

She disappoints us, Sonia. She frustrates us in her resistance to the cliché of the cheated, the obligation to be angry. We want her to spew vitriol upon the resilient lies of history, the ghost records, the secretive champions, the unexplained glories of a time when nobody ran with more thrilling grace than she did on the great flashbulb nights of Track and Field.

But Sonia just guides us around the barbed-wire reflex. Instead of delivering a sermon, she gently introduces us to a girl.

Remember Liu Dong? Chances are you don't, given our memories of Stuttgart '93 have remained largely unresponsive.

Over time, the Chinese of those World Championships acquired an almost inanimate quality in our minds, one indistinguishable from another. An army of robots almost. Cold. Mechanical. Doll-like.

Well, Liu Dong was the girl who won 1,500 metres gold, ahead of Sonia's silver. She lives in Spain now and they've met a few times in recent years, first at the '97 World Indoor Championships but, more recently, at the 2015 World Cross-Country Championships in Guiyang.

And Dong always asks Sonia for a photograph when they meet. She comes across as warm, respectful, likeable.

Once, she even wrote her address on the back of an envelope and Sonia remembers promising herself that she'd send a Christmas card. But she never did.

**RUMOUR**

So Dong is still a fading mystery today. A rumour in human form. After winning that gold in Stuttgart, she completed a lap of honour to almost stony silence. Then O'Sullivan and bronze medalist, Hassiba Boulmerka, returned to the track, circling to a wild ovation.

Sonia remembers wondering at the time if this might be the ultimate conceit, a lap of honour for finishing second? It was unheard of back then, but - somehow - the crowd demanded it. They were delivering a statement then that they imagined might make a difference. It never did.

A quarter of a century on, Sonia meets people on an almost daily basis lamenting the so-called 'Chinese Takeaway' of those Championships. After all, she finished fourth in the 3,000 metres final behind three of Ma Junxia's army too. The medalists ran like soldiers.

Recently, at home in Cobh, she dusted down an old photo album the Irish team manager Fr Liam Kelleher had given her from those Championships. She'd never really paid much heed to it before, but some of his close-up pictures of the Chinese now startled her.

Their faces especially. Blank. Compliant. Empty-eyed.

And it set her thinking how she wished she'd sent that Christmas card, maybe opening a line of communication to Liu Dong that might have led at some point in the distance to having the conversation she now knows will never happen.

Asking the unending question: "What were you doing back then?"

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**W**ANT TO KNOW THE thing that grates? More than the cheats? More than the state-sponsored cheating? More than the endless pharmaceutical arms race?

It's the lazy consensus. The way history becomes disfigured, rewritten through the narrow lens of those with dirt beneath their fingernails. When Sonia runs now, she listens to podcasts, a recent favourite being that of the reformed alcoholic turned American endurance athlete, Rich Roll.

A couple of weeks back, Roll interviewed Bryan Fogel, director of 'Icarus', the documentary that morphed into an exploration of Russian state-sponsored doping.

During the interview, Fogel recalls his first meeting with the central character of the story, Dr Grigory Rodchenko, director of Moscow's anti-doping centre.

Fogel asks Rodchenko if he believes it is possible to win an Olympic medal without taking performance-enhancing drugs.

The Russian's response is: "I should believe, I try to believe, but I do not believe..." Then he pauses briefly, before adding: "I don't know. Maybe I'm a bad man!"

Listening, Sonia experienced a quiet fury rise up inside of her. The way Fogel's conversation with Roll was beginning to unspool seemed to be slipping into the trap again of somehow normalising drug use. Of writing the honest athlete out of history. "It really got to me," she acknowledges now.

"I remember thinking, 'You can't say that! Because I know it isn't true.' But this is the recurring betrayal of those who run clean. The cheats' assumption that they don't."

When Sonia was in her pomp, she was acquainted with the boyfriend of a Russian athlete whose training diaries openly documented her ingestion of drugs.

"I'd met her a couple of times," Sonia remembers now. "And she told her boyfriend that they assumed, of course, that I was cheating too."

