



TEAM IRELAND

GUