

Games chief goes for gold

The woman who brought the Special Olympics to Ireland is chasing big businesses to back the athletes globally



In 1991, Mary Davis, then the national director of Special Olympics Ireland, was “sitting in a field in Minnesota” with other Irish delegates watching the opening ceremony of the Special Olympics games, which is held every four years for intellectually disabled athletes.

“We all said to ourselves, ‘We could do this in Ireland, and we could do it better, too’. It was just one of those conversations,” she said.

Some 12 years later, Davis stood on a platform in Croke Park in Dublin alongside former South African president Nelson Mandela, taoiseach Bertie Ahern, president Mary McAleese and billionaire businessman Denis O’Brien at the opening ceremony as Ireland hosted the 2003 games.

A kaleidoscope of colour lay before them: 80,000 cheering fans waving flags. Davis, by then one of the most recognisable women in the country, was chief executive of the games and O’Brien was chairman of

the organising committee.

The €60m event remains the biggest sporting occasion yet held in Ireland, with 7,000 athletes from 150 countries taking part. Towns across the island, north and south, became involved through a hosting programme for athletes.

For those eight summer days, the country’s imagination was captured.

For Davis, who now heads the Special Olympics movement in Europe and Central Asia (Eurasia), it was a personal triumph. A photograph of the moment adorns the wall of the meeting room in the Dublin office. She smiles as she recalls the occasion. “Standing up on stage with Mandela while the flame was lit — that was my best memory. It was just the feeling of accomplishment. A massive group of ordinary people had achieved something extraordinary.”

Almost seven years later, Davis, a relentlessly enthusiastic Mayo woman who taught physical education to special needs students before joining the Special Olympics organisation 21 years ago, is on another mission. She wants to take the lessons learnt from staging the 2003 event and building the movement in Ireland, and apply them across the 58 countries under her remit, which stretch from Europe to (but does not include) China. And she wants Ireland’s business community to help her achieve it.

Davis plans to “build the Special Olympics brand” across the Eurasia region, sign up new corporate sponsors to help fund its activities, and create a region-wide “council of patrons” of wealthy benefactors.

She maintains that the Special Olympics is more than simply a global event held every four years: the preparation for the main event and individual national games

happens every week in towns and cities around the world. “It happens 365 days a year. The games only happen every four years, and the games will always happen and people will always organise a good showcase. But I place more emphasis on the training and everyday aspects than on the games.”

Several times a week, the movement’s volunteers coach and assist intellectually disabled athletes, similar to Ireland’s

Community Games formula, but on a worldwide scale. About 500,000 athletes regularly take part in Special Olympics sessions in the Eurasia region, including 11,000 in Ireland.

Here alone, the Special Olympics needs €6m to function each year, rising to €8m in years when there are national games, such as this year’s event in Limerick.

Each country is responsible for its own budget, although Davis has a budget of €4m for her Eurasia body’s co-ordination and branding role. “I want to increase that to €7m,” she said.

The movement’s global power base is in America, where the overall chief executive is Tim Shriver, son of the late Eunice Kennedy Shriver, JFK’s sister and one of the movement’s founders. Tim Shriver asked Davis to take over the Eurasia role almost two years ago. She was succeeded as head of the movement in Ireland by a former Digicel executive, Matt English.

Earlier this month, Davis took the first step towards creating the Eurasia council of patrons she has in mind by organising a forum for business leaders in Monaco, the wealthy principality better known as a playground for Europe’s rich elite. Among those in attendance were O’Brien, who



chairs the Irish council of patrons that Davis is trying to replicate, members of the Moratti family that owns Inter Milan, the Polish industrialist Zbigniew Niemczycki, and members of Turkey's Sabanci dynasty, who are perennials on Forbes's annual rich list.

The "working lunch" was hosted by Prince Albert of Monaco.

"It is ultimately my desire that there would be a highly influential group of between 18 and 25 people that would come

together two or three times a year, interact with us and help us to achieve our goals," said Davis. "Monaco was a step towards that. Obviously you have to get to know all these important people before you can have your council.

