

A lifetime of little sacrifices and they're not finished yet



Katie Taylor's father Pete will be by her side on the next leg of her sporting journey, writes **John O'Brien**

THEY were 12 days out from the Games. Ticking along nicely. Katie on the blue canvas floor in the little gym by the harbour, locked in combat, her father Pete watching dutifully from the corner, ready to blow the whistle on another day's work. In less than 24 hours, they'd be settling into the athletes' village in east London, getting excited about the opening ceremony the following day. Everything was flowing like a dream.

So sensing Pete's call, surging with positive energy, Katie figures she'll finish with a flourish. Pete sees her unwind a left-hook but, fractionally mistimed, it glances off her opponent's head guard. And then he sees something he prays against every day of his life — a wincing pain flashes across his daughter's face. Surely not now, he thinks. The last sparring session before they leave for London. The last punch.

He unties her gloves, strips the bandages away and inspects the bruising on her thumb. He sees there's nothing broken, no immediate threat to her Olympic dream. Katie relaxes. Pete's anxiety grows. He sees 12 days ahead with no sparing and an injury that needs to be carefully managed. He sees plans laid down for months having to be tweaked now, strapping applied daily, a minor injury flaring up in his head, taking his mind off other things, goading him into distraction.

In London, nobody, beyond those inside the Taylor camp, will be any the wiser. Nothing percolates the bubble they inhabit. As a coach, Pete's philosophy has always had two guiding strands: to always test himself and be the best he could be and to control the flow of information both ways, not in an oppressive or domineering manner, but in a way that channelled all the external pressures in his direction, leaving Katie only the worry of performance.

It is a role he never stops playing. Even after the Olympic final, when their lives should have been nothing but sweet euphoria, and a needless media storm had erupted over a homecoming reception, Pete wrongly accused of having spiked it, his paternal instinct was to distance her from the fallout. He figures she'd have had a vague idea that a tempest was brewing, but little grasp of the details and, mostly, that is how it has worked.

"I try to take everything," he says quietly. "All that stuff about the homecoming, Katie wouldn't have known anything about it. All she has to do is focus on her boxing. I think that's what makes us a good team. Before she fights there's always people looking for interviews or asking for tickets. I take all that away from her. She doesn't need that. She just concentrates on her boxing. It isn't a game. You play football. You play tennis. You don't play boxing. You can get hurt."

Such devotion never cost him a moment's thought or induced any personal qualms. For all her talent, for the blessings she bestowed on him, it was merely what she deserved in return. His little gift to her.

THERE are two boxing clubs in the town: Bray Boxing Club, which sits in a former boathouse on the harbour, and St Fergal's, located in the community centre off the Boghall Road to the south. Both were founded by Pete Taylor, the latter in 1996 after the last club in the town had shut its doors 10 years previously, the year he'd been Irish intermediate light-heavyweight champion. To Pete, this felt wrong. Like a horse running on three shoes.

He'd been 18 years in Bray by then, a blow-in from his native Leeds, inexorably drawn towards the relaxed seaside bustle and a striking girl called Bridget he'd met in a club one night. He smiles at the rich irony: two non-drinkers raising a family in the Christian faith meeting each other in a dimly-lit nightclub. Not that he had much sense of their destiny back then. He just knew he had fallen head over heels in love.



Pete Taylor: 'We knew one day she'd want to box at the Olympics even though there was no female boxing at that time.' Photo: David Conachy

TAYLOR'S SUCCESS GREAT ADVERT FOR IRISH FIRM

PETE TAYLOR is a technical advisor to Health and Sport Technologies Ltd, an Irish company founded in 2010 which has produced an innovative new system for athletes.

This system provides a cost-effective and easy-to-use means of collecting, collating and analysing critical information that links preparation and practice to performance, that otherwise is fragmented, difficult to acquire or simply unavailable.

The company is currently in discussions with several international clubs, associations and coaches keen to take its revolutionary system. It is available both on mobile and web for remote monitoring of athletes' training performance and psychological aspects.

The flagship athlete monitoring system allows for effective management



of performance. Training, competition, nutrition, psychology, lifestyle are all included in this integrated approach, which is player-centric and coach-focused.

The system uses sophisticated methods to derive insights from the data, and assists coaches in drawing on these to shape decisions and, ultimately, improve performance. Predictive

analysis techniques help coaches and athletes answer questions such as what is likely to happen next? And what should we do about it?

The system provides a platform to analyse years of data from emerging talent groups to identify talent early and accurately, and will assist in developing a continuous conveyor belt of talent.

Currently Health and Sport Technologies' client base includes the Norwegian Ski Federation, Swim Ireland, NUI Galway, Crystal Palace FC Academy, the Scottish and Welsh FAs and, in GAA, Kilmacud Crokes, the Down minor football team and the Ulster Council. Taylor and his daughter Katie also use the system.

For further information see www.healthandsporttechnologies.com

ing in what I thought would make a good coach. I was always trying new things. I knew my limitations as a boxer and what I thought should've been done for me."

