

# **The Importance of Race Sponsors 1920 – 2019**

**A presentation by Niall O'Sullivan**

**at the Mansion House on the 3 August 2019**

So, we have made through to the 100<sup>th</sup> Liffey or indeed the 139<sup>th</sup> Liffey – but more on that a minute...

For those of you who don't know me, I'm Niall O'Sullivan. I swim with Dublin Swimming Club and a few years back I started documenting the history of our club and collecting materials for a Dublin Swimming Club archive. Dublin Swimming Club was established in 1881. I've since helped establish an archive since also for Leinster Open Sea, The Liffey Swim and Sandycove SC (established 1882). I should add that I am drawing some of the information that follows from the detailed history of the race undertaken by Cyril Smyth who is here tonight.

We all got excited about this being the 100<sup>th</sup> but it has also given us a window to collect the history – programmes, old minute books, medals, club membership cards and so much more. Thank to you the many people who have donated materials. These are now stored securely in archives in Pearse St Library in Dublin.

So going back to the start...After the success of the 1920 race organised by as we know by Bernard Fagan, the Independent Newspaper Group approached the Leinster Branch I.A.S.A. and provided the Perpetual Challenge Cup that we are still swimming for... and a gold medal for the winner each year. Tonight, I'm going to take a brief look back at the role sponsorship has played in keeping this great race alive,

As you may know, due to problems with water quality, the race was in danger of not being run in the late 1970s. Mick Fitzpatrick – who passed away recently - and others were determined it would continue. As a result. the 1977 - 1979 Liffey Swims were jointly organised by the Half Moon and Dublin Swimming Clubs. It was over a course of one mile further up the Liffey near the boat clubs. The men's race was sponsored by Tayto.

Another innovation was a 500-yard race for women. The 1977 Liffey Swim for Ladies was sponsored by Tommy May, himself the 1957 Liffey Swim winner, and this race continued into 1978 and 1979. Many of you will know Tommy's

son, Mark who swam today. In a curious scenario in 1980, the Liffey Swim reverted to a men-only event on its return to the Quays.

It's interesting that the 1978 women's and men's races attracted 70 and 87 entries, respectively, again in the Upper Liffey, probably the closest to parity of numbers we have ever seen.

In 1989 Paul Meehan of Independent Newspapers retired. The changing of the guard led to the end of their sponsorship after 70 years. I'm pretty sure this is a record long-term sponsorship in an Ireland context.

So that brings us to 1990, a time of recession and emigration in Ireland. The Liffey Swim faced a financial crisis. Luckily... the E.S.B. stepped in with sponsorship to save the day. It was reported that it cost in the region of £1,500 Irish punts (€1,905) to stage the event then.

Since 1991 the Liffey Swim has always been held on a Saturday. 1991 would also see the women's race over the same course as the men for the first time. At the December 1990 meeting of the Outdoor Swimming Committee, it was reported that the E.S.B. was willing to continue its sponsorship of the Liffey Swim... and that it was interested in there being a race for women. This was initially agreed by the committee but then in April they decided against, citing safety concerns. The possibility was then raised that the E.S.B. might withdraw its sponsorship if a ladies race did not go ahead. As a compromise of sorts, the Chairman proposed that a ladies' race go ahead in 1991 'on an experimental basis' and that the race be reviewed afterwards. The proposal was voted on - 3 for, 3 against and 1 abstention. The Chairman exercised his casting vote and it was carried.

The ladies now swim for Liffey Swim Ladies Challenge Cup which was presented by the Electricity Supply Board in 1991. The sponsorship arrangement continued but 1995 saw more concern for the future, but ESB continued their sponsorship that year.

At some stage also, there may have been no headline sponsor, certainly in one of the years the IASA stepped in with prizes to help ensure its continuation.

1999 it was titled the EBS / Speedo Liffey Swim – I'm not sure if that was just one year, I think Ben Kealy may have helped secure the EBS sponsorship.

Toyota were sponsors in c2000 up to c2004, the year I did my first swim. My sources tell me that Jerry Kiersey (RIP 2022) helped organise that deal – no

doubt he 'ahem' drove a hard bargain. I always remember the many Toyota flags adorning the Liffey quays that year.

I think then from c2005 onwards Dublin City Council came on board – Brian Mongey was certainly helpful in that regard I'm sure. They have been a key sponsor and supporter ever since.

Dublin Port were also part of the sponsorship in c2010 / 2011 and were also crucial for a number of years at a time when the Irish economy was in dire trouble.

Today we have three key sponsors. I'll start with Swim Ireland. Going back in time, the main reason ESB had dropped out after 1995 was that the sport of swimming was toxic to companies. The lack of appropriate child welfare meant that sponsors were running as fast as they could from swimming in general and The Liffey Swim suffered too. Swim Ireland was created in 1998 after the Irish Amateur Swimming Association (IASA) was dissolved. We now have a sport that is well managed, respected and ahead of the game in terms of governance in many ways. This has created the environment that has helped us attract great sponsors and indeed Swim Ireland have also become key sponsors in their own right, linked in part to their innovative Swim a Mile campaigns.

Just as Swim Ireland mind the sport, Dublin City Council mind the river for us – it's not always an easy task, but with their offices overlooking the river they have become key supporters and minders of this race. The fact that Bernard Fagan, who at the time worked for Dublin Corporation established the race is a wonderful link and a key part of today's story too. The logistics of the race – in a major urban capital also make DCC such a valued and relevant partner.

Our sponsors are like three tributaries flowing into one main river, with other smaller sponsors in turn feeding into them. As a result, this is a golden era with 376 men entered and 265 women today – 641 in total!

We spoke about The Independent's 70 years, DCC have been on board since c2005 and now we have Jones Engineering since 2017 also. So only 56 and 67 years respectively to break the Irish sponsorship record folks!

Not everyone know this but Jones amazingly committed to a ten year sponsorship. Such a commitment like this is unheard of generally and absolutely helps ensure a strong future for the coming years. Under the leadership of Eric Kinsella, Chairman and Jim Curley, Managing Director, they understand the place of this great race in Dublin's past, present and future. They get the romance element of the race too. They have assigned a great team to help out who have gone above and beyond in their support. We are hugely grateful. Who knows what they will be talking about at the Liffey

celebration dinner in 2119, but hopefully with great sponsors and organisation it will still be going strong.

Just to go back a little again and then I will finish. Jackie Kearney and Paul Emmet we think probably did the most Liffey's. Less well known is that of the 39 ladies' races on the main Liffey course, Sandra Trappe has done 38 – a record I believe. Indeed, that's why you could say that today was the 138<sup>th</sup> and 139<sup>th</sup> Liffey. Next year sees the ladies' race really come of age – the 40<sup>th</sup> race – while the race overall celebrates its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In 2020, with the support again of Dublin City Council, we will have an exhibition looking at major themes of the race since its start. Continue to enjoy the race and really appreciate the work of the many that has gone before us.

Thank you and Enjoy the night!



Niall