



Team Ireland Review

2022 Winter Olympic Games, Beijing

**Review conducted on behalf of the Olympic Federation of
Ireland**

By

Teneo

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The 2022 Winter Olympic Games took place in Beijing, China from 4th – 20th February. Despite significant challenges and uncertainties caused by Covid when it came to qualification and training/preparation Team Ireland qualified six athletes which demonstrates the progress that is being made when it comes to Irish athletes competing in Winter Sports at the highest level.

Overall Team Ireland had a successful Winter Olympic Games with most performances on a par with what was expected and two specifically exceeding expectations. When the many disruptions caused by Covid, from qualification to travel to administration issues at the Games and many others, are taken into consideration the Olympic Federation of Ireland should be highly commended for the organisation and structures that were put in place to ensure athletes and support staff were protected from many of these disruptions.

This review identifies and recognises the many positive aspects from the OFI/Team Ireland Winter Olympic programme while it also identifies areas for improvement and key learnings. Many of the recommendations set out in this document can be implemented relatively easily and at low cost and have the ability to make significant improvements for the coming cycle and so continuing to drive progression of Team Ireland when it comes to Winter Sports.

The 'team spirit' engendered by the Olympic Federation of Ireland, and particularly the Chef de Mission, was called out by all athletes and support staff involved and overall it was a very enjoyable and memorable Games for all involved with very encouraging results secured.

Introduction

This report is a review of Team Ireland's programme leading up to and at the 2022 Winter Olympic Games; it presents key findings from qualitative and quantitative research conducted amongst athletes, support staff and certain NGBs and recommendations arising from these findings.

Athlete performances

The performances of the six Irish athletes at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games are set out in the tables below. Clear performance targets for individuals and Team Ireland were not evident and so measuring success specifically against objectives is difficult however it is generally accepted that Team Ireland's performance was on a par with, and in the case of two athletes exceeded, expectations.

Alpine Skiing results

Athlete	Event	Run 1	Run 2		Total		
		Time	Rank	Time	Rank	Time	Rank
	Men's combined	1:45.16	14	52.58	12	2:37.74	12

Jack Gower	Men's downhill	N/A		1:47.61		31	
	Men's giant slalom	1:08.30	31	1:12.26	25	2:20.56	25
	Men's super-G	N/A		DNF			
Tess Arbez	Women's giant slalom	DNF		Did not advance			
	Women's slalom	1:07.83	55	1:06.78	48	2:14.61	48
	Women's super-G	N/A		1:25.18		42	

Cross Country Skiing results

Athlete	Event	Classical		Freestyle		Total		
		Time	Rank	Time	Rank	Time	Deficit	Rank
Thomas Hjalmar Westgård	Men's 15 km classical	N/A				40:01.5	+2:06.7	14
	Men's 30 km skiathlon	43:03.8	42	41:51.7	42	1:25:29.8	+9:20.0	43
	Men's 50 km freestyle	N/A				1:15:59.0	+4:26.3	29

Freestyle Skiing Halfpipe

Athlete	Event	Qualification				Final					
		Run 1		Run 2		Run 1		Run 2		Run 3	
		Points	Rank	Points	Rank	Points	Rank	Points	Rank	Points	Rank
Brendan Newby	Men's halfpipe	10.75	21	47.00	20	Did not advance					

Luge

Athlete	Event	Run 1		Run 2		Run 3		Run 4		Total	
		Time	Rank	Time	Rank	Time	Rank	Time	Rank	Time	Rank
Elsa Desmond	Women's singles	1:01.608	33	1:03.857	34	1:02.254	33	Did not advance		3:07.719	33

Snowboarding Half-pipe

Athlete	Event	Qualification				Final				
		Run 1	Run 2	Best	Rank	Run 1	Run 2	Run 3	Best	Rank
Seamus O'Connor	Men's halfpipe	57.00	10.25	57.00	15	Did not advance				

METHODOLOGY

Research Overview

It was agreed with the Olympic Federation of Ireland that Teneo's research would take a two pronged approach; quantitative research through a survey conducted on Survey Monkey followed by one to one interviews with all athletes, support staff and some relevant NGBs involved in Beijing 2022.

