

Dr. PJ Smyth

'A Man Ahead of His Time'

Rhoda Sohun, PESS Department

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PJ Smyth has been a lecturer on the Physical Education programme of the National College of Physical Education (NCPE), Thomond College of Education (TCE) and University of Limerick (UL) since 1974 and on the Sport and Exercise Sciences programme in UL since it was established in 1993. Although recently retired, he remains a valuable member of the Physical Education and Sport Sciences department. PJ Smyth is not only known for his research in Motor Behaviour and Applied Sport Psychology, he is also well respected for his knowledge, expertise, and innovative coaching and training methods in rugby and athletics. He has been described to me as 'a leader, innovator, guide, mentor and true professional'. PJ is a member of the panel of sport psychologists of the Irish Institute of Sport (IIS) and is an advisor on mental preparation and skill development to a number of performers.

I first met PJ Smyth nearly 20 years ago, when I came to the University of Limerick as a student of the BSc. Sport and Exercise Sciences programme in 1994. Although I have my own stories that reveal PJ's commitment and passion for imparting knowledge, his sensitivity towards students' abilities, and his rather unique love of bananas and bagels, I thought it more appropriate to contact some of the graduates who were students of the NCPE and TCE to ask them for their memories of PJ.

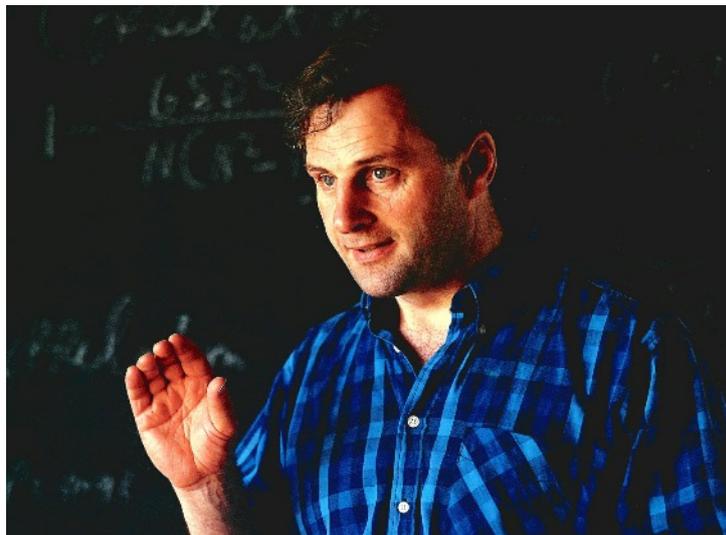
I have learned that PJ Smyth has always been committed to the education and development of his students, that he was ahead of his time in relation to physical conditioning and training methodologies, and you will struggle to find a person who is as generous with his time as he is.

A Little History

PJ Smyth is the eldest of five and grew up in Dun Laoghaire. He attended Christian Brothers College (CBC), Monkstown for primary and secondary school. The CBC was advanced in that it had exceptional facilities and exposed its pupils to a variety of subject areas. Pupils were fortunate to be introduced to activities such as pole vaulting, strength training and cross-country, among others. Rugby was Smyth's passion from an early age and he was Captain of the Junior and Senior Rugby teams at school, playing several positions, but mainly centre and flanker.

He was a member of the school's athletic club and later Crusaders Athletic Club. As a boy, Smyth was fascinated with training, fitness and skill acquisition and he applied the principles of fitness and training to himself. He watched role models training and performing skills and practiced such skills in a planned and thoughtful approach, thereby initiating his longstanding interest in motor skills and skill acquisition.

Smyth received a BA (1968) followed by a HDipEd (1969) both from UCD. At that time physical education training for men was not available in Ireland, and so Smyth went to St.



Mary's College, Strawberry Hill, London where he received a Diploma Physical Education in 1970. In his Strawberry Hill days, Smyth was renowned for his knowledge in relation to strength training. He was the person you went to if you needed advice on strength training and if you trained with PJ, you trained hard. He trained 7 days a week and at that time played front row for the Senior Rugby Team. In 1973, after teaching PE and general subjects for three years at his old school in Monkstown, PJ went to Springfield College, Massachusetts on a Fulbright scholarship. There he obtained an MEd in physical education.