# 'We'd look over at Szabo and her doctor's big, black bag, wondering why did she need a doctor?'

In the most candid interview she has ever given, Ireland's greatest athlete, Sonia O'Sullivan, talks about drugs in her sport and feeling 'used' by the OCI at the London Olympics in 2012



**VINCENT HOGAN**

"How could you possibly run that well if you weren't cheating?"

In 1994, Sonia finished second in the 1,500m at the Goodwill Games behind Russian, Yekaterina Podkopayeva. Officially, the winner's age was documented as 42. She reckons Podkopayeva was nearer 45. "You'd be looking at her, thinking, 'How can she be doing this, running four minutes for the 1,500 metres?'" she remembers now.

"She was almost seen as this old lady back then, but she'd come up to you after and be really friendly. She'd always want to greet you when she'd see you in the hotel and I'd be thinking, 'I don't want to be anywhere near you!'"

So the shadow has always been there. Maybe the innocence has been in trusting officialdom's appetite to remove it.

In believing the blazers. In underestimating how politics, when unchecked, reduces everything to yokel.

She thinks, for example, about the IAAF's 100th anniversary celebrations in 2012 and Wang Junxia's induction into their Hall of Fame.

Beijing had hosted the Olympics with the World Championships and World Cross-Country Championships soon to follow. The IAAF had recently announced a new sponsorship deal with the China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation.

**APLAUDED**

And now the entire room stood and applauded Junxia as she came to get her award. Wang Junxia, who broke the women's 10,000m record by 42 seconds when running at her National Championships in 1993.

Who ran the second half of that race 11 seconds faster than the existing world record for the 5,000m. Who ran the final 3,000m five seconds faster than the world record for that distance. Whose previous best 10,000m time before '93 had been roughly three minutes slower.

Wang Junxia who, at those same championships in Beijing, would carve more than 16 seconds off a world 3,000m record that had stood for the previous decade.

That IAAF evening in Monte Carlo was hosted by its president, Lamine Diack, a man currently under house arrest in Paris over allegations that he accepted bribes for covering up doping violations for Russian athletes.

And it was around the time Diack's arrest took place that Sonia O'Sullivan began to decommission her own interest in an administrative role within international athletics.

She'd been nominated by Athletics Ireland in 2015 for a seat on the IAAF Council, but the story of Diack broke just as she was travelling to the World Championships in Beijing.

"I remember reading it and thinking, 'Do I really want to be a part of something that is as corrupt as that?'" she recalls now.

"You're supposed to be protecting the athletes, but this is going on, decisions are being made and you probably don't even know about them. So I went there and I wasn't really that committed to pushing my name forward anymore. I just wasn't sure about it at all."

How on earth could she be? Last year, a story broke that Wang

Junxia was one of nine signatories to a letter admitting the ingestion of "a large dose of illegal drugs" during their time under Junren's tutelage.

The IAAF confirmed at the time that they had launched a probe into those claims. In October, a former doctor of the Chinese Olympic team admitted to a systemic doping programme in the country across all sports during the '80s and '90s, suggesting that every Chinese medal won in that period was tainted.

The week that story broke, Sonia was attending an IAAF road-running conference in Germany. Asking an official for some update on the story now trending wildly on social media, he seemed blissfully unaware of it.

"It hadn't even registered," she reflects incredulously. "So he said, 'Oh, there's an Integrity Unit dealing with all that!' Apparently, they're working from now backwards. It'll be a long

time before they get to '93!'"

So anger? If you light that match, what exactly is it that you end up gaining from the fire?

Sonia still runs most days of the week, sometimes hard and solitary, other times just a gentle jog with fellow mothers on the school run.

She coaches bits and pieces. Her younger daughter, Sophie, has a talent (high-jump and middle-distance) that looks like it might flower into something around which a career might even form.

But Sophie runs, not because her Mum was - arguably - the greatest female athlete on the planet in her day. Sonia has never coached her, never wants to. No, Sophie runs for the simple joy of it. That feeling of camaraderie and, on occasion, blissful weightlessness. The simplicity of finding a day when, as Sonia puts it beautifully, "it's like you're nearly dancing."

