

John Fulham in the  
Dublin Docklands

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Photos by Julien Behal, Maxwell's Photography

# Shaking THINGS UP

Whether competing as a Paralympic track athlete, acting as press spokesperson for the Irish team at London 2012, or forging new partnerships between IWA and the business world, John Fulham has spent much of his life promoting positive images of disability. Despite this, he admits to *Joanna Marsden* that he still experiences the occasional bout of insecurity, like when it came to meeting his future in-laws...



John Fulham's role in IWA is to build corporate partnerships that can support the Association's work

It's now less than a month until John Fulham's October wedding. "Let's just say my mother is delighted to have me finally off the shelf at the age of 43," jokes John. "I met my fiancé Mary Jennings through my job in AIB's head office in Ballsbridge, where I worked as a bank manager until January this year. Mary was working there as an IT consultant, but she also has an outdoor fitness company and coaches *The Irish Times* 'Get Running' programme, so she instantly intrigued me with her passion for running."

It took John a few months to build up the courage to ask Mary out. "She certainly made me do a bit of chasing, and I ended up having to organise quite a few irrelevant meetings before I actually got that first date!"

With John's two-decade-long involvement in the Paralympics, their shared love of sport provided instant common ground. "In many ways we had a similar attitude to life, but Mary had no personal experience of disability before she met me. I remember asking her about that early on in our relationship and she said that while she'd obviously noticed I was in a wheelchair, after the first couple of dates she felt like she'd stopped seeing it."

Nonetheless John admits to being worried when it came to meeting Mary's parents for the first time. "What were they going to think about their daughter settling down with a guy in a wheelchair? I generally regard myself as very forward-thinking when it comes to disability and knew I shouldn't be thinking that way, but sometimes in these kind

of emotional situations, your insecurities come to the fore and you just can't help it."

John adds, "Thankfully, my worries turned out to be completely unfounded. Mary's parents were very open-minded and accepting and the whole experience taught me that society really has moved on and I need to work on letting go of a few of those out-dated anxieties!"

John says experiences like this remind him not to take life, or disability, too seriously. "You need to have a sense of humour, and not get too caught up with the way you think other people might see you. A few weeks ago, for example, I went to my GP for a check-up. I told him I was getting married shortly and asked him semi-jokingly whether he could check I was in good working order. The poor guy just looked at my wheelchair awkwardly and clearly didn't know what to say!"

John credits his general physical and mental robustness to his no-fuss upbringing in Castletroy, Limerick. "I was born with spina bifida and I got my first wheelchair when I was four, but apart from that I was just a typical lad: climbing trees, playing up and down the road, messing around on the local swings and slides. Looking back, I think my mum was ahead of her time. In those days parents were just handed a baby with spina bifida and told, 'Off you go!' They didn't get any support. And you have to remember that there were very few role models – partly due to the reduced rate of survival, and partly because people with disabilities weren't so visible in society. So

my mum had to go on gut instinct in the early years. She decided to let me go out on my own, even if that meant falling down or getting stuck up a tree. Many of the things she did were frowned upon by others. 'You shouldn't let him do that,' other people used to tell her. 'But I can't stop him,' she'd reply."

His parents' forward-thinking gave John a very normal childhood. "Disability wasn't uppermost in my mind. Children instinctively find ways around problems without thinking too much. For example, when my friends ran and I couldn't keep up with them, our solution was to do 'the wheelbarrow', with them holding my legs up while I crawled rapidly with my arms.

"To prove how unaware I was of my disability as a young child, I always tell a story about one Halloween when my friend and I dressed up as Laurel and Hardy and went trick n' treating around the local streets. I was Laurel, with a black hat on, white face paint and a cushion stuffed up my t-shirt. I was feeling very proud of my outfit, so you can imagine my disappointment when one of the neighbours opened the door, looked at me and said, 'Hello John'. I went home to my mum and I asked her, 'How did he know it was me?' Somehow the fact that being in a wheelchair made me instantly identifiable, whatever I was wearing, had escaped my mind!"

It was when John reached secondary school that he remembers feeling left out for the first time. "The other lads started talking about sport and I realised I couldn't really participate in that banter because I didn't know first-hand what it was like to play those games."

Around this time, a volunteer from a local IWA sports club spotted John and, seeing his potential, invited him to a local track and field event. "It was the first time I'd been to an IWA event. In front of me was a gaggle of people with disabilities on a field and my first instinct was that I wanted nothing to do with it. I just didn't see myself in that category. By then I had absorbed the negative public perception of disability and I didn't want to associate myself with it."

Despite John's initial reluctance, the organisers pushed him to come along to a club training session, and soon he found himself participating in swimming, basketball, track and field. "For me there was instant joy in being able to compete with people on an equal footing. I suddenly got a chance to discover what I was good at. I was fast, strong. My years of messing on the road had paid off. I started to enjoy the camaraderie. That's the importance of what IWA does. It provides an avenue to get young people involved in sport."

John started competing at local and national events. "There were two volunteer coaches in particular, Harry Pierce and Sean O'Grady, who had disabilities themselves and were excellent at encouraging me. In 1989 I got my first cap when I participated in track racing at Stoke Mandeville. It was a nice place to start my racing career, but I didn't do very well – in fact I got my arse kicked! But it



John Fulham with his fiancé Mary Jennings in New York in January 2014 (it was on this trip that John proposed to Mary)

paid off because it showed me the standard, and I realised that this was make or break. All young athletes reach a point where they ask themselves, do I really want this enough? For me the answer was yes – I loved it and I was going to do everything I could to get to the level needed to win."