Quantitative research

Nancy Chillingworth created a survey that consisted of 19 questions for the support staff and 17 questions for the athletes. This was put up on Survey Monkey and issued to all support staff and athletes by Teneo via email.

This questionnaire was responded to by 11 of the 12 support staff involved (excluding Peter Sherrard and Nancy Chillingworth) and all six athletes.

Qualitative research

Following the initial survey, Teneo then contacted all athletes, support staff and two National Governing Bodies with a view to conducting a one to one interview to get their experience of the Games and the preparation around same.

An interview guide was created by Teneo and approved by the OFI with one specific for athletes and one specific for the support staff.

All interviews were carried out remotely via Zoom/Teams with the exception of in person meetings with Peter Sherrard, Nancy Chillingworth and Heather Boyle.

Experience of/at the Games

This was an unusual Games as a result of the Covid restrictions and as such was potentially a very different experience to other Games and tour events in more regular times. However, the consistent feedback from the athletes, coaches and support staff was that it was a very enjoyable experience.

It appears that there was an excellent atmosphere across the team with all reporting good relationships and a strong team spirit. This was a feature of the planning and preparation phase and one of the key areas of focus during the holding camp phase which seems to have worked well when it came to arrival at the Games itself. The relatively small size of the group is conducive to achieving this and it is clear a strong bond was forged in the lead up to and during the Games.

The survey results indicate that the overall experience was rated as a positive and enjoyable one. This was also referenced in the subsequent interviews with athletes, coaches, and support staff. Given the Covid restrictions and the potential for the Games experience to be negatively impacted, this is a significant finding. The creation of a strong team spirit and building an enjoyable atmosphere within the group is something that should be built upon and replicated in future Games.

The team was split into two groups due to the separation of events across two villages, however this did not prevent a unified spirit across Team Ireland. Everyone went out of their way to visibly support each when competing and this was appreciated by all.

Equally, the athletes were highly complementary about how the OFI staff understood the atmosphere and got the balance just right in terms of having fun whilst being serious about competing in the Games. Indeed, some athletes went as far as to say they 'loved working with the OFI at the Games' and the Chef de Mission and the rest of the OFI staff allowed them 'be ourselves'.

The planning and preparation around logistics and operations was highly rated by all. There was little or no issues identified in this regard which given the complications related to Covid protocols is a significant achievement. The operations were described as very smooth and efficient. For example, the speed of booking the charter flight to transport the team from the Holding Camp to the Games meant that Team Ireland did not have some of the travel challenges other nations encountered in getting from training camps to Beijing.

From an operational perspective the significant workload in the pre-Games period for Snowsports, which was exacerbated by the impact of Covid 19 and appeals processes, placed a high degree of strain on the NGB. While this did not impact at the front-end for athletes and staff involved in the Games, it came at some cost to the organisation which is entirely voluntary in structure.

A nomination and selection issue arose between Snowsports Ireland and the OFI which resulted in a costly appeal process. It is the view of Snowsports Ireland that this was due to lack of clear communication and following of processes by the OFI as well as a lack of clear understanding of the specific sport. It is the view of the OFI that the athletes in question were eligible for the Long List and so deserved a place on it. This is a cause of friction between the two organisations and needs to be resolved.

Overall, communications were well managed and the flow of information was well rated. People generally felt 'in the loop' in terms of what was happening at all times and this was a further reflection of the positive relationships created within the group during the Games. The only comments for improvement in terms of communications related to the need for regular communication in the early stages of planning and preparation pre-Games to ensure alignment of approach, philosophy, and identification of any relevant issues to be addressed.

