

Ministers Speeches



Address by

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At the

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Presses Sportive) Annual Congress,**

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Ministers Speeches



It is a pleasure for me to be here today among such a distinguished gathering of international sports journalists. On behalf of the Government and the people of Ireland I am delighted to welcome you and to extend a 'Cead Míle Fáilte', or 'One Hundred Thousand Welcomes', to each and every one of you. In welcoming members of the UEPS (Union Europeene de la Presses Sportive) and the AIPS (Association Internationale de la Presse Sportive) to Ireland, may I congratulate you on the work of your members in providing the communications through your various media, which are the lifeblood of both amateur and professional sport. I would like to welcome particularly UEPS President, Leif Nilsson, Vice-President, Jerzy Jakobsche, and General Secretary, Morley Myers, as well as the Officers and Executive Board Members of UEPS, and delegates from National Associations. Welcome also to President of AIPS Gianni Merlo, and your colleagues.

May I also add a word of congratulations to your hosts, the Association of Sports Journalists in Ireland, whose distinguished member Jimmy Magee was elected to your Executive Board in 2003. As many of you will probably know, Jimmy is Ireland's renowned "Memory Man" when it comes to sport.

Ask Jimmy to name a team from any decade, a final result from the distant past, the medal count of nations at any Olympic Games, the line-up of Ryder Cup teams, winners of horse races far and wide, and a thousand and one other questionsand Jimmy will have the answer.

I've always been tempted to ask Jimmy if he could name the UCG team that played a particular game in the Collinwood Cup soccer competition during the 1969/70 season. I'm interested because on the team was a Seamus Brennan. I have to admit it was my first game....and as it turned out, also my last game. I was told I was more interested in devising the tactics for the game than in actually playing. It was around that time I decided to hang up the boots and try my luck on the political field instead. So today, thanks to taking the political route, I have the honour of saying thank you to Jimmy Magee, a great sporting ambassador and a truly professional sports journalist.

Ministers Speeches



I would also like to complement the Association of Sports Journalists in Ireland for the outstanding work it is doing on behalf of Irish sports journalism which plays a pivotal role in the promotion and expansion of all sports in this country.

I wish you all a pleasant stay in Ireland, a country which has a passionate relationship with sport. Well, almost all sports, that is. I'm reminded of Ernest Hemingway's assertion that "there are only three real sports: bull-fighting, car racing and mountain climbing. All the others are mere games".

If you stick strictly to Hemingway's, dare I say 'bullish' pronouncement on the 3 real sports, then Ireland has done fairly good at car racing over the years; our mountain climbers have scaled a few lofty peaks, but for some reason the bull-fighting has never really taken off. Maybe it's something to do with our mild temperament and lack of interest in contact sports!

Today is an opportunity to salute and acknowledge the important contribution that you, the sports journalists, make to increasing our enjoyment and knowledge of sport. You do so by injecting great flair and passion into the written and spoken accounts of the many epic encounters you report on. At the same time you help to deepen our understanding of all sports by insightful analysis and commentary that probes behind the scenes and beneath the official results and announcements. Sport, in its many and varied forms, captivates a great many of us. And it is to people like you, and your colleagues around the world, that we look for the reports that bring the events alive. Okay, here and there in some reports may be a penchant for over embellishment and some copy may be laced with a glut of superlatives, but we still devour and enjoy every word. It is also to people like you that we look , particularly at times of big sporting occasions and also at times of controversies, for the analysis that peels away the publicity gloss and probes deeper for the true picture.

I sometimes think that one of sport's greatest attractions is in helping us to escape from the business of everyday living. It can lift us away from the workplace, away from the daily pressures and away, briefly, every now and then even from the world of politics. Although, having said all that, I think it would be hard to convince those

Ministers Speeches



glued to Ireland's Triple Crown victory in rugby over England two weeks ago that politics, and the clinging influence of history, was forgotten on that day!

As that pulsating game showed, and as many of you here today will be aware, sport is deeply ingrained in Ireland's heritage.

Our mythical heroes include Setanta who arrived at the court of King Conor Mac Neasa with a bronze hurling stick and a silver ball and became Ireland's first sporting legend. I don't think there were any sports journalists around then to chisel out their reports in stone on those early epic tussels! Dark days throughout our history were enlivened with sporting contests ranging from hurling games played between adjoining parishes to athletics meetings, road bowling and horse racing. Over the centuries we were introduced to a variety of new sports until in the 1880's the foundation of the Gaelic Athletic Association refocused the national support for the great traditional games of hurling and Gaelic football. Alongside this a wide variety of sports like soccer, rugby, hockey and golf established themselves throughout the country.