The rest of it? The putrid stuff? The shameless subterfuge? The Kenyans running as Turks? The chronic asthmatics? The curious heart conditions? The odd sicknesses that assail the fastest, strongest, biggest athletes in the world? The language of chicanery? Sonia tells a story.

During the Sydney Olympics, she

stayed on an island - Couran Cove - with husband, Nick, and daughter, Ciara. To get to the track, they'd take a boat and, often, Gabriella Szabo would be in the boat with them.

"She had her coach with her and she had a doctor," Sonia remembers. "And the doctor would always have this big, black bag. We'd be looking over, wondering why did she need a doctor? You know it was way beyond anything that I could comprehend. Like, I didn't even have a physio."

"So you're looking at this big, black bag, wondering what on earth was inside it."

"I remember we did a training session one night at this Runaway Bay and drove down the Gold Coast immediately after to where the British team was based. Gerard Hartmann was working with them as a physio and he'd agreed to see me in secret, just to give me one session. So that's how basic it was for me."

**PACKAGE**

Three years after those Games, Szabo's Ford Mondeo would be stopped by French border police outside Monaco and a package containing Actovegin, a derivative of calf serum that increases the blood's oxygen-carrying capacity in the same way as EPO, found in the boot.

Szabo was not present, the car being driven by a friend of her husband. And when one of her team-mates at that year's World Championships in Paris subsequently took responsibility for the drugs, Szabo was cleared, retiring almost immediately.

So does Sonia imagine she was robbed of gold in Sydney? Not exactly. In her own mind, she blew it. Yes, there were a lot of things about Szabo that made her "wonder".

But that 5,000m final and the seven stone wraith holding her off on the home straight? No, this wasn't about feeling cheated.

In one sense, she was blessed that the two Ethiopians, Gete Wami and Ayelech Worku, began arguing at the front. Their coach, Jos Hermens, would be livid afterwards, given their prior tactical agreement to push the pace hard enough to lose O'Sullivan.

"That was the whole thing, to get rid of me," remembers Sonia. Briefly, they succeeded only for their argument to then start. "Faster, Fast-

er," bellowed Wami, only to discover that Worku had medal ambitions of her own. So, crucially, the field came back to O'Sullivan. And that's when she knew she had a real shot at gold.

After finishing fourth in Barcelona and suffering a wipe-out in Atlanta, Sonia had a decision to make 200 metres from home. "If I watch Sydney now, I should have won that race," she says flatly. "If I had been a little more patient, if I had a little more belief in myself... not panicked and not gone for it."

"Not tried to match Szabo on the outside. Why didn't I just sit in behind her? I might just have had that little bit of extra stuff at the end..."

After crossing the line, she took a few seconds hunkered down to assemble her thoughts before rising with a smile. "If you lose a race, your first instinct is to be disappointed, you're annoyed," she reveals. "But then you have to remind yourself that this is the Olympics. All your life you've been trying to get to this moment of winning an Olympic medal."

"If you ran the race again, maybe the medals would be distributed differently. You could have been first, you could have been fourth. But it's over. I ran as best I could."

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**I**F THERE'S A PEBBLE IN her shoe left over from Sydney today, maybe it's to do with the medal presentation.

It was Pat Hickey who put the silver around her neck that night and, eight years later, it would be largely through his encouragement that she'd take up a place on the Olympic Council of Ireland board. What did she know of him then? Little enough beyond the garrulous nature of his personality, the uncommon weight of his self-regard.

But, when the Rio ticket scandal was erupting 16 months ago, she found herself on Olympic duty in a Montrose TV studio, her phone ringing daily from people in the RTÉ News Department. As a member of the OCI board, she was coming under pressure to provide answers she simply did not have access to.

"It was kind of assumed you knew everything that was going on, but you didn't," she explains now. "You couldn't



Sonia O'Sullivan with David Matthews, Niamh Matthews and Gerard Hartmann at the Irish Independent Sportstar of the Year awards in association with The Croke Park Hotel, where she was inducted into the Irish Independent Hall of Fame  
SAM BARNES/SPORTSFLE

Right: Sonia with Gabriela Szabo after finishing second to the Romanian in the women's 5000m final at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney  
DARREN ENGLAND/ALLSPORT

## WINNERS ALRIGHT

Sunday Independent four-page Christmas Racing Special features all the runners and riders for the St Stephen's Day meetings and an in-depth interview with the rising star of horse racing, trainer Joseph O'Brien; plus a chance to win €1,000 in our Final Whistle Christmas Crossword.

