping, his mother is less so.

"She'd go camping but she's not big into kayaking or water sports. This was a new thing for her and she was like, this is incredible, it's wonderful. Nathan would recommend trying one of Paul's accessible adventures to anyone with a disability.

"You can sit at home all you want and watch the Discovery Channel, see all these wild nature spots, or you can say, 'I don't care I'm in a wheelchair, let's get out into nature.'"

To find out more, [visit the Accessible Adventures website](#).



Nathan McCabe pictured during his Accessible Adventures expedition on Lough Erne and Devenish Island.



Nathan McCabe pictured during his Accessible Adventures expedition on Lough Erne and Devenish Island.

Beating the January blues

Keep busy and focus on things you love

January can be a difficult time of year. The Christmas rush has come and gone and life has returned to normal. The evenings are dark, the days are short, summer still feels like a long way off, and the weather isn't usually at its best.

While most of us wouldn't pick January as our favourite month of the year, for some, it can be a particularly hard time, with feelings of loneliness and anxiety coming to the fore.

If you're having a hard time this January and need support, you can talk to your GP, or consider booking a session with an accredited psychotherapist who you can talk to openly and honestly. If you're in crisis and need urgent help, you can call emergency services or the Samaritans on 116 123.

Keep Busy

For some IWA members, the key to getting through January lies in keeping busy, focusing on hobbies they love, and spending time with loved ones.

Claire McCawley, who is from Leitrim, says she's "not too keen on January" – but she does what she can to look after her wellbeing.

"It's a long month and a depressing month, but once you get into February it's kind of warmer and brighter. I find it a depressing month because it seems to last so long," she tells Spoke Out.

"Even coming up to Christmas, people are talking about it earlier now in the year, so in September, October, all you're hearing about is Christmas and all you're seeing on the television is Christmas, and then when it's over there's a kind of a lull and you don't know what to do with yourself for a few weeks."

Claire distracts herself in January by keeping busy and staying connected with loved ones.

"I watch a lot of television. I watch far too much television!" she laughs. "I watch anything that isn't news or politics. I love game shows, dramas, anything like that. When I have time, I like to sit down and watch a good murder mystery and not get interrupted."

She's also lucky to be surrounded by family, which is a big help.

"Once you have family around you and all that you should be OK, which I do, so it's not so bad."



IWA member Claire McCawley from Leitrim.

"We've got Spring to look forward to" - Teresa

Teresa Brigdale-Dean, who is also from Leitrim, tells Spoke Out that she doesn't usually mind January, but she does have her own ways of boosting her mood in these dark winter months.

"I wouldn't say I'm happy all the time. I'm more likely to say I have pleasant times, and if I feel a bit under the weather, I guess I would probably find a book to read, or read the Leitrim Observer, read some international news," she says.

She also spends time on YouTube watching travel videos, and a good cup of tea is always a surefire way to lift her mood.

"I stroke my dog a bit, I might have a biscuit, cake, something like that. A little bit of everything I suppose," she says.

She also loves nature – she enjoys watching the birds from the window of her home.

"We can get snowed in here, but you just have to put up with it a bit. You have to think, it's not always going to be like this, we've got spring to look forward to. It's the natural seasons."

She adds: "You have to say to yourself, I'm going to have to get on with this, take deep breaths, put a bit of music on, put the radio on."

If you need emotional support, you can [contact the Samaritans on 116 123](#).

Advocacy

Disabled People must not be left behind.



Happy New Year from the Advocacy Team.

As we move into a new year and very cold weather the advocacy team will keep pressing the Government to introduce a dedicated Winter Emergency Payment for people with disabilities, to help allay the financial pressure many are currently experiencing.

Central to our work in the year ahead is ensuring that policy is shaped by lived experience. We will be working closely with our broader membership to run focus groups on the cost of disability, capturing real-world evidence of how these costs affect daily life. This will inform a solution-focused research paper, which will underpin our engagement with Government during upcoming Budget discussions.

Alongside this, we remain committed to advancing our work on **Transport, Housing, the Built Environment, and DAISY** (Disability Awareness in Schools) because true equality depends on access, to services, communities, and opportunities.

Our message is simple: disabled people must not be left behind. We will continue to advocate until policy reflects that reality.

If you are interested in getting involved, please [email Joan Carthy to join our campaigns](#).



Joan Carthy, centre, IWA's Advocacy Manager, pictured at the Disability Coalition's protest outside Leinster House before Christmas, calling for an emergency winter payment for people with disabilities.