National College of Physical Education

In 1965, Captain Michael McDonough (former Director of the Army School of Physical Training) was appointed as Inspector of Physical Education by the Department of Education. In 1969 McDonough prepared a report outlining the feasibility of setting up a National College of Physical Education (NCPE) which would offer the award of a B.Ed degree. The NCPE Limerick opened in January 1973 and Smyth began his career at the NCPE the following year. Some of Smyth's work colleagues in the early years of NCPE included Paul Robinson, Anne Sweeney, Teresa Leahy, Joanne Moles and Carmel Vekins and the equally memorable, Mr. Dave Weldrick. Smyth had first met Dave Weldrick at Strawberry Hill, while they were both on different physical education training courses. They shared an office for a number of years and remained colleagues until Weldrick's retirement in 2009. Weldrick recalled the early days of the NCPE and the 'stormy and emotional times' that ensued when there was uncertainty as to how physical education teacher education would be viewed in academic circles. In those uncertain times, Weldrick remembers PJ's tranquil nature and remarked that he was a 'pillar of steadfastness' with an ability to boost morale of many staff members. The college was renamed to Thomond College of Education in 1975 when subjects other than physical education were added. From 1984-87 PJ took a three year leave of absence to go the University of Southern California (USC) where he studied motor learning and sport

psychology. He obtained his PhD in motor learning from USC in 1990. In 1991 Thomond College of Education was dissolved and integrated into the University of Limerick and the Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences was formed.

Physical Education & Sport Sciences Department

In 1993, a B.Sc in Sport and Exercise Sciences (SES) was offered for the first time at the University of Limerick, and for the first time in Ireland. Smyth's expertise was such that his knowledge and capabilities enabled him to cross both programmes. His research interests were in practice factors affecting performance of sport skills in competitive situations, the development of fundamental skills in children and the relationship between fundamental skills and sport specific skills.

He held the position of Course Director for the SES undergraduate degree programme for 11 years on and off. He was the department's Cooperative Education coordinator from 1993-2011 and has worked tirelessly in promoting both undergraduate programmes and the newer postgraduate programmes as they came on stream. He continues to take a special interest in tracking Sport and Exercise Science graduate appointments and has maintained contacts with a large number of students.

"Over years PJ built up a great wealth and experience of coop opportunities and always took time to follow up with the placement providers and thereby build the range and quality of opportunities for future students."

"PJ followed the career trajectories of literally hundreds of graduating students and built up a register of career options and pathways for our BSc Sport and Exercise Science graduates. No one knows more about our graduates' careers than PJ and he continues to be a contact for our graduates many years after they completed their degrees."

Drew Harrison, Head of PESS Department 2006-2013

In the nearly two decades that I have been part of the PESS department I have not encountered any other staff member who is as dedicated and passionate at promoting the PE and SES programme and who is driven to keep track of past graduates. PJ Smyth can be regularly heard listing off where past graduates have taken up employment. He remembers students; not just their names, he truly remembers them.

"PJ has been the inspirational lecturer and long term friend to generations of students. After many years at UL, his enthusiasm is unabated, and he remains the students favourite, for his kindness, his ability to listen to and encourage, and most of all for his passionate belief in the value of Physical Education and Sport and Exercise Sciences.

He is universally loved and respected, and through his teaching and quiet encouragement of generations of physical education teachers and sport and exercise scientists he has made a major contribution to his profession, to the University of Limerick, and to Ireland."

Alan Donnelly, Head of PESS Department 1999-2006

The Educator

From the early days of the NCPE up to recently, PJ Smyth taught on a variety of modules in the department including, rugby, athletics, physical conditioning, badminton, motor learning and applied sport psychology. Eddie O'Sullivan (graduate of the TCE (1979) and Irish National Rugby Coach, 2001-2008) describes Smyth's 'extra effort' to ensure that

students understood the content he was teaching. "His own passion for the subject matter automatically rubbed off on his students. PJ prepared meticulously for lectures, constantly introducing the latest research in his field." I can also testify to PJ's attention to detail, as I have not forgotten his A4 handouts, which had a large number of additional slides, studies and other materials painstakingly reduced in size and arranged and photocopied on one A4 sheet.