All in tomorrow's Sunday Independent

Sunday Independent

The Complete Read





Sonia O'Sullivan in The Croke Park before being inducted into the Irish Independent Hall of Fame  
SEB DALY/SPORTSFILÉ

was just a photo-opportunity for them. And that's when you kind of realise it's all a game. Because nothing was properly organised, everything was kind of last-minute."

O'Sullivan's suspicion today is that, at the highest level of the Council, her name was always going to be more important than her input. She came under pressure in London to commit all of the medalists to a formal OCI homecoming when none had been pre-arranged. With most athletes having already made their own, individual arrangements, the OCI event had to eventually be postponed.

Did she feel used?

"At the end of 2012? Yeah. We never discussed it. Like I had a role to play, but it wasn't an administrative role. It was more a connecting role with the athletes. And I felt good about that role because I wasn't that far away from being an athlete myself, so I understood everything they needed. I got really positive feedback from the athletes."

"But that's one of the reasons, I decided against doing it in Rio. I just felt I hadn't been involved up to that point and, all of a sudden, you get thrown in."

**DISTRACTION**

"The athletes don't need that. It's just a distraction really. Then they just feel obliged to talk to you and it's one extra thing they don't need to be dealing with."

"Like in London, I hardly spoke to Katie before the Olympics. She had this whole routine she followed before her fights and I often saw her with her mother, early in the morning, coming into the Village as I was going for a run. You know you'd wave, but you knew she was in the zone, doing her own thing. So I was, 'I don't need to be bothering her here...'"

"I would be the same. I'm not going over there to try to speak to her, just because I'm Chef de Mission. It's this small-talk stuff... you don't need that extra thing in your day."

As a compromise, O'Sullivan offered to go to Rio for the first week only, then return to Dublin to fulfil broadcast commitments with RTÉ. The offer, much to her relief in hindsight, was rejected.

The truth is she never did get to know Pat Hickey on anything but the most superficial of levels. Yet, during recent filming in RTÉ for 'Ireland's Greatest Sporting Moment', footage came on screen of Sonia's medal presentation in Sydney. And the identity of the man handing over that silver left her feeling conflicted.

"There's a little voice in your head," she acknowledges now. "And it's asking, 'Are you really happy about that?'"

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**S**O HOW DO YOU STAY in love with a sport that keeps unravelling before your eyes?

Maybe by remembering that sunrise of a smile Thomas Barr brought to Rio? Maybe by looking at the young Irish juniors now running so hard and so fearlessly in wait of that magical day when they, too, might just run outside of their imaginations. Maybe by looking into your own daughter's eyes and remembering that not everything is poison.

Sonia admits that a small part of her felt dejected watching the Rio Games last year, sensing the broad absence of innocence, the joylessness in so many.

It's clearly harder now, she understands that. So many athletes feel they're just running into stone walls. They see stuff like the Oregon Project looking to create the perfect athlete while pushing the concept of legality as far as it will stretch.

They see the epidemic of TUEs. They see Africans winning European titles. They see the very institutions meant to police all this bad stuff caught up in incriminating business of their own.

**TRUDEST**

And there's a trap in all of that. The trap is that you stop remembering who your truest opponent will always be.

In her pomp, she never saw Olympic qualification as a challenge so it was impossible for her to empathise with those who did. Then the ageing process brought her back to the field.

"Like I had this run of winning 20 races in a row and I never thought about it," she remembers now. "Sometimes, it was almost as if I stepped outside myself during those races."

"Like there were so many races I'd look back thinking, 'How did I do that?' I never thought there'd be a day I wouldn't be able to get a qualifying time for an Olympics. I'd be thinking, 'Well I'll never not be able to do that...'" And then you can't. You find yourself running so slow and you're thinking how did I ever run so fast? It doesn't make sense."