He would have undertaken that journey without Katie, but she was the catalyst. He'd established St Fergal's in the community centre in Ballywaltrim, but they were limited to two training sessions per week there and when the old boathouse came up for sale in 2005, the year she won her first major title, he sold his electrical business to fund it and became her full-time coach. The position carried no material rewards but her talent simply demanded it. She was 10 when he'd allowed her into a ring for the first time and what stunned him wasn't just her natural ability, but the intensity she brought to every session, every move. She played all sports but excelled at boxing and he'd note the sadness in her eyes whenever he'd take a group of boxers away to a tournament and there was nothing for her to do but stay behind and train.

The crusade to gain acceptance within the Irish boxing fraternity began when she was 12 and, from the outset, they knew it would be a long voyage. "Anything our kids wanted to do, myself and my wife tried to help them," Pete says. "Our son (Peter) won Young Scientist of the Year twice and went to Cambridge. That cost a lot of money, but we wanted to give them the best opportunities they could have.

"It was the same with Katie. We knew one day she'd want to box at the Olympics even though there was no female boxing at that time. But we knew the World Championships would be starting and there were the European Championships too, so we thought 'why not have a go at that?'"

Clearing a thicket through the morass of doubt and discrimination was the first step. He had the IABA's number on speed dial and, he says, "tormented" officials until they relented and put her on a bill at the National Stadium in 2001. He did the same with the high-performance unit, turning up one morning and refusing to leave until they'd given Katie a trial. The second time she'd fought abroad, they'd sent her away with a different coach, so Pete paid his own way and ended up doing her corner anyway.

He talks about "little sacrifices" that pale into insignificance in the glint of an Olympic gold medal. The years he spent running his business, grabbing a quick shower and heading to the club, finishing the night on security work before the cycle started again the next day. It is only two years since he was formally recognised as Katie's coach, receiving a fee from the Irish Sports Council as a technical adviser to the IABA, a curious set-up to which he can only shake his head and offer a single word: "Politics."

It has never been just his struggle, though. He thinks back to the

venue and Bridget takes over. She plaits Katie's hair and they pray together, that she serves the Lord as best she can and that she emerges from the fight unscathed. It never struck Pete to think that one part of the routine might be more vital than another.

"Bridget and Katie have a powerful relationship. I can't explain it. They're just very close. I get the credit for being close to Katie, because people see us together. We do get on great. I can't remember the last time we even had an argument. But I wreck her head with boxing all the time. Outside of boxing, she's probably closer to her mother."

"It was tough," he says, "but in fairness over the last two years we couldn't have asked for more from John Lynch (IABA chairman). Anything we asked for, we got. We went to Georgia instead of boxing in the All-Irelands and the association was all for it. They knew we were looking at the big picture, which was the Olympics. Thank God it worked out, because it justified him backing us up."

"A few years ago, they'd have said 'no, you're boxing in the All-Irelands and that's it'. I mean no disrespect to the other girls, but in Katie's division only one girl weighed in and she'd only had a few fights. It wasn't going to be a fair match-up."

He's certain about one thing, though. Not long before Katie was born, Bridget had made the decision to become a Born Again Christian and, without coercion, their children surrendered naturally to the faith. It has become a huge part of their lives — "more than boxing," Pete says — and even though he is less informed than the others and is often at the club when they are attending church, he acknowledges the part it has played in their journey. "I don't think we'd have come through," he says quietly but insistently. "It wouldn't have happened. We just know now it was God's plan for Katie. And that these things were put in the way as obstacles. If it hadn't been so difficult, it wouldn't have been so much of a victory at the end, would it?"

He thinks of their routine. In the morning she weighs in, then they have breakfast followed by a brisk walk, talking tactics, distilling the knowledge that Pete has worked on to every last detail. Then they reach

contemplation and a little soul-searching. He winces at the memory of a day in the Stadium, maybe 18 months ago, when she took a punch while sparring and her nose was left virtually touching her left temple. He dreamed of the day she'd win Olympic gold, hoping it would be the day she'd have her last fight. He knows it wasn't to be now. That God's plan was for her to continue. And that's fine too.

Pete is wary, though not afraid, of the professional game. People tell him they'll have to relocate to America and he's alright with that too. "If everything fitted into place and the offer was good then we'd go," he says. "Obviously, I might not be the No 1 coach but I'd still be there, having an impact. That will never change."

He looks around the newly-renovated boathouse, though. What a wrench it would be to leave now. He trained five fighters to reach senior finals this year, two male and three female, and reckons his was the only club in the world to have two boxers at the Olympic Games. It's not just about Katie, you see. He was never just a one-boxer coach.

You sense it wouldn't take a lot to convince them to stick around for Rio in 2016. It would help, he says, if they promised to sort out the futures of Billy Walsh and Zaur Antia, whom he describes as being like a "second father" to Katie. He'd appreciate something better too than the annual contract he labours under, that makes him feel as if he is under a lifelong probation.

"It's like if you don't win the Worlds or the Europeans or you don't win the Olympics, everything's on the line," he says. "There's already enough pressure without that. It's not about money. It was never about money. It's about making sure the system is right and everybody gets the contracts they deserve. For us, it's about having the right structures around Katie."

Either way, you sense, nothing fundamental will change. They'll come home from Portugal, eager to get going again, making the short journey from their home to the harbour twice every day, pulling the red steel door shut behind them, a notice up to deter well-wishers: 'Do Not Disturb, boxers training'. And, as he does at the beginning of every season, he'll ask himself the same hard question. "How can I make her better?"