"Thank you PJ for what you have given to the generations of Irish PE teachers and their students...while still quietly preparing for the next lecture"

John Sheehan, Graduate

Tony Ward (rugby fly-half for Munster, Leinster, Ireland, the British and Irish Lions and the Barbarians in the 1980s) started in the NCPE on the same day that Smyth started his teaching career in the college in 1974. He recalls that the lectures on psychological aspects of physical education were the most eagerly anticipated and best attended lectures of their college week.

Dave Mahedy (former student of NCPE and Director, Sport and Recreation at UL) described the dinner table debates on physical education and sport that he and fellow students and Smyth had when they were tenants in Mick Sherry's house. Ward says they constantly beseeched Smyth for hints on upcoming exams, but Smyth never yielded and maintained professionalism at all times, much to his housemates disappointment.

"For nine months we pleaded with him for just a snippet of information, a small hint ahead of exams. Needless to say we got nothing. Mr. Perfect Lecturer milked the high moral ground for all it was worth!!!!"

Tony Ward, Graduate

John Sheehan, graduate of TCE and currently Physical Education teacher in St. Clements College nostalgically reminisced 'amazing memories of PJ Smyth' whom he first met in 1976. Within weeks of starting in the NCPE, Smyth "transformed a group of 17 young men into a pretty decent rugby team". John recalls that this transformation of a group of young men into a team confirmed his desire to become a physical educator.

Dave Weldrick revealed that in the early years he learned from watching PJ teach and seeing how the students learned from him. He described Smyth's persuasive approach and how he used his knowledge to motivate students. Pat Duffy (TCE graduate and Professor of Sport Coaching, Leeds Metropolitan University) describes PJ as the 'informed and empathetic guide. You knew he knew, but he would always make you think. By building positive, professional relationships with students, he gained their respect – and then proceeded to inform and influence their thinking and practice in both firm and subtle ways".

"He introduced us to a totally new world of Physical Education and Sport. Up to that time, we just played a game. PJ showed us how to think about sport, how to prepare to play and above all how to improve both our own skills but the skills of others. It was a pioneering time in Irish Sport and PJ was there, leading the charge"

Dave Mahedy, Graduate

Playing Rugby

PJ Smyth played rugby for UCD in 1965-1969 (flanker and sometimes prop). He played mainly prop for Bective Rangers (1970 to 1976) which he captained in 1971-1973 and is now an honorary life member of the club. Between 1976-1978 he played prop for Garryowen Rugby Club.

At around 19, his friend, Phil Conway (Irish Athletics Olympian, 1972; National hammer and discus coach) introduced PJ to Michael Colleary's gym in Dublin. Michael Colleary, was incredibly knowledgeable in relation to the theoretical and practical aspects of resistance training. It was at this gym that Smyth transformed his physical shape to a front row prop.

Louis Magee (Chairman of the IRFU, Performance Committee) was introduced to Smyth in his early 20's when he and Smyth were playing with Bective Rangers and continues to regard him highly. He described how Smyth introduced the club to scientific training methods and taught the players how to improve skill. Training sessions were structured and all aspects were well thought out. Weight training and diet were attended to and Magee said it was not surprising that after that first season, Smyth went on to captain the team for two years. Smyth laid the foundation for successful teams to follow. Magee is without doubt that all players benefited from Smyth's expertise.

Coaching and Coach Education

Eddie O'Sullivan played for Garryowen Rugby Club at the same time as PJ, and remarked that Smyth was "notorious for his extremely high level of fitness and his work rate around the field and was regarded as a very skilful prop when he played with Garryowen." He believes that Smyth's retirement from coaching rugby was a huge loss to Irish rugby.