Now it has to be said that as a small nation we have managed to 'box above our weight' in sporting terms. We only have to look back as recently as last month, when Ireland won a gold medal at the World Indoor Athletics Championships, took the three major trophies at the Cheltenham racing festival and rounded off with that great Triple Crown win, to realise the extent of our sporting prowess. Irish men and women are involved in a bewildering array of sports and it is not at all unusual to celebrate international achievements in minority sports like rowing, snooker, cricket and even tug o war. Irish sports teams and individual competitors are also regularly watched and cheered by millions of television viewers around the world. The Irish soccer team has blazed a green trail across the world and our All-Ireland rugby team is renowned for its flair and never-say-die attitude.

So, wherever sport is played at the highest level, it's a fair bet that you are sure to meet the Irish.

Ministers Speeches



This sporting passion is a rare and valuable national asset. Not only does it provide hours of recreation for more than a million Irish people of all ages, but it also puts Ireland into the world spotlight and attracts many thousands of visitors to our shores. The Government recognises the value of sport to our national culture and well-being, as well as its contribution to tourism and to the economy. It has shown this by substantially increasing its investment in sport over the past decade so that today over €150 million a year is poured into supporting sport. In addition almost €400 million has been invested in recent years to provide facilities and equipment in every community in Ireland designed to bring and keep young people in sport.

Many major national projects have been developed. Croke Park in Dublin, which you will be visiting while in Ireland, has been developed into a world class stadium with capacity for over 80,000 spectators. In addition to hosting our native hurling and football games, Croke Park will soon opens its gates for the first time to international soccer and rugby games. This will help to further elevate Ireland's sports reputation internationally as millions of sports fans around the world will be getting to see this magnificent stadium for the first time.

Plans are also well advanced to redevelop Lansdowne Road as a national rugby and soccer stadium, while several horse and greyhound racing stadia have been modernised and redeveloped.

The building of the first phase of a new National Sports Campus is due to begin shortly. Funds for the development of sport in Ireland and support for elite competitors are channeled through the Sports Council of Ireland whose budget allocation this year exceeds €40million. I want to take this opportunity to thank the Sports Council for the tremendous work it is doing to meet the training, coaching and competition needs of all our competitors.

It is also to be commended on initiatives to attract more women into sport and to encourage older people into sports activities.

The vast improvement in sports facilities in Ireland has opened up opportunities for Failte Ireland to attract more sporting and special interest visitors to the country.

Ministers Speeches



The holding of your Congress in Ireland this year is another important recognition of Ireland's status in the world of sport.

Since 2000, some 80 international sporting events have been successfully staged in Ireland, ranging from windsurfing to motor sports, and from golf to sailing. Last year an estimated 27,000 international visitors, including competitors, spectators and officials participated in events supported by the International Sports Tourism Initiative.

There can be little doubt but that the Irish sporting highlight of 2006 will of course be the hosting of the Ryder Cup at the K Club in Co. Kildare. I know you will have the opportunity to visit the K Club during your visit and I look forward to many of you, and many of your colleagues around the globe, returning to report on the event itself in September. The event has been planned for more than eight years and I know that Ireland, through Fáilte Ireland, has in place a structure geared to achieving maximum tourism benefits through targeted marketing, international media relations, golf and sports tourism. The event will be watched by a worldwide television audience and it will provide a unique platform to promote Ireland as a quality destination with a great variety of leisure, sports and cultural appeals.

Ireland is also well advanced in a bid to host a round of the World Rally Championships from 2007 onwards and a number of other major projects are also in the pipeline. The selection of London as the host city for the 2012 Summer Olympic Games and Paralympic Games has also opened up opportunities for Ireland to promote itself as a high-quality centre for elite athletes and teams to finalise their preparations for Olympic competitions.

Before then of course, literally millions of sporting events will take place around the globe, from school sports days to the World Cup and the Beijing Olympics. All will enthrall and excite, will stimulate emotions from ecstasy to despair, and most will be reported on by sports journalists.

In conclusion, it is worth recalling how sports journalism has changed and evolved in a fairly dramatic way over the past century. Decades ago the public relied almost

Ministers Speeches



solely on newspapers for sports results and for accounts of games and events. Then radio came along and created its own arena of the imagination by broadcasting reports of games and events. Now we have television which has gone from the 1960's grainy black and white pictures of sports once or twice a week to 24 hours a day, 7 days a week coverage of everything from the World Cup and Olympics to tractor pulling championships in Scandinavia.

All of these technological advances have made sport more accessible and that is to be welcomed. But I do think it is worth noting that in the midst of this splurge of instant sports coverage, the importance of accurate, incisive and investigative reporting by sports journalists has probably never been needed more. Your great value and contribution is in your professionalism.

It is in your depth of knowledge of sport. It is in your ability to sift through the hype and the excitement of the moment in order to deliver the facts and the insights. And, most important of all, it is in your crafting and shaping of reports that quite literally burst from the newspaper pages, and out of the radio or television, and enrapture and enthrall the sports fan.

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