One area that was a disappointment during the Games was the lack of coverage for Team Ireland as a result of the decision for the national broadcaster not to attend the Games. This had two major consequences. Firstly, it meant that the level of visibility for the Irish athletes was reduced considerably at home. Secondly, it places a major strain on the staff on the ground at the Games to manage the daily activities as well as trying to cover the media demands and ensure some level of coverage. Combining the level of workload with the time difference to home meant on many days the team were working very late into the night to ensure adequate coverage and updates were being sent back home to generate some media

coverage and reporting. This is a major concern if the national broadcaster continues with the policy of not covering the Winter Games on an ongoing basis.

In summary, this was a positive and enjoyable experience for all involved. Everyone came away from the Games with fond memories which is how it should be. Olympiads are special moments in the life of any involved.

KEY FINDINGS

1. General

- The level of planning and preparation put into these Games by the Olympic Federation of Ireland staff was of the highest standard
- Athletes and support staff were listened to and had a 'voice' when needed throughout the preparation and time at the Games. The welfare of athletes and support staff was of paramount importance throughout
- The majority of athletes and support staff felt that there was a compelling vision for the programme however none were aware of any specific performance targets set
- All athletes and support staff cited the 'team spirit' as being amongst the best they had ever experienced
- All athletes cited strong support from the Olympic Federation of Ireland across all elements

2. Pre-Games

Qualification and selection

- The qualification process differs depending on the sport however the Olympic Federation of Ireland had a clear nomination and selection process in place for team members from the outset
- An issue arose with the nomination process when two extra places became available in cross country skiing because of Thomas Westgard's qualification. The manner in which the non-nomination of these athletes, and the subsequent appeal process, took place resulted in a lengthy and costly appeal. Each party needs to look at their role in the process in order to understand how this dispute could, and should, be avoided in future
- Snowsports Ireland has cited lack of clear communication and following of agreed processes as the root of this issue and has questioned how clearly the OFI understand their sport. This has caused strain on the relationship between the OFI and Snowsports Ireland and needs to be resolved.
- An athlete was brought into the system from another country's Olympic system with six months to go to the Games. Whilst this is understandable from a performance perspective it was a factor in the subsequent appeal regarding selection and in future it would be good to align on policy in this regard further out from the Games so all parties are clear on the policy.
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The pre-Games camp

- The Pre-Games camp was excellent overall. It gave athletes and support staff the chance to get to know one another and really foster a sense of team spirit from the outset. Overall the access to training facilities was very good however there was some issues with transport and access to ski facilities due to Covid.
- It is acknowledged that the Winter Olympic Games has a very wide range of sports, with very different requirements, and some compromise is required when sourcing a venue for a pre-Games camp in order to facilitate as many sports as possible to as high a standard as possible. Equally it is acknowledged that Covid requirements created a number of complications
- The Pre-Games camp assisted greatly with administrative work around Covid requirements that had to be completed in the lead up to the Games
- Having a doctor present at the pre-Games camp was of benefit, particularly when it came to Covid
- The Pre-Games camp manager would benefit from a recce and to be involved in all aspects of planning for the camp from the start
- The OFI zoom series was of some benefit but not all athletes attended the sessions. Of those who did attend the sessions they said it gave them a very good sense of what to expect in Beijing, particularly with respect to Covid

Preparation for athletes and support staff

- Logistical preparation by the Olympic Federation of Ireland and communication in the lead up to the Games was excellent in general
- All six winter Olympic athletes representing Ireland are based outside of Ireland, as are the majority of the coaches, so there was a large variance in the standard of training and preparation. Some athletes had a close relationship with their coaches whereas others had not met their coach before the Games which does not lend itself to a High Performance environment
- As the athletes are overseas they cannot directly benefit from services on offer from the Institute of Sport and funding is not available for athletes to source their own sports science support overseas
- In general, athletes felt they had sufficient training facilities and competition in the lead up to the Games. For Luge it was cited that the athlete was in too much competition, over training, ahead of the Games however it was in order to get access to a track and Covid also had an impact
- Getting into a 'partnership' with another nation for preparation and training in the lead up to the Games was cited as one of the key reasons for Jack Gower's success. This partnership enabled access to the highest standards of facilities, training programmes, coaches, training partners success and ultimately a high performance environment