Not long before Páidí Ó Sé died, Sonia was on a bike ride in Dingle with Gerard Hartmann when they decided to call into his Ventry pub. During their conversation, Ó Sé pulled this biscuit tin from behind the bar, in it his eight All-Ireland medals.

That moment set her thinking. None of this, you see, is really about medals in the end.

It is, ultimately, about people being the best that they can be. It is about courage, moral and physical. About honour. The rest? It becomes just noise. Theatre and noise.

And for as long as we are alive, there will always be a mirror in the next room.



Tom O'Riordan in action during the 1966 Amateur Athletic Union and NACA Championship in Gormanston CONNOLLY COLLECTION / SPORTSFILÉ

# Legendary O'Riordan a huge inspiration to generations on the track and in journalism

**Former Olympian, who celebrated his 80th birthday this year, made most of his unique position to enhance a remarkable career**

**T**HE final question I asked Tom O'Riordan was the first time he shrugged off giving an answer during an interview at his home in Dublin this week.

"What advice would you give me for writing this piece about you?" I asked Tom.

He laughed.

But later, as I walked out the front door, Tom called from the sitting room: "Put away those notes and write from the head."

Writing and running was what Tom O'Riordan did. He turned 80 in July this year with nearly half of those years spent as a sports journalist with Independent Newspapers (and more years as a freelancer). It was a career he formally started the same year he qualified for the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo.

Tom's time as an amateur athlete rolled into his job as a reporter. Journalists are told to know their subject; well, Tom was his own subject on a few occasions.

After one of the seven senior National Cross-Country titles he won, Tom remembers still wearing his spikes and running gear as he rang in the report of the race he just came first in from a public pay-phone on the course.

Writing from the head must have been easy when your heart was fully in it.

Tom also 'double-jobbed' a few times when he ran in the World Cross-Country Championships. "I had to find out who the winners were and the times and the team race and all that. It was a bit of an effort but I managed it. I was never sued for writing the wrong stuff!" he smiles.

**OPINIONS**

"The race was the most important. I didn't even think about the report until it was all over. I never found it very difficult. I could relate and once you got a few basic facts you were away."

Tom wasn't afraid to back up his opinions as an athletics journalist. After being critical of the Ireland Cross-Country team, he was asked to take over as team coach for the 1979 World Championships in Limerick.

Tom took it on and organised training sessions at the Phoenix Park for a very talented group of athletes. Ireland went on to win team silver with John Treacy retaining the title.

"It was a great achievement. I found great satisfaction in that," Tom admits.

Of course, he still had to file



Sinead Kissane with Tom O'Riordan in his Clonskeagh home



a report on the race but at least he didn't have to track down the coach of the team for quotes.

Tom's athletics career took off when he was offered a four-year scholarship by Idaho State College in 1957 at a time when only a handful of Irish athletes went to America on scholarship.

A report from the college described Tom as having the "makings of a second Ron Delany". His coach, Dubby Holt, also said Tom's arrival should "inspire the rest of the track team since runners from that part of the world are very hard workers".

Tom worked hard. He reckons he broke over 20 records in Idaho State College and by the time his scholarship near the Rocky Mountains finished, he ran in competitions in every state in America.

His achievements included the NAIJA Cross-Country title in 1960 and, a year later, he finished fifth in the NCAA Cross-Country.

After returning home, 1963 was a vintage year as Tom broke Irish records and finished the season with times in the top five in the world for the two-mile and three-mile events.

It's over half a century since the 1964 Olympics but time hasn't dimmed the sense of regret Tom has over not qualifying for the 5,000m final.

The Olympic gold was won by American Bob Schul who Tom spent the previous summer training with in California.

Another friend of his, American Billy Mills, won the 10,000m final.

What was it like seeing one of his training partners win the final?

"God, it was great. But it would make you feel like, God, what were you doing wrong. 'Twas a bit of a disappointment now that

I didn't make the Olympic final because I was capable of it and I was fit enough but I just didn't do it. And that lived with me for a good while after. It was a great disappointment to me. Huge," Tom admits.

"It's in your mind and it never leaves your mind. Well, it does leave your mind but it's a bit of a regret that's in you. At the time it was a bit hard to take."