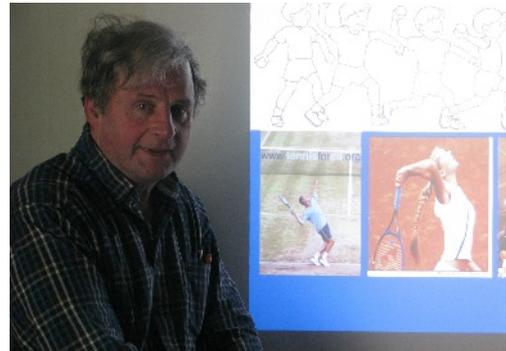
Smyth's coaching methods were both meticulous and innovative. Eddie O'Sullivan summarised Smyth's techniques "He had the capacity to break down fitness training and skills into their constituent parts and using the latest available research in the field, developed innovative methods to maximise the potential of players. Training sessions were always brutally hard, but you felt you were getting the maximum return for your efforts. Coaching sessions were always interesting and constantly challenged you to improve your skill levels through innovative mini games and drills".

Tony Ward says he will never forget the cross field sprints from touchline to touchline behind the posts of Maguire's Rugby pitch) where physical and mental commitment were expected and where light-heartedness were treated with disdain. Dave Mahedy, says that Smyth was the first person to introduce students in NCPE to interval training. Mahedy said it didn't take long for a following of top class players to tag on to him for sessions, including Mahedy himself, rugby players such as Tony Ward, Eddie O'Sullivan, Pat Whelan, and Mick Sherry, and GAA stars such as Oggie Moran and even the late Paudi O'Shea all taking part in interval sessions 2-3 times a week. Mahedy says "it was like a private High Performance group ahead of its time and before the term High Performance was even invented".

In the 1980's Garryowen Rugby Club was at the pinnacle of Irish Club Rugby. As joint coach with Pat Whelan, Smyth coached the Garryowen back-line to two Munster Senior League titles and was an extremely innovative coach in his time, constantly challenging players to become more skilful. During that time Garryowen became known for their innovative back play and willingness to run with the ball, which was atypical of Munster club sides at that time.

Seamus Byrne, (Club President of Garryowen Rugby Club in the 1980's) recalled a vivid memory of PJ in 1983, when the team was on route to play Bangor Rugby Club (one of the best rugby teams in Ireland at the time). Byrne described a 'dossier' that PJ produced on the 15 man squad. "It was a complete analysis of every player. PJ had the ability to assess players' technical skills and personalities and determine how these would affect performance". Byrne said he had never seen anything like this level of player analysis before. In Byrne's opinion, PJ Smyth expanded the role of the coach. Smyth prepared a psychological strategy for the season and for each individual game. Goal-setting and mental rehearsal became part of the game. Pat Duffy reinforces Byrne's observations and remembers Smyth as revolutionary with his coaching methods. "He was ahead of his time in advocating a decision-making approach to the development of skills and also in the importance of strength and conditioning".

PJ Smyth was been heavily involved in rugby coach education courses and player development programmes in the pre-professional days. He was a member of IRFU and Munster Branch coaching committees. He contributed to coaching manuals with respect to physical fitness, skill development and psychology. He was also involved in coach education for athletics teachers and coaches. He contributed to skill development and sport psychology aspects of coach education for a variety of sports with the National Coaching and Training Centre (NCTC), now Coaching Ireland.



Some of the Students He Influenced

John Sheehan recalled the endless hours PJ spent helping students like Tony Ward curving a rugby ball over and back along a line in the sports hall, and working on passing and evasion skills, to helping anyone improve their sporting performance or academic understanding.

"Proper preparation was the basis of performance"

John Power (Rugby Player and friend)

"He would be someone that I would be eternally grateful to as he was probably the main influence on my career. In every area imaginable he was brilliant, from passing on the tools of the trade to advice on all sports and especially on what direction to take in career decisions"

Dave Mahedy, Graduate

Ward himself says that when he first met PJ, he had no idea as to the major influence the 'self-effacing Smyth' was to have on his sporting development in the years to follow, and not just on his development but on many other Irish high performance athletes in the years that followed.