"We presented a number of initiatives and asked them for their advice and contacts. Sometimes you just have to take the work on in chunks and see what you can achieve."

Davis sells the Special Olympics as a ready-made route for companies which are building corporate social responsibility programmes — "Look beyond the profit and look at society and what you can give

back." Then she comes in with the kicker: "In the recession, research shows that 65% of people have remained loyal to a brand that has a giving element to it."

Eircom, the Special Olympics' longest-serving sponsor in Ireland, is celebrating 25 years of its association this year. Among the other important sponsors in Ireland are Kia Motors and Accenture, the consulting firm. Bank of Ireland was one of the main sponsors associated with the 2003 games, with up to 1,000 of its employees volunteering.

Smaller companies can also help on a local basis. "The local bank or supermarket can help buy the equipment," said Davis.

"We also need more assistants, more coaches. If we had more help to support that, we would be in a much better position."

Professional football, with its millions of fans worldwide, is another area that Davis is targeting heavily to help boost the Special Olympics' profile and raise funds. The Smile programme is intended to bring on board professional clubs and their players as ambassadors for the Special Olympics. Davis hopes to extend the initiative — which is run entirely from her Dublin office — to come up with a way of tapping

fans for donations.

Inter Milan and Tottenham Hotspur have already signed up, while Davis is talk-

ing to Celtic and Manchester United. Kaka, the mercurial Brazilian who plays for Real Madrid, is an ambassador in a personal capacity.

"We already have the support of [the Manchester United manager] Alex Ferguson — we met him at an event in Dublin recently," she said. "But we have to also go through the official channels of the club."

What about José Mourinho, the Chelsea manager? "I got this close to him at an Inter match," she holds her hands a foot or so apart. "I think Mourinho's great."

She is a member of an advisory board that is assisting the organisers of next year's Special Olympics summer games in Athens. It has a budget of €80m, a third more than Ireland's. Davis is confident that the Greek government's fiscal crisis will not tempt it to renege on any of its promised €26m.

"I was there last week, at the height of their financial troubles, but I still got a sense of optimism from the Greeks over the Special Olympics. I don't believe they will scale back their plans."

Davis moves in powerful circles. Since the success of the 2003 games, she has become hot property on the Irish non-executive director circuit.

She recently finished stints on the boards of the Dublin Airport Authority, the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland and the Irish Sports Council. She still serves on the board of the Irish Times Trust and chairs a state committee on active citizenship.

A supreme networker, Davis never misses a trick to promote the Special Olympics. "We don't miss an opportunity, because we can't afford to," she said.



The life of Mary Davis

VITAL STATISTICS

Age: I'm in my fifties (she is 55)

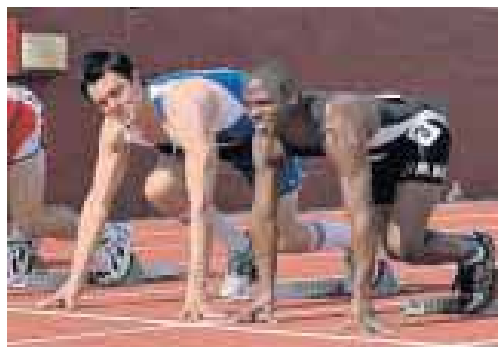
Home: Dublin

Education: St Louis school in Kiltimagh, Mayo, and the University of Edmonton in Canada

Family: married to Julian, with four children

Currently reading: The White Tiger by Aravind Adiga

Favourite film: The Ringer, *pictured*



WORKING DAY

I travel abroad several times a month. When in Dublin, I am an early riser and am in the office by 8am. My daughter, who works nearby, usually drags me home at 6pm.

DOWNTIME

I do a small bit of running and I also play golf. I consider myself a reasonably fit person. I climbed Mont Blanc in 2008 to celebrate France's EU presidency (on the invitation of the Irish president, Mary McAleese).



Davis saw the Special Olympics in Minnesota in 1991 and felt it could be done better in Ireland. In 2003, she proved it, with competitors such as Cork's Pat Dorgan, inset, taking part in Dublin