Here for a Reason

Tom Leahy launches autobiography and pays tribute to IWA

IWA member and one of Ireland's most decorated Paralympians, Tom Leahy, launched his autobiography last month, 'Here for a Reason' reflecting on his life and many achievements as an athlete, artist and disability advocate.

Tom is from Ballyhooly in north Cork and says that he decided to write the book to highlight his achievements not just as an athlete but as a person living with a disability and an accomplished artist.

"The book is all about my achievements and all my efforts to get to where I'm now.... the reader will learn that nothing should ever stop you from following your dreams even with [a] disability," he said.

As a successful Paralympian in Boccia and throwing events Tom became Ireland's first Paralympic medallist for Boccia. He won a total of eight medals at the Paralympic Games including three gold (1984, 1988 and 2000).

He is a five-time world record holder and has won over 50 medals for Ireland on the international stage throughout his long career. Tom competed at a record eight successive Paralympic Games from 1984 to 2012, when he retired after his eighth Paralympics.

'Here for a Reason' doesn't just focus on Tom's sporting life but reflects on his own journey outside of sport. Born in 1957 with cerebral palsy, Tom's book recounts the challenges he faced in his life because of his disability and still faces today.

Emmett Coffey, co-author and a good friend of Tom who is a lecturer at MTU Cork, worked closely with Tom on the book.

"I was approached by Emmett, and he asked me if he could write a book about my life. I had good support around me to make the book a success", he said.



Family and friends gathered to celebrate the launch of Tom's book 'Here for a Reason', in Fermoy last month.

Help shape inclusive Cancer Care

Noreena Coyle writes about her PhD research project which focuses on understanding the unmet supportive cancer care needs of people with physical disabilities in Ireland

People living with physical disabilities are living longer than ever, and as a result, more people will experience cancer at some point in their lives.

However, cancer services are often not designed with physical disability or mobility needs in mind, and we know very little about what cancer care is actually like for people who already live with a physical disability.

For many, navigating cancer care can involve additional challenges related to accessibility, independence, and dignity, yet these experiences are rarely reflected in research or healthcare planning

As a person living with a physical disability (rheumatoid arthritis), and with a close family member who is a cancer survivor living with MS, this research is both personally and professionally important to me. I am a PhD researcher in the School of Psychology at Dublin City University, funded by the Irish Cancer Society. My research focuses on understanding the unmet supportive cancer care needs of people with physical disabilities in Ireland by exploring the barriers people encounter, the supports that help, and the gaps that exist from the point of a cancer diagnosis onward.

As part of this PhD, I reviewed research from different countries on the cancer care experiences of people with physical disabilities. This work showed that many people face significant challenges after a cancer diagnosis, not because of cancer alone, but because cancer services are often not designed with physical disability in mind.

Common issues included physically inaccessible hospitals and equipment, a lack of support with mobility and personal care during cancer treatment, and disability-related pain or discomfort being overlooked or dismissed. Many people also described emotional distress and having to repeatedly self-advocate to have their physical needs recognised during their cancer treatment.

Notably, the research found that people with physical disabilities were often less likely to receive curative cancer treatments and more reliant on family or informal supports to manage day-to-day care. Most of this research was conducted outside Ireland, highlighting the need to hear directly from people with physical disabilities in Ireland about their experiences of cancer care.



Noreena Coyle who is carrying out the important PhD research project at DCU, funded by the Irish Cancer Society

Building on these findings, this study seeks to generate evidence to inform future policy, guidance, and the design of cancer services in Ireland. By centring the lived experiences of people who have navigated cancer alongside a physical disability, the research aims to identify where current cancer care falls short and what changes are needed to ensure services are inclusive, accessible, equitable, and dignified. Ultimately, the findings seek to support meaningful improvements in cancer care planning and delivery so that people with physical disabilities are not disadvantaged within the cancer system.

If you would like to be involved or want further information about the study, you are very welcome to [email Noreena Coyle about the inclusive cancer care study](#) or [call Noreena at 089 411 3547](#).

i Accessibility Note:

The information in the research poster added in the article as an image, has been reproduced in text format below to ensure it is accessible to all users.

Help Shape Inclusive Cancer Care for People with Physical Impairments

Have you experienced cancer care while living with a physical impairment?

(e.g. Functional neurological disorder, MS, polio, arthritis, spina bifida or mobility-related conditions, etc)

Who can take part?