Tom would go on to cover every Summer Olympic Games up to and including Sydney 2000 as a journalist. But sitting in the front room of his home listening to him recall his own Olympic experience reminded me that there's a duality in everything – regret in what many others would view as an achievement in becoming the first athlete from Kerry to be selected for an Olympics track event.

Listening to Tom also made me realise how little of the full picture I knew.

It's hard to write this piece solely from the head because Tom is my uncle. He rarely spoke about his achievements but we knew enough since we were very young to always be proud to call him our uncle.

Every time he went to the Olympics he brought home presents for his nieces and nephews (I still have the T-shirt from Seoul '88 at home somewhere).

Tom's the reason I wanted to get into journalism and why there was always a great interest in athletics in our family.

He motivated plenty of others. "As a young boy growing up, I knew that if I could beat Tom O'Riordan, that would make it a big deal and I would make it onto the world stage," Eamonn Coghlan told me at the *Irish Independent* Sportstar of the Year awards

this week. "I left Metropolitan Harriers way back in 1974 to join Donore Harriers. Why? To train with Tom O'Riordan and that's why I felt that if I could beat Tom, not just in training but in a race, I was going to make it."

What stood out about interviewing Tom was how he constantly mentioned friendships and those who were kind to him. Money was tight so he travelled home to Kerry only once during his four-year stint in Idaho but his coach looked out for him and every Christmas had him over for Christmas dinner. "He was a father figure to me, and his wife as well, and I was made to feel so welcome," Tom recalls.

Tom also struck up great friendships with sports people like John Treacy, who used to stay with him in Dublin, and the late Páidí Ó Sé. "I was great friends with Páidí. I gave him a lot of advice and he appreciated it. Advice about training, squad training, training on short hills. Páidí used to love the short hills," Tom says. "He was an amazing man. The last man in the world you would expect to die."

Inside Tom's office in his home, amidst all the medals, memorabilia, photos and athletics book, is a poster of the All-Ireland-winning Kerry team of Fitzgerald and Moynihan. Tom loves Kerry football and rarely, if ever, tipped any other team to win the Sam Maguire.

**ACCESS**

"I had great access, that's right. You could walk into a dressing-room and just talk to anyone. I was over in Killarney one time and Mick (O'Dwyer) said: 'Go away in there and talk to the lads' (in the middle of the training field). It was unbelievable," Tom laughs.

The flip-side was Dublin. "The Dubs, that was a kind of a difficult situation. I would often go to Parnell Park when they were training. Oh, I wasn't very popular around Dublin now!"

Life has slowed down for Tom after he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. "There's a fear of falling – you lose your balance. My mind seems to be reasonably OK. It's been a bit of a struggle with it now," Tom admits.

"I don't find it a cross to bear or anything like that. I suppose as the doctor said to me: 'Parkinson's – it won't kill you but you will die with it.'"

"I have to be truthful with you and say that I've had a good life. I wouldn't change it for anything. I won no Olympic medal but I don't have any real regrets or anything like that," Tom adds as his phone pings with a message from one of his sons.

I leave soon after, grateful that the line of work he inspired me to do was an excuse to spend time before Christmas with a person we all look up to in our family.

Happy Christmas to you and your family.

explain to people that you had no idea. Because people would say, 'Well, why didn't you? You should have known!' And, to be fair, I would be the same looking at the IAAF when all of that blew up. Surely if you're on the IAAF board, attending all these meetings..."

"So I'd be out in RTÉ getting all these phone calls from their news department wanting me to go on the News. It was really weird. Nobody (in the sports department) said that they were or weren't going to ask me about it. So I was always a bit on edge. There was a lot of criticism of them for not asking me about it, but they had decided not to because they didn't want to put me in that position."

"Because I wasn't there to discuss being on the Olympic Council board. So they just kind of skirted around it."

What wouldn't have been known then was just how easily Sonia might have been out in Rio herself and, potentially, open to arbitrary arrest.

As all manner of OCI personnel suddenly found themselves in custody, O'Sullivan was thankful that she'd turned down Hickey's invitation to reprise the Chef de Mission's role she'd undertaken at the London Games. That invitation, essentially, came too late for Sonia to prepare properly and, given she'd had little or no prior involvement with the athletes going to Brazil, "I kind of felt it was just going to be another publicity stunt."