3. During the Games

- Most athletes were well prepared going to the Games in terms of fitness and readiness to compete. One athlete had limited opportunities in terms of pre-Games competition and training for a variety of different reasons while another athlete had an injury that impacted their preparation in the lead up to the Games.
- Overall performances were in general on a par with what was expected across the squad and that reflects the fact that Winter Games is becoming a more serious programme and Ireland is starting to show progress and make strides in this area with most athletes reaching their potential
- Two athletes (Thomas Westgard and Jack Gower) had exceptional results and the reasons cited for Thomas's result was that he was very well prepared and his coach and support team were excellent, while one of the key reasons cited for Jack's success was the Swiss partnership that provided a high performance environment when preparing for the Games
- The standard of coaches that travelled to the Games was mixed when it comes to high performance standards. Some coaches were world class however some coaches, two specifically, had no previous experience at Olympic Games and limited experience in coaching of that particular sport
- Having a physio present was of major benefit to all athletes, while further medical staff were available remotely
- The physio cited the distance between athlete villages was significant and flagged that the car she had was imperative
- Communications was very good at the Games. The WhatsApp group proved very useful for all
- The 'team room' at the Games was very beneficial for administrative purposes but also for athletes and support staff to interact and socialise during down time
- It was accepted by all that the overall 'Olympic experience' was hampered because of Covid. This is a factor outside direct control of the Olympic Federation of Ireland but it was agreed by all that anything the OFI could control in relation to Covid was done to the highest standard
- Media coverage of Team Ireland during the Games was limited for a variety of reasons but a major reason was that RTE took the decision not to send a team to cover the Games. This added extra pressure to the OFI team on the ground in Beijing who were tasked with trying to generate content to supply to media.

4. Post-Games

- Two athletes specifically cited finding the two weeks immediately post-Games difficult but did not know of services available ie Sports Psychologist to help
- The Ball was an excellent addition and gave athletes the chance to really celebrate their achievements together

5. Logistics, administration, kit

- A number of challenges existed as a result of Covid but these were overcome through excellent organisation across the board, and particularly from the Chef de Mission
- There were mixed feelings on the kit but no major performance issues overall. Specifically some athletes and support staff cited that previous kits had been warmer, some required more sizes, some had more technical requirements for their specific sports
- An issue arose with transportation of the technical kit whereby there was a deadline for the transportation of bulky training equipment (training gates) which the OFI were not aware of. Once the OFI became aware of this it was too late to send out. This could be addressed in future through earlier planning and clearer communication between OFI and the experts within each of the sports/disciplines.
- The support staffs' strong contacts within the IOC from previous Games really assisted with some logistical issues at the Games
- Travel arrangements were as good as could be expected with Covid and all ran very smoothly. Swiss Air were excellent to fly with
- All members of the support staff were very clear on their roles and any issues that arose were dealt with in a solutions focused manner

RECOMMENDATIONS

Nomination and Selection criteria

1. In order to ensure clear nomination criteria that is understood by all stakeholders, specifically athletes and their coaches, it is important that all stakeholders fully understand the principals behind the criteria and the process, as well as the actual policy.
2. Should a nomination or selection dispute, or the makings of a potential dispute, arise in future the agreed appeal process in place through the SDSI Olympic Tribunal should be followed and all parties need to fully understand, and agree to, this process from the outset.

High performance preparation

Athletes

3. Once an athlete has been named on the Long List for the Winter Olympic Games it is recommended that preparation check-ins with a relevant member of the OFI are scheduled to ensure that the athletes are preparing in a high performance environment and to understand where/if further assistance could be provided at an early stage in the preparation process.