People with a physical impairment who have experience of cancer care within the Irish healthcare system and had their physical impairment prior to their cancer diagnosis

You must be 18+ to take part

What does participation involve?

- A confidential interview (online, in-person or by phone)
- At a time and duration that suits you
- Accessible and flexible participation options available

Why Take Part?

- Ensure the voices of people with physical impairments are heard in cancer care research
- Highlight challenges, barriers, and unmet needs
- Help inform future cancer services, training, and policy
- Contribute to research focused on dignity, accessibility, and inclusion

Who is conducting the research?

This study is being conducted as part of a PhD research project at Dublin City University, funded by the Irish Cancer Society.

If you would like to be involved with this research or are looking for more information, please contact Noreena Coyle by email or by phone

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✉ noreena.coyle2@mail.dcu.ie

☎ 089 411 3547



Fundraising

Ready for an adventure in 2026? Support IWA along the way.



Did you by any chance miss out on a Dublin City Marathon place? Don't worry, all is not lost. You can register to run for Irish Wheelchair Association.

All we ask is that you fundraise €1,500 which will support our work with people with disabilities across Ireland. Irish Wheelchair Association is Ireland's leading organisation providing vital services to our members such as Assisted Living, Community Centres, Wheelchair Accessible Housing and Employability Skills for our members.



Some of last year's Dublin City Marathon runners for IWA

Taking part would mean supporting people like Mary and Imelda.

Mary has Multiple Sclerosis which affects her mobility and taking part in activities in her local Irish Wheelchair Association Community Centre has been something of a lifeline over the past eight years.

She loves meeting her friends at the centre telling us that it's her 'happy place'. "To me, it is a day out of the house – something to look forward to, a reason to get dressed. I have made lots of friends here in IWA. I love to catch up with friends, have a chat and get any support I need."

Imelda is a wheelchair user with very high dependency and has been attending her local Community Centre for the last number of years "I really enjoy coming here. It's a great outlet. I enjoy mixing with people. If I couldn't come, I would be on my own all week. I love the chat. At the end I am tired but it's great."

Raising €1,500 may seem challenging but be assured that we will give you all the support you need to reach this target. [Places are limited – right now, there are only seven left – so sign up here and secure yours today to join our IWA Team. Together, we are stronger.](#)

If a full marathon seems daunting, there are other options. You could also take part in the Dublin City Half Marathon or VHI Women's Mini Marathon and support IWA. There are lots of options to challenge yourself and raise vital funds for IWA.

Here are some other reasons to take part.

- **Make a Difference** by supporting our work with people with disabilities.
- Challenge yourself to reach a new milestone in 2026.
- Meet like-minded individuals and build friendships.
- Help shine a light on the importance of accessibility and inclusion in our society.
- **Have Fun** while contributing to a meaningful cause.

To find out more on our upcoming up events throughout 2026, [visit our fundraising events page](#)

Volunteers

Thank you John! Valued Volunteer in Tuam



Volunteers play a vital role in IWA, helping to create a welcoming, supportive environment for members.

We are fortunate to have individuals who give their time so generously, and one such person is John Martyn, whose long-standing connection with IWA Tuam has made a lasting impact.

Members in Tuam will need no introduction to John!

John actually started with IWA Tuam on a Community Employment Scheme in January 2016. He worked for three years on this scheme and then moved onto other employment as there was no position available at that time.

In 2024 though John returned to Tuam Community Centre – this time as a volunteer!

He currently volunteers one day a week and is a huge asset to the team with his daily duties including driving to collect or drop members home, partaking in programmes or having the chats with our older members who would have known him when he first started with IWA.

John says he really enjoys volunteering as it breaks up the week for him at home. He looks forward to getting out of the house and meeting with the members for chats and laughs.

“I enjoy going on day trips with the members and enjoy being part of the team here in Tuam,” said John who has made some long-standing friendships through the years.

The team is so appreciative of John always being on hand to help or assist whenever he can.

“We would like to take this opportunity to thank John for his dedication and service over the last number of years and hope he stays on with us for many more,” said Sharon Houston, Services Support Officer.



John Martyn, who volunteers with Tuam IWA.

Thanks for your company

If you like what you're reading, please spread the word!

SHARE SPOKEOUT JANUARY 2026



Remember:

Your voice, your choice! We're all ears for your feedback, thoughts, and suggestions.

Share what topics intrigue you the most and what you'd love to see in future magazine features.



SpokeOut is Irish Wheelchair Association's lifestyle magazine published every month for our members.

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