



VISION SPORTS IRELAND ACCESS TO SPORT FOR VISION IMPAIRED PEOPLE

“I’ve been a member of Vision Sports Ireland for almost 11 years. I have achieved quite a lot of success during this period and I’m very much looking forward to assisting and helping Vision Sports Ireland reach out to vision impaired people and get them to participate in sport at all levels, including getting to Paralympic Games!” - Jason Smyth, quadruple gold medal Paralympic athlete who will represent Ireland at the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.



OUR STORY

At Vision Sports Ireland we help blind/vision impaired people to live a full and vibrant life involving access to sport while dealing with the extremely difficult aspects of blindness and sight loss. Established almost 30 years ago, we are a registered charity providing a range of services which encourage the participation in sport by blind/vision impaired people. We work with athletes of all ages and abilities from local those involved at community level to elite Paralympians. We are unique in that we are the only organisation in Ireland solely dedicated to promoting sport and recreation for blind/vision impaired people. Our annual MayFest - an extravaganza of “come and try”, competition and demo sports for blind/vision impaired people, their families and friends - is the highlight of our year with no less than fifteen sports on offer including VI tennis, judo, blind football, blind golf and swimming as well as 20 miles tandem cycle, competition track athletics and a tenpin bowling championship.

“It gave me great confidence in trying out new sports and helped me think about possibly following up on one sport. I really enjoyed MayFest and would love for as many people as possible to know about it so that they can enjoy it too.”



“It was just an inspiring day. I loved the golf, loved the tenpin bowling. I have already signed up with Irish Blind Golfers as a guide. I think today has given me a new perspective on life.”

HOW LIVES ARE TRANSFORMED

Participating in Sports allows people who are blind and vision impaired to develop independence without unnecessary restrictions. Like sighted people blind participants can share in the thrill of victory, the reality of defeat and the importance of taking part! The following stories are ones which reflect the reality of hundreds of vision impaired people in Ireland today.

DONNACHA

When Donnacha developed a form of Leukaemia in 2001, which affected his optic nerve and left him with total sight loss in the space of a few weeks, he thought that the world of sport was lost to him. Having grown up playing GAA and soccer with his local clubs, sport had always been a huge part of his life.

“Suddenly I wasn’t able to run any more, I wasn’t able to kick a ball and I couldn’t even enjoy watching my beloved Cork play!”

When he heard about vision impaired sports, blind football immediately grabbed his attention. The ball has ball bearings inside which rattle as it moves around so players can locate it and there are coaches along the side lines and behind the goals to give instruction and feedback to players.

He now trains regularly on a club team in Dublin with Blind Football Ireland, part of the Vision Sports family. He also takes part in athletics and cycling events, held by Vision Sports Ireland, as well as giving any new sports a go.



“Getting back involved in sport, as a blind person, isn’t easy. But, with a little determination and a lot of stubbornness it can be immensely rewarding. As well as all the health benefits regularly participating in sport can provide, it has hugely improved my self-confidence, communication skills and even spatial awareness”

Michael

Michael is 19 years old and suffers from a rare eye condition called Peter's Anomaly. Unfortunately, since birth he has had numerous eye surgeries including retinal reattachments, corneal transplants, cataract removal as well as surgery for glaucoma. As a youngster he was involved in athletics, which he loved. However, throughout his early education ongoing surgeries and aftercare often prevented him from taking part in regular sport and leisure activities.

Michael was introduced to Vision Sports Ireland at a time when his eyesight continued to deteriorate and surgical intervention lessened, enabling him to reengage in sports again.



“My first MayFest was amazing. I was given the opportunity to experience new sports. I discovered that I really enjoyed tandem cycling. The feel of the breeze blowing through my hair, the air on my face, the speed of the bike, the whole experience was exhilarating! I felt safe having a pilot in front of me but I also felt energised knowing that my contribution cycling behind was part of a team effort. “

As a result Michael eventually invested in a tandem of his own and now takes part in regular leisure cycling locally as well as organised events with Vision Sports Ireland. Vision Sports Ireland has re-opened up the whole world of sports and leisure activities and has introduced him to a peer group which has brought new friendships, support and encouragement.

PAT

Pat has always been involved in sport and was an avid runner when he had his sight. A few years later, after losing his sight completely, Pat was lamenting his lack of opportunity to participate in sport and decided to do something about it. Along with friends in a similar situation, he helped to organise swimming and walking groups in Cork to promote inclusion and allow vision impaired people practice sport in an environment where they could feel safe and confident. When funding became a crisis four years ago, the groups thought their days were numbered but luckily they contacted Vision Sports Ireland whose support ensured the groups stayed active.