4. Consider the introduction of analytical services to impact on training and preparation and then to assist with performance when at the Games

Coaches and support staff

5. Criteria for coaches and support staff to travel to the Games should be established once the team has been finalised. This criteria needs to look at the needs of the athletes as a team, as opposed to individual athletes, and understand where synergies can be created from the outset so that accreditation can be maximised to deliver the highest level of support to all athletes.
6. A physio in attendance as part of this support staff is imperative.

Partnerships with other countries

7. Jack Gower has cited his partnership with the Swiss team as a key reason for his success. Athletes who would benefit from this type of partnership should be identified and opportunities to create relevant partnerships with other countries should be identified and pursued where possible.

Pre-Games Camp

8. Overall the pre-Games camp was a major success and should be replicated in future. This camp should be booked as early as possible to maximise opportunities to access to facilities of the highest standards
9. The camp manager should complete a recce ahead of the camp and should be involved in the planning process from the very beginning. This will ensure the camp manager is clear on all responsibilities that will lie with them in the lead up to, and during, the camp.

During the Games

Performance targets

10. Setting and communicating clear performance targets for the team and making all athletes are aware of these, as opposed to just their own individual performance targets, will allow for greater understanding of what success looks like for the team, potentially drive higher performance standards and further drive the sense of team spirit.

Athlete village logistics

11. A clear understanding of the location of athlete villages is required in order to determine exact requirements for specific support staff. Specifically, if the villages are more than one hour's drive away from each other then a second physio should be brought to the Games to ensure all athletes have access to this service. This recommendation is on the basis that accreditation allows for a second physio and it does not compromise other support staff travelling i.e. coaches.

Communication

12. Communication in Beijing was strong and specifically the use of WhatsApp group was cited as being very useful by a number of athletes and support staff and this should be used again at Games in future for group communications.

Post Games

Post-Games transition support

13. Two athletes specifically cited struggling in the weeks immediately after the Games. While a post-Games support plan was in place where the athletes had an opportunity to speak with a sport psychologist, it is recommended that the athletes are reminded of this service, and encouraged to use it, either by a text or phone call from a member of the support staff who has a strong relationship with them from the Games.

General

Stakeholder structure

14. As Ireland's credentials in winter Olympic sports continues to progress, consideration should be given to how the OFI works with, and assists, the National Governing Bodies in winter sports to ensure continued and always improving high performance standards. These NGBs tend to be volunteer led with relatively small teams and consideration needs to be given to the pressures that may arise on NGBs as specific sports grow and gain further success.
15. Consideration should be given to shared administrative resource support across the disciplines which would alleviate some extra admin work and also ensure key learnings are shared across these sports
16. The OFI should work closely with the sector to ensure the Winter Games strategy is implemented and strong alignment across the sector is created in terms of what is trying to be achieved

Milano-Cortina and future planning

17. Begin planning for Milano-Cortina as early as possible which would include creating a communications process with key bodies to ensure ongoing dialogue on all areas throughout the cycle
18. Consider challenges associated with distances between venues in Milano-Cortina which need to be addressed to minimise strain on resources and logistics
19. Leverage the 'technical' expertise of key individuals from the support staff in the planning phase to ensure all bases are covered in terms of athlete/coach needs, equipment and discipline specific requirements
20. Identify any potential 'make a difference' actions that could make a significant performance impact for a relatively small spend e.g. purchase of Luge sled
21. As Ireland continues to build progress in Winter Sports at a world class standard, a strategy for talent succession/planning for the next generation of athletes should be considered by the OFI. As part of this consideration should be given to driving profile of the athletes once they have qualified and are selected which would assist with recruitment to these minority sports but also around driving marketing and commercial support
22. All athletes cited that funding would be of significant assistance to them. There is a strong argument for Winter Olympic athletes to be part of the Carding System and OFI should advocate or provide support for this