



BEST FOOT FORWARD!

CLAIRE BERGIN GETS READY FOR THE 4x400m RELAY

As *Accountancy Ireland* hits desks, **Claire Bergin** will be donning the green of Ireland in the 4 x 400 metre relay. Having already competed in the bobsleigh event at the Vancouver Winter Olympics in 2010, Claire is the first Irish woman ever to participate in both the Winter and Summer Olympics. A trainee Chartered Accountant, she has been telling **Accountancy Ireland** how she balances her work life with training and competing.

It seems strange to think that as many people read this article, I will in the Olympic training camp in London, just over the Irish Sea but what seems like worlds away for me.

Having confirmed my spot at the Olympics at the end of June, it may appear that it has all happened quite quickly but, believe me, running has been all consuming for me, for the last year in particular. That and, of course, studying for my accountancy qualification.

ACCOUNTANCY AS A CAREER CHOICE

To give just a little background, I decided to become a Chartered Accountant after I had finished my undergraduate degree and had taken some time out to decide which direction I wanted to go with my career. My degree is in Environmental Science and Health so accounting was a big change. I completed the Postgraduate Diploma in Accounting at DCU and I'm not going to lie, it was hard going but I am very glad I did

it as it gave me a good level of understanding of all the subjects I would be studying with the Institute which is important for anyone not coming from a business or accounting background.

Chartered Accountancy is an excellent qualification to have. It is so well recognised internationally and easy to travel with and I felt that it would offer me many opportunities in my career, particularly in the long term.

Since September 2009, I have been working in the Financial Services Audit Department with Deloitte. I've worked mainly on funds, insurance, re-insurance and some special purpose vehicles. I spent about six months as a trainee before I took my first interlude for sporting purposes when I was part of the first Irish women's bobsleigh team to compete at a Winter Olympics in Vancouver. I cannot tell you how fantastic the experience was and I was grateful that I was allowed time out to train and qualify for the Olympics. What's more, I got the taste for competing at that level and I liked it!

Soon, though, it was back to the day job and when I returned to work I had missed out on the early part of my first year and the audit busy season. The priority was to work hard to reach the level of the other trainees in my year. Fortunately, I had the luxury of not having exams in first year and spent the summer in the office getting to work on audit files and gaining valuable experience. I then went into second year with the rest of my year and continued to work and train like a full-time athlete while also attending lectures for my CAP 2 exams.

To have a work/life balance, my life had to be very organised, sometimes preparing for two training sessions a day, a day's work, lectures, as well as eating the correct food which meant that I would always have to have this with me. This was a heavy schedule before having any bit of a social life. It often felt like I was running just to stand still (excuse the pun). Although I was constantly on the go, I quite enjoyed it but, on reflection, it probably wasn't all that sustainable. I was hugely relieved and very



BEST FOOT FORWARD

ACCOUNTANCY IRELAND
AUGUST 2012 VOL.44 NO.4



grateful when Deloitte allowed me to take the year out to train full time as an athlete. A dream come true and an opportunity I just couldn't say no to.

MY ATHLETIC CAREER

Athletics was an easy choice of sport for me. It actually wasn't even really a choice, it just happened that way. From a young age I was always quick. In first class, I was already the quickest girl in school. I didn't join an athletics club until I was 11, but Dundrum South Dublin has been my club since then and I am currently the ladies track and field captain. The club has been extremely supportive at every stage of my career. As a juvenile athlete, I won all the accolades – all-Ireland championships, schools championships, British underage championships as well as qualifying for all the major underage competitions including the World and European Junior Championships. I went on to get a sports scholarship to DCU and continued to run well but also battled with some injuries over the years. I qualified for two World Student Games, which is the next biggest sporting event in the world after the Olympics.

Along with the ups, there have been downs too and I took 18 months out of the sport altogether in my final year in college as I had a stress fracture that was stopping me from running.

On reflection, I think I had also got to the point where I wasn't enjoying it anymore. However, taking some time out to travel, clichéd though it may sound, I 'found' myself and realised that I missed competing and wanted to return to athletics.

I had been back training for a couple of months when I was contacted by the Irish Bobsleigh Association about getting involved and my athletics career took hold once more and spiralled from there. I spent two seasons doing bobsleigh, competing mainly on the European circuit. As we could only do a limited amount of training at home we also spent a lot of time in Austria and Germany training over the winter months, which wasn't too shabby either!

My experience from the different sports has definitely stood to me. I had competing in athletics at the Olympics in mind as soon as I got back from Vancouver and I properly dedicated all my of training to athletics at that stage. I made the Irish team for the European Athletics Championships – quite a quick turnaround from competing at the Winter Olympics in February – and then on to a 400m relay at the Europeans that July.

TRAINING

At the end of the summer season in 2010, I took a few weeks off and then it was back to the hard graft for the winter of 2010/11. This was a lot more difficult than the previous winter as it was the first time I really

“ATHLETICS WAS AN EASY CHOICE OF SPORT FOR ME. IT ACTUALLY WASN'T EVEN A CHOICE, IT JUST HAPPENED THAT WAY. FROM A YOUNG AGE I WAS QUICK. IN FIRST CLASS, I WAS ALREADY THE QUICKEST GIRL IN SCHOOL.”

took on 400m training along with studying for my CAP 2 exams. I was certainly feeling the pressures of life at work and trying to balance it all.

My indoor season of 2011 didn't quite go to plan but racing at the weekends in January and February in the middle of the busy season at work wasn't ideal. That said, the team around me at work were very understanding and accommodating when it came to training but there was still a lot of things going on. It wasn't a disaster either, though, and I took the positives from it and, from there, moved on.

