



**THE  
CAMOGIE  
ASSOCIATION**  
An Cumann Camógaíochta



# TELL THEIR STORY





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# Abbie O'Rourke: “Arthritis isn’t just something your grandparents have”

**By Alanna Cunnane**

**A**bbie O'Rourke doesn't want to be known as just “the girl with arthritis” but if you saw play, or even heard her speak, you'd know that there's absolutely not a chance that that's the case at all. The 18 year old is much, much more than that.

She's a prolific midfielder for Maynooth Camogie.

She's the one who wears the number nine, always. Her superstitions won't allow for otherwise. She's the player who serves a plucky spiritedness any time she takes to the field, and acts as a true leader.

And she's determined to break the stigma around arthritis, to showcase that “it's not just something your grandparents

have”, and that while it's an “invisible disease”, it's one she lives with and continues to battle every day.

The very bones of her are consumed with an undeniably charismatic and inspirational aura, and Camogie...always Camogie.

Her story shouldn't change that viewpoint, and if anything it makes everything that this remarkable young woman has achieved all the more inspiring.

You see, in October 2020, she was playing a final against Éire Óg when her feet started to hurt and she had to be substituted off (although she insists to mention that they still won the game, thankfully).

Thinking nothing of it she put the pain down to her new boots, but when it persisted on, into her



everyday life and even interrupted her school work, that's when her and her family decided to investigate it further.

"It was scary...it got to the point where I could barely walk, so I went to the hospital," she explains, "that's when I was diagnosed with juvenile idiopathic arthritis."

"I just knew what everyone knows about arthritis at the time. I was thinking, 'oh yeah, but sure that just makes your fingers crooked', but then after a while it started spreading from my feet to my knee, my lower back, my wrist, fingers, my jaw and my eyes."

She started treatment in Temple Street the following November,

taking three injections a week, coupled with steroids and more medication too.

"They were helping but they weren't curing anything," O'Rourke says.

"People don't even think it can get that bad, but I was unable to walk for four months from January to April 2021.

"I was just in constant pain the whole time."

That April she began steroid injections, which cleared the pain from her knee, and alongside some help from her physio, Kelly Robinson, allowed her to resume involvement with her beloved sport, if only in little bursts.

"I was going back to training and doing 15 minutes of the session, just little bits to build my fitness back up and my knee strength back up as well," she says.

"Back then in May 2021 I still didn't think I'd ever play Camogie again. I didn't even think I'd be able to walk properly again. I started slowly but gradually got back into it and doing full training sessions, the entire thing, but not giving it 100%."

It took another five months for her to reach that stage, but no matter what, her commitment to Camogie and the team's commitment to her never wavered.



All of that was facilitated by her wonderful coach Naoimi Devroux, who always made sure O'Rourke felt a part of the team, even when she was sidelined.

"My Camogie coach Naoimi always included me in the trainings," she recalls.

"I was never just sitting there watching them, she'd ask me to come up with drills or encourage the girls and she was really inclusive with me".

"She knew I loved the sport and that it was hurting me to be away, because I was missing my teammates, training and the sport, so she always understood that and made me feel involved."

An All Ireland final, made captain of the U17 team and led them to Division 1 glory and many more important matches with her own age group and the senior ranks followed, but one thing topped the cake of the comeback for O'Rourke.

On her return to the side, she made to Kildare minor panel, putting to bed her own self doubt that "they're never going to take a girl with arthritis on their team." "None of the girls knew... I just didn't want anyone to know, but hopefully they see this and they might understand," she says.

"I still have arthritis, I'm still in so much pain, I take three injections a week, I'm off my steroids, but I'm taking calcium just to build my bones back up.

"I don't often say that I've done any of this, but that's my biggest accomplishment, I'm just so proud of all of that."

Her willingness to speak on the topic is also suggestive of just how mature she really is, ready to do anything in the hope that it might

help someone else and alleviate the loneliness of the experience.

O'Rourke was out of her beloved Camogie and football for a full year, had been to hell and back both mentally and physically, but yet she couldn't imagine where she'd be without sport and the support of her family, friends, club and wider network .

While she still experiences painful flare ups from time to time, she's determined to break the stigma around the disease, which her, and over 1,000 children throughout the country live with everyday.

"The whole thing was really scary because it's not like I could even really talk to my friends or my family about it because people just don't understand what it's like to have it, and you'll never understand the pain if you don't," she says.

"I was actually reading a few of the Tell Her Story articles from last year and I got inspired. I felt like I wasn't alone, so I just hope that some girl or boy can look at this and just feel even a little bit the same."

Entering a new stage of life having completed the Leaving Cert and celebrated her 18th birthday in June, the world is now O'Rourke's oyster.

If her track record of overcoming adversity is anything to go by, she'll easily go the whole nine (definitely not an unlucky eight or seven) in achieving her dreams.





Tell Their Story