Another?

O'Sullivan admits now that she believes her appointment to the OCI board in 2008 was "just a publicity thing". She did, it's true, have an input into the London Games and, most of it, rewarding. But post-2012, she reckons she attended – at best – three board meetings. "You'd kind of think surely my position on the board would have been questioned by somebody," she suggests. "If you can't

come to those meetings, why are you on the board?"

As to the London Olympics, she recalls a few "rocky moments" towards the end of those Games that, in hindsight, maybe should have been educational.

Sonia explains: "I remember when Katie Taylor won her medal, I had to bring her to this Irish House and it was the last place on earth that she wanted to go. You know she's just not into pubs or anything like that, but I was getting constant phone calls, 'Where is she? Where is she?'"

"I remember being in the back of the car going down there, saying to her, 'I know that this is the last thing you want to do...'" I would have been exactly the same, going into a crowd full of people who are totally drunk. They mean well, but it wasn't done properly for someone who had just achieved what she had achieved.

"And Katie was telling me that all she wanted to do was go to McDonald's, have some time for herself and her family to just reflect on the whole thing. But, at that moment, it's like you're owned by the Olympic Council I suppose."

"We went there and they had this small stage roped off. There was a bit of security there, but not much. It was around midnight, this heaving crowd, the place absolutely packed. All these people pushing in on top of everybody. Katie came in and everybody was cheering. Most people couldn't actually see her, they just knew she was there and seemed happy enough with that."

"So when Katie left, I became the next best thing. It took ages to get out of there but, when we did, I remember walking down the road, Pat Hickey and Willie O'Brien walking in front of me. And I just felt, 'They don't even care!'"

"The thing was to get Katie there, they didn't care what I did. And that was one moment when I began to ask myself, 'Why are you doing all this?' It

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## Katie blasts 'absolutely clueless' pundits over criticism

**Bernard O'Neill**

KATIE TAYLOR has described British pundits Mike Costello and Steve Bunce as "absolutely clueless" after they questioned her boxing intelligence against Jessica McCaskill earlier this month.

Taylor defended her WBA world lightweight title on a unanimous decision in York Hall, London where she was docked a point for holding.

The Bray fighter soaked up a number of shots in middle rounds after abandoning her slick hit and move tactics and opted for a dust-up with the Chicago brawler.

Costello wasn't impressed and question her boxing intelligence on radio, saying: "It demonstrated and showed us is how leaky Katie Taylor's defence is."

"She could not miss, it was so easy it was embarrassingly one-sided. But that wasn't enough for

her, she wanted to get involved. I thought it showed, actually, a lack of a boxing brain."

Bunce remarked he was "a little bit surprised at how often she was hit by basically a six-bout novice", adding: "She didn't fight a seasoned woman who's coming from loads of World Championships and Olympic qualifiers and trials."

Responding, Taylor didn't pull any punches, tweeting: "I

would've thought that people making those comments would have some knowledge."

"The reason I won the fight well is cos I used my boxing brain and outsmarted my opponent. If people who particularly are involved in boxing can't see that, they are absolutely clueless."

Taylor is expected to fight in Ireland for the first time as a pro in April, with Argentina's Victoria Bustos a possible opponent.

## LEONA HOPES SISTER LISA'S MOVE TO PRO RANKS WILL PAVE WAY FOR IRISH



**GOLF:** World amateur No 1 Leona Maguire is thrilled her twin sister Lisa is considering joining her in the paid ranks in 2018.

The Duke University star (23) plans to turn professional after she graduates in May and she's hoping to have Lisa for company in LPGA or Symetra Tour events as often as possible.

"I've always wanted to play on the LPGA Tour and play against the best players in the world," said Leona

(right), who is still undecided about whether or not she will make June's Curtis Cup her amateur swansong.

"It would be great to see Lisa turn pro alongside me. She's had her fair share of struggles but she's been playing better of late so it be great to have her out there."

"We need more Irish out on tour with Stephanie (Meadow) and hopefully we can pave the way for many more to come in the next few years."