

Former Olympian tests his endurance off the track

Professor Colin Boreham plans for the success of the Institute for Sport and Health at UCD - Gavin Cummiskey reports.

Adapting to the varying nuances required to ensure the success of the recently established Institute for Sport and Health at UCD will not pose too much difficulty for Professor Colin Boreham, the man charged with the task. And, it's not just down to his duly impressive academic CV. As an athlete, he represented Great Britain for 13 years. First as a high jumper - he broke the national record in 1973 - before switching to the decathlon; a sport which ensured him a career in the shadow of Daley Thompson, arguably Britain's finest ever Olympian.

Professor Boreham competed alongside his teammate Daley Thompson at the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, where Thompson reached the pinnacle of his athletic career. "Interesting times. If it wasn't for injury, he could have gone on to achieve a third gold medal in Seoul," says Professor Boreham.

"We (Scotland's Brad McStravick was the third Briton) helped Daley to achieve his goal of a second Olympic gold. Not that he really needed us - he was the most competitive athlete I have ever encountered. Phenomenal single mindedness. Ruthless," explains Professor Boreham, Director of the Institute for Sport and Health at UCD.

The Institute aims to promote health and sporting excellence through a range of activities and programmes, including high quality research in the sport and exercise sciences, sports science support services and appropriate

teaching in sports-related degree programmes. It is closely aligned with the UCD School of Physiotherapy and Performance Science, which is a constituent of the College of Life Sciences, located in the Health Sciences Centre on the Belfield Campus.

Aside from his achievements as an athlete, Boreham served as a professor of exercise and sport at University of Ulster for more than 10 years applying his broad experience in teaching, research and administration. As a former director of the Physical Education centre at Queens University, he has always enjoyed the mix of the academic and management roles.

"My role at UCD really mixes those two elements together, as well as my main research interest which is the role of exercise in health. It really was an ideal opportunity to get all my eggs in one basket as it were. And it's been a really stimulating experience thus far," says Professor Boreham.

Born in Luton, Professor Boreham spent most of his early years in Bournemouth. He made it to the Belfield campus via Birmingham, California and Belfast.

He graduated from the University of Birmingham in 1975 with a first class degree in Sports Sciences. Armed with a Fulbright Fellowship, he studied for his Masters Degree at the University of California, Berkeley. After this he took up a lecturing position in Physical Education at Queens University where he joined the Ballymena and Antrim athletics club, who he represented at the 1982 Commonwealth and 1984 Olympic Games.

In 1996, he departed Queens for the University of Ulster, Jordanstown, where he spent the next 10 years as the Professor of Sports Science. In the summer of 2006 he moved to Dublin, to take up his current role at UCD.

Professor Boreham has been a student of sports science for 30 years. He has published over 100 peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters, and was a member of the 2001 UK Research Assessment Panel for Sports Science. He is also a fellow of both the American College of Sports Medicine and the European College of Sports Sciences.

The main body of his research has focused on the relationship between exercise and health, primarily in young people. The World Health Organisation (WHO) regards him as a leading expert in the field of childhood obesity.

"Obesity is a major concern in western society. The priority has to be tackling and preventing childhood obesity for a number of reasons," says Professor Boreham. "We know the health dangers of obesity accumulate as you go through life. The longer you are obese the more danger you have of developing illness. Even if you become slim as an adult, childhood is a critical area and you will suffer health problems as an adult irrespective of what you do with your weight in adulthood."

"Early adulthood is a critical period. One thing missing as a student is the structured physical education programme which may, in many cases, no longer exist."

"The structured lifestyle of secondary education changes dramatically in the first year of university life. Students find themselves in a totally different environment with the freedom to act as they wish - which is great, but it can lead to lifestyle problems," says Professor Boreham.

"It's critically important that we encourage new students to maintain or take up some form of physical activity. If they are sporty by nature we should encourage them to maintain this by providing opportunities but it's not about just representing the first 15 or first 11. Maintaining some form of physical activity for all students is important" explains Professor Boreham. "I'm very much hoping we can build on UCD's excellent record in promoting student sport to influence students at all levels."

"It's critically important that we encourage new students to maintain or take up some form of physical activity. If they are sporty by nature we should encourage them to maintain this by providing opportunities but it's not about just representing the first 15 or first 11."

Why did the student Boreham become a decathlete? "Well, I always tried to marry my education and sporting interests. I guess I was bored with the high jump to be honest. Also, by 25 I realised I was not going to get much better. I didn't want to quit athletics because I was at the peak of my fitness levels," he explains.

"I didn't have a long apprenticeship as I scored over 7,000 points the first time I competed and was selected for the national team soon after." At 30, the LA Games in '84 was his swansong from high level competition. He finished 20th out of 34 athletes. "No excuses but I did have a small knee injury, which is a pretty crucial joint, so I was only competing at about 95%. Still, it was a thoroughly enjoyable experience."

After retiring he managed several international athletic teams and even became a fitness advisor to the Irish rugby team between 1987 and 1990, when Ulsterman Jimmy Davidson was coach.

Boreham can relate to every elite athlete he encounters at UCD, as he too sacrificed the easy road in life to reach his current position.

What are his goals for the coming years? "The priorities for the first year are multiple. The first would be to establish linkages internally and externally to see how people's interests might marry with the interests of the institute to

develop our teaching, research and service functions. The possible structures, location, budgets - the usual management side of any new venture- need to be put in place."

"We are in the Philips building which is on the Clonskeagh side of the campus. It is under refurbishment for a variety of usages in the university including the institute. In the same building we have the IRFU High Performance unit. The office next to mine is where Brian Mullins, the UCD Director of Sport, is located."

"It's a sporting hub and overlooks the playing fields. Our resources include a performance laboratory, which I hope will develop into a state of the art facility where our students can learn in the right environment and coaches want to send their athletes."

"The other side is human resources - it's critical to get the best staff in place. We've had a good start. UCD has just appointed a new Professor of Performance Science, Giuseppe De Vito, who joined us from the main sports science university in Rome. We also have Dr Brian Caulfield - coming to us from Physiotherapy and Performance Science. There will also be a number of lecturing and laboratory appointments over the next year or two."

A work in process but the endurance required for success is already a proven asset.

Gavin Cummiskey (BA 2001) is a sports journalist with the Irish Times.



Colin Boreham

SPORTS