After school, and a brief spell on a business studies course, John was successful in getting an entry level position with AIB in Donnybrook, Dublin. "Getting that job wouldn't have been possible if it wasn't for the fact that by then I'd got my own car and was learning to drive with IWA. I was lucky because an aunt left me money which paid for the car and that really got me started in life. After that, my mum and dad barely saw me!"

For many years in Dublin, John lived in inaccessible two-storey house shares. "I had a system; I'd keep one wheelchair upstairs and one downstairs, and I'd crawl up and down the stairs. I used to joke to my housemates, 'If you step on something in the night, don't worry, it's

“I did get slagged for being ‘Mr Eternal Fourth Place,’ and for missing out on a medal by a 200th of a second, but that’s part of the endless psychological challenge of competitive sport. I’d probably still be racing if I could!”

probably just me!' New housemates took a while to get used to me. In the evening, I'd iron my shirt for work the next day and then they'd see me crawling up the stairs with my ironed shirt over my head. If I could do something for myself, I didn't want anyone else to do it for me."

John adds, "I'm still like that to a great extent, but as you get older you also realise that everyone needs a little help sometimes – life teaches you these things!"

Spending his evenings and weekends training with IWA Sport, John "got to link in with other athletes and trainers, people like Patrice Dockery, Mark Barry and Mairead Farquharson. We built up a good group of friends and an incredible support network. My first Paralympics was 1992 and I participated in every Paralympic Games from then until I retired in 2004, as well as in countless European and World Championships. I got some decent results over the years. The highlight was probably the European Championship 100 and 200 metres in 2003 – after which I held the European record for 100m for several years."

Unfortunately, despite being a finalist on several occasions, John never won a Paralympic medal. "But just being a Paralympian was an incredible experience. The Paralympic Games are the golden chalice – the one event every disabled athlete really wants to be part of. I did get slagged for being 'Mr Eternal Fourth Place,' and for missing out on a medal by a 200th of a second, but that's part of the endless psychological challenge of competitive sport. I'd probably still be racing if I could!"

The span of John's own career saw significant growth in the whole Paralympic movement. "In the early days of my sporting career, there was very limited grant funding and I relied on the generous support of AIB, but over time support structures grew for high performance athletes."

Since 2005 John has been a board member of Paralympics Ireland [he is currently vice-president] and he is involved in IWA's track development programme, which aims to nurture talent. He also played a key role in London 2012 as spokesperson for the Irish team. "Anyone who was in London will tell you what an incredible experience that was. It felt like Paralympic sport had come of age and caught the imagination of the public. Finally it was being perceived as equal to the Olympics."

In addition to track racing, John has played on the Irish basketball team, and still plays National League basketball. He also coaches Killester's Wheelchair Basketball team. "It's great to see children getting into sport. As well as giving you physical strength and endorphins, sport teaches you how to get involved in the world and compete. There is a huge socialisation aspect. It fosters independence and self-belief, and introduces you to older people in similar circumstances who can act as role models."

When John talks to parents of children with disabilities, he reassures them that getting knocked about in the course of a game is not a bad thing. "A parent's instinct is



John aged ten. He remembers hopping out of his chair so he could play with his new puppy Sophie

to protect a child, but I always say, 'Let them fall'. That's life. If you don't allow your child to experience these things, you are subconsciously creating a barrier."

With increasing opportunities for all children to try wheelchair sports, John sees sport as a great vehicle for education and integration. "When it comes to disability, young children have a way of asking a question, getting an answer, and then just going about their business. It is only as we get older that we try to categorise and put labels on things."

Seeing the value of sport to the younger generation was one of the factors that spurred John to leave his job in AIB in January 2014 after 22 years. "Banking is a pressurised environment these days, and I said to myself, if I'm going to work this hard, I want it to be for a cause that makes a difference. Leaving was a nerve-wracking decision because a job in the bank was a job for life, but when an opportunity came up to work for IWA as a Corporate Partnership Development Manager, I realised this could be the fit I was looking for. I'd spent two decades building relationships with corporate customers in the bank, and now I could use those skills to help IWA."

John says his new job is about "thinking differently". "If IWA wants to take control of its future, and ensure we are in a position to keep providing important services, we need to be assertive and to move beyond traditional forms of fundraising towards corporate partnerships."

Such partnerships are about more than straightforward philanthropic donations, explains John. "A company may, for example, offer their IT skills and resources to IWA, or, as in the case of DPD Ireland, they might provide free courier services. It's about working out where the natural fit is, and then ensuring that we give those businesses something in return for their support. Staff can get a lot out of involvement in volunteering projects, like the Fidelity Investments' community garden in IWA's Athlone centre, or



John Fulham with his IWA colleague Communications Coordinator Anita Matthews.  
Anita and John are working together to raise awareness of the work IWA does

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from participating in team-building events like wheelchair basketball matches.”

In order to build more corporate partnerships, John says it's critical to raise awareness about the Association's work. “What we do and why we do it is a powerful story, and when people tune into it they take us seriously. Businesses need to see first-hand what people get from IWA. I'm living proof because IWA did two

critical, life-changing things for me – it brought me into the world of sport and it got me driving. Those two things had a direct impact on my confidence, independence and ability to integrate in the world. So when I'm sitting in my suit in a corporate meeting room, I'm happy to tell people what IWA has done for me, and why I feel a very personal responsibility to ensure it keeps doing the same for others.”