However, last summer, athletics wise, was another story for the most part. I opened up with my first 400m just outside my personal best. My subsequent races showed good form over 100m and 200m, as well. As a result of this, I became a member of both national relay teams – the 4x100m and 4x400m, both of which required further training sessions.

My first event is the 400m, so it was an added bonus to be part of the 100m relay. While the 4x100m wasn't faring as well as possible, the 400m team seemed to be coming together nicely. Everyone was on the same wavelength and showing good form. In particular, our number one girl, Joanne Cuddihy, was getting back to her best which was important for the team. The rest of us were all running personal bests, too. And another important aspect for the team was that we were all getting on well which helped to steer things in the right direction.

We had qualified for the World Championships from the Europeans the previous summer and were showing good form and so we were picked by Irish management to compete in Daegu in August last year.

Then misfortune hit the team when one of our team members, Marian, had to travel home due to a family bereavement. So we were one girl down. We had a substitute but her best time was nearly 2 seconds slower than Marian's which is a lot in a 400m and particularly on a world stage. We were happy for her to run as I know she is an excellent athlete and well able to step up to the mark.

At this stage we had just a week until our race. Amazingly, Marian returned to Korea after the funeral with a few days to go before the first round. Team management gave her a time trial two days before the race to make sure that she hadn't been affected by the jet lag or trauma, but Marian is a tough girl and withstood the test. We ended up finishing fourth in our heat while smashing the Irish record. What's more, we finished twelfth overall but there was very little between eighth place and us so we could have nearly made the final.

Confidence was high at this stage – we were on the road to qualification and the Olympics were in our sights.

Now for the science part – to qualify for the Olympics, the best 16 teams in the world qualify. With our time from the World Championships and our next best time we

were ranked twelfth with a time of 3 minutes 27 seconds.

To provide a little context, the last time an Irish women's relay team made an Olympic Games was in Sydney 2000 with a time of 3.32.24. We were pleased with our position in the run up to the 2012 European Championships at the end of June. It was crunch time, as this was the last chance to qualify for the Olympics but we were confident and felt that there was room for improvement with our baton changeovers as well as improving on our individual speeds.

“I HAD BEEN BACK TRAINING FOR A COUPLE OF MONTHS WHEN I WAS CONTACTED BY THE IRISH BOBSLEIGH ASSOCIATION ABOUT GETTING INVOLVED AND MY ATHLETICS CAREER TOOK HOLD ONCE MORE AND SPIRALLED FROM THERE. I SPENT TWO SEASONS DOING BOBSLEIGH, COMPETING MAINLY ON THE EUROPEAN CIRCUIT.”

And so on to our race in Helsinki. The race was at 10 o'clock in the evening so it was a long wait and nerves were building. I was running first so was leading the team and anxious to get going. The race didn't go 100% to plan and it took an anxious wait until after the final the following day before we finally knew that we had maintained our place in the top 16 and had qualified.

There were a flurry of emotions – from disappointment that we hadn't performed as well as we might to relief and elation that we had finally confirmed our spot. And, while you always think that you could have run faster, the experience in Helsinki really demonstrated to me how important and supportive the relay team is. Team work will definitely be key to a strong performance in London.

And so now, as I write this, it is all eyes on the big event. I'm really proud to be part of the 65-strong Irish Olympic team, and to be one of the 26 athletes who are part of that team. We'll have a couple of races between now and then, including the national championships, but I am really looking forward to heading over to the training camp.

The goal will be to hopefully make a final. This will be a tough task but also a realistic goal if we can run close to our Irish record or, better, beat it again and place as high as possible.

I also want to really enjoy the whole Olympics experience once I get there and to meet lots of new people and maybe even get to meet the likes of Usain Bolt!

WHAT NEXT?

So what's next for me? Well come August 20th, I will be back at my desk in Deloitte, focusing on getting back into work and finishing my qualification. And while my two 'jobs' feel worlds apart, I will be glad to see all my friends and colleagues, and get back to a normal routine. In all the excitement, it may seem unusual, but I've missed that too! ■

Clare Bergin is a trainee chartered accountant in the financial services department of Deloitte.

IN BRIEF

SMPs AND THEIR CLIENTS FACE SIMILAR CHALLENGES

Complexity and pace of change of regulations, in particular tax requirements, topped the list of challenges faced by small- and medium-sized accountancy practices (SMPs) and their small business clients in the first half of 2012, according to the Small and Medium Practices Quick Poll results released in mid-July by the International Federation of Accountants.

Keeping up with new regulations and pressure to lower fees were the top two challenges for practitioners. Their clients face similar challenges, according to the SMPs polled, with burden of regulation topping the list and three economic factors – pressure to lower prices, economic uncertainty, and difficulties accessing finance – nearly tied as the next biggest challenges.

The poll also included questions on business drivers and outlook. For nearly half the respondents, business from new clients is the main driver of growth by a wide margin with less than half as many respondents citing increased revenue from existing clients as their main driver of growth. However, when asked about performance expectations, the largest portion of practitioners expect no change in business in the current year compared with 2011.

For further details, see www.ifac.org

HALF OF EMPLOYERS KNOW LITTLE OF GOVERNMENT JOBS PLAN

Almost half (44%) of Irish employers know very little about the government's 'Jobs Action Plan' while one in ten has never even heard of the JobBridge scheme for internships, according to research conducted by Hays. The research also showed 60% of employers would consider taking an intern from the JobBridge Programme and 16% already have. Other positive news is that one fifth of employers (20%) would like to hire staff with aid from the government's Action Plan For Jobs while 14% already have.