



**THE
CAMOGIE
ASSOCIATION**
An Cumann Camógaíochta

TELL THEIR STORY





About the Author

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Contents

- 4 Lucinda Gahan: Camogie is always there for you, in the good times and the bad
-
- 8 Daria Niewiadomska: "I'm a person that puts my head where nobody would put their hurl"
-
- 12 Kate Leenane: Ticking off each camogie goal, one at a time
-
- 15 Linda Kenny: Passing the proud tradition of Camogie through the generations
-
- 18 The Gannon sisters, for club, for county, for life: "It's unbelievable playing with your two sisters"
-
- 22 Abbie O'Rourke: "Arthritis isn't just something your grandparents have"
-
- 26 Ella Níc an tSionnaigh: "I just want to be included and I don't want to be blown up in the news either"
-
- 29 Mary Duffy: If you fall of the horse, you get straight back up
-
- 32 Kevin Hanly: Making the big bad world a more inclusive place one step at a time
-
- 36 My Experience: Hannah Looney explains how anti doping testing is "nothing to be worried about, but something to be mindful of"
-
- 40 My Experience: Sharon Shanahan on bouncing back from the Sharon Shanahan of concussion
-



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My Experience: Sharon Shanahan on bouncing back from the Sharon Shanahan of concussion

By Alanna Cunnane

Aged 21, Sharon Shanahan is wise beyond her years, and already has had the harsh realisation that “your brain is your most valuable asset.” Having experienced three concussions to date, she knows what it’s like to be plunged into the “deep black hole” that can consume an athlete while they’re injured, but the Offaly woman has proved that it is possible to bounce back, better and stronger than ever.

Her first one occurred when she was just 14 years old during a Camogie match, and while she had heard of concussion before, what she wasn’t aware of was how much it can impact your life, and especially how important it is to take adequate recovery time.

“I didn’t realise the severity of it.

My head was spinning, I was having headaches and I just didn’t know what was going on,” she recalls.

At age 18, Shanahan experienced her second concussion, which was in her own words “a more extreme case”, and when “everything kind of went downhill.”

“I was involved in a bad accident which involved a car, and as a result I got a severe concussion due to hitting the concrete ground with great force,” she says.

“It was really scary.”

Keen to get back quickly, she rushed through return to play protocols, and now understands that perhaps in the long run that that wasn’t the best plan of action.

Just seven months after that, she was hit with another concussion while playing with her club, and



although this one was on the milder side, she decided to take serious heed of it, choosing to take a year out from sport as a result.

“Mentally and physically I was so drained. I was eager to get back and I caused myself more injuries... It was one thing after another,” she says.

“That’s when I decided to take a step back. It was actually the best thing I’ve ever done because I probably realised how much of a

privilege it is to play Camogie and how much I missed it, but I also was giving my body sufficient time to recover,” she adds.

That said, it didn’t come without its challenges.

Undergoing her own research into concussion, the isolation that comes along with this particular injury is an aspect Shanahan hopes will change.

“It was the most awful time I’ve ever had. I just kind of felt like I was standing there watching the girls from the sideline and I had nobody to talk to about this. Then I started to wonder whether all of this was in my head, and was I the only one going through this sort of thing,” she says.

“I was curious then and I started to research information about concussions particularly in sport and the GAA. There is information provided on GAA websites that provide relevant knowledge around concussions which is valuable to individuals. Also, the GPA is a representative body that offers support to athletes in terms of injuries, mental health and they will go above and beyond for you, they are brilliant! It really helped me because it made me feel like I wasn’t on my own in this, that someone got what I was going through.



“You never really see big GAA players opening up about stuff but I think it’s really important when they do because they’re role models, and although you might think you’re the only person in the world to go through something, there’s always someone that will truly understand.”

Studying PE and English in the University of Limerick, it was when the extent of the concussion extended beyond sport that things really hit home for Shanahan.

Her degree, in both capacities, really comes to the fore when she describes first hand what it feels like to have one.

“I felt like my head was in a jar and it was being constantly shaken. I could not think, I could not concentrate, the constant headaches, sensitivity to light and noise were daily struggles. It was unbearable at times,” she says.

Or – “everything just turned to black and white dots. If you’ve ever spun around or got up too quick that was what it was like for me all of the time.”

Or even that it felt like she “was in the middle of a concert and everyone was screaming” directly at her.

While linking in with her physio and engaging with return to play protocols, she also completed regular SCAT tests, which are designed to evaluate the extent of the concussion.

“I was asked questions like, ‘here’s a list of numbers, repeat that backwards to me’, but I was struggling with it. The more questions that were asked the more I was getting puzzled and confused and then frustrated because you don’t know what’s happening,” she says.

“They were such simple questions and I couldn’t answer them and that’s what made me realise that this really isn’t a simple injury, there is no “quick fix”, patience, time and rest are precious.”

That feeling of helplessness also protruded into other areas of her life at the time, further reinforcing a feeling of powerlessness over her scenario.

Luckily, it’s something Shanahan was able to overcome, helped along by her support system of course, yet another indication of her brave and courageous nature.

“I couldn’t concentrate at college, I was looking at my screen and everything was just fuzzy. It was just the worst time. I remember sitting



up in my room one day wondering if it was ever going to go away. Was this going to treat itself or I have this for the rest of my life? Would I ever recover?" she says.

"I was thinking, I've actually no outlet for myself. I can't train, I can't play, I can't go out, I can't do anything.

"Thankfully my physio was very strict and good with the protocols, regimented in a programme where you did one thing for two weeks (let's say for example straight line running), and if you could you'd move on to the next section, if not you'd go back until you were ready.

"I would not have gotten through these times without the care and support from my family, friends, boyfriend, teammates and my physio. They all got me back on track!"

Slowly but surely, she made her way back to the pitch, and just this year won the Ashbourne Cup with UL and picked up a personal All Star award too.

Shanahan knows that were she to be hit with another concussion that "early retirement" could be something she would have to seriously consider, and while she'd like to encourage more awareness around the topic, and possibly push for an examination of the charging rule, for now, she's enjoying every moment she can out there on the pitch.

"I've realised that life is too short to be rushing back, I'm always going to have Camogie there, what's an extra two or three weeks if I'm fit and healthier for it," she says.



Tell Their Story