“We couldn't have continued without the intervention of Vision Sports, their support was crucial and we wouldn't exist now without them.”

Pat now attends a thriving swimming group once a week which is given access to its own private pool and lanes to ensure maximum safety for participants. He's also the coordinator



for a walking group which has ventured all over Cork's trails and walks, giving enormous emotional as well as physical rewards to its devotees. Without Vision Sports' Group Activity Fund Pat and his companions wouldn't have been able to continue with their activities which have far reaching confidence and well-being benefits beyond just the swimming or walking!

"The group allows me to access the physical and, just as importantly, mental health benefits that everybody else can derive from sport."

THE FUTURE

For almost 30 years Vision Sports Ireland has been committed to improving the lives of individuals with visual impairment by giving them the opportunity to access to the same sports and leisure as fully sighted people. The joy of playing a game of football with friends, the therapy of walking in nature after a stressful week, the pride of crossing the finish line or the satisfaction of competing with your peers shouldn't be lost to blind/vision impaired people. We are committed to expanding and developing the essential services we offer so that more and more blind/vision impaired people can reap the benefits that regularly engaging in sport and leisure activities can have on their lives.

Our key goals for the future include:

- Reaching a larger demographic of blind/vision impaired people.
- Allowing greater access to a greater variation of sports to blind/vision impaired people.
- Providing guidance and support to blind/vision impaired people who want to pursue sports
- Educating sporting organisations and individuals interested in developing classes and programmes for blind/vision impaired people
- Developing sports and training programmes and classes in conjunction with sports clubs and organisations throughout the country to allow blind/vision impaired people enjoy greater access to sport in their community

"What can sport give to people with a visual impairment? Have you ever done a tumble in the water? Now imagine doing one when you're blind, when you can't see the wall or the bottom of the pool or know where either is! Imagine that sense of independence you would feel! It takes great courage but gives a huge sense of personal achievement" – Frank Cullinane, Vision Sports swimming coach

A Vision for the Future – Partner with Us

Vision Sports Ireland has been funded for many years through the support of grants and the generosity of donors. We now need your support more than ever to continue providing our essential, life-transforming services to the vision impaired community. We are expanding our services with a series of new, exciting developments which will allow us to ensure that blind and vision impaired people throughout Ireland enjoy the same health benefits as everyone else derived from regular participation in sport and recreational activities:

- The establishment of a **Sports Development Programme** to expand our services to vision impaired people throughout the country. This programme would provide additional guidance and support to blind/vision impaired people on which sports and recreational opportunities are available to them. The aim is to further develop partnerships/relationships with sports governing bodies, resource workers, local sports partnerships, schools, colleges, sports clubs, businesses and all interested in supporting vision impaired people find and climb the sports ladder. To achieve this, we need funds to improve our communications and advocacy capabilities and to recruit a Sports Development

Officer responsible for promoting Vision Sports Ireland's core message: *to enable blind/vision impaired people participate in the sports of their choice.*

- The expansion of our **Direct Support Programme** which provides essential, financial support, through grants, to blind/vision impaired individuals to enable participation in a specific sport. Blind/vision impaired people are at a significant participation disadvantage due to the extra costs associated with purchasing adaptive equipment, transport as well as logistics associated with requiring guide/partners. These grants are used to support the participants in sports, which would otherwise be out-of-reach, such as golf, athletics, tennis and horse-riding. Vision Sports Ireland currently provides direct support to individuals in this way but there is a huge demand for more access to sport and recreational activities. With additional support we hope to provide funding to up to **20** individuals per year. Our grant cover up to 50% of the cost associated up to a maximum of €500 with the activity and can make all the difference in nurturing a blind/vision impaired person's passion for activity and sport.
- The development and growth of our **Group Activity Support Fund** which provides assistance to people who wish to partake in a scheduled group activity such as walking, tandem cycling or swimming. Vision Sports Ireland currently facilitates access to group walking and swimming scheduled activities in Cork and Dublin and we truly believe this to be an invaluable opportunity for blind/vision impaired people and their families to build relationships with people in similar situation to themselves whilst reaping the many benefits of being active.

Our aim is greater participation by a greater number of members in a greater variety of sports. In order to continue to provide essential support and services to our members and to expand the new initiatives Vision Sports Ireland needs to raise an additional €70,000 per annum.

For further information on our services and how you can support us help people like Donnacha and Pat to achieve their goals and maintain active, healthy, fulfilled lives please contact Sarah at 0858500193 email office@visionsports.ie. Visit our website at www.visionsports.ie.