When Eddie O'Sullivan moved positions from playing fly-half to wing when he joined Garryowen Rugby Club in 1978, Smyth helped O'Sullivan reinvent himself as a player. Through a combination of strength training, plyometrics and track work, which according to O'Sullivan was 'way ahead of it's time', Smyth helped O'Sullivan transform. O'Sullivan believes that the specific skill training that pertained to being on the wing, was a huge factor in helping him be selected for Munster. O'Sullivan has also reported that Smyth was hugely influential on him as a professional rugby coach, providing him with understanding and knowledge of the development of skill pedagogies and sports psychology. Smyth has made many lifelong friendships with the graduates from NCPE, TCE and UL. He was groomsman for Eddie O'Sullivan (which PJ almost missed by getting lost on the way to the Church!) and I am reliably told that he was asleep within minutes of leaving the reception, as it was long past his bedtime!

Kindness & Generosity

Students and staff describe PJ Smyth as giving his time before, during and after lectures. Greg Knipe, a lecturer in International Tourism who retired from UL in 2010 stayed with Smyth for a number of years, when he first came to Limerick. Knipe said they were like 'chalk and cheese', he had a love for rock'n'roll music and good wine, and PJ did not! Colleagues and students repeatedly state that Smyth was always obliging with both his time, knowledge and books. As he has done in the past, he continues to inspire, encourage and motivate others. Dave Weldrick remarked that if you were interested in physical conditioning, strength training, motor learning or sport psychology, it was not to the library that you went, but to Smyth's office, where you could borrow books but also engage in lengthy discussions with Smyth.

"Time stood still when PJ was engaged with you. He gave you all of his time and all of his knowledge. I have never met a more generous man".

Greg Knipe (former lecturer in UL)



"PJ always encouraged and inspired me to open my mind and question everything. He always fostered critical thinking and cherished dialogue, discourse and debate."

Jennifer Joyce, PESS PhD student, 2013

To paraphrase all those that contributed to this article.....PJ Smyth is dedicated and sincere and has embraced his life as an educator. He is sensitive, considerate and understanding of others and is regarded as one of this world's 'true gentlemen'. He has a gift of mimicry and intelligent humor. In the past (am not certain about now!) he suffered from gargalesis (tickles), and some of his students took delight in sitting on him and tickling him until tears rolled. PJ has an extensive music collection, and some of his favourites include Mario Lanza and Maria Callas. He was a fan of Pavarotti ever before people heard of Nessun Dorma. The story would not be complete without reference to his love of bananas. In the past he was known to arrive at training or coaching courses with two gear bags... one for his kit and one full of bananas! To this day, the banana is never far from his hand and he will always have one to offer you if you are hungry.

PJ Smyth is a man who supports all staff and students in the PESS department and is the first to applaud any personal accomplishments achieved by the staff and students. He continues to collaborate with existing staff in the department. Ed Coughlan, a teaching assistant in the department describes Smyth's ability to apply science and research, succinctly. "It is a rarity, but his understanding of the science and the research is so complete that he knows how to join-the-dots for the students and athletes alike". Tadhg MacIntyre (Lecturer in Sport, Exercise & Performance Psychology) has known PJ for many years and defines Smyth as a 'polymath with a vast array of expertise across multiple domains and an insatiable intellectual curiosity'.

There are an abundance of past and present staff and postgraduate students in the PESS department who would have queued at my office to offer their memories about PJ. I am without doubt that their stories would reinforce all that I have presented in this feature.



PJ Smyth, Stephen Clothier (PESS Chief Technical Officer) and Dave Weldrick, 2002.

I asked PJ what his memories are of teaching in the Physical Education and Sport Sciences Department and after much thought he arrived at this conclusion:

"I have been so very lucky and privileged to have been always working at something which I love. I remember my father predicting when I was in primary school that I would never leave school and that is what happened. I have always been a student or a teacher whether it be at school or university. There is a saying that goes something like "....when you are a teacher it is by your pupils you will be taught." That certainly applies to me. It has been a great privilege to have worked with both physical education and sport and exercise science students who have made their mark in society in many different ways both in Ireland and around the world. I have also had great colleagues who have guided and inspired me in so many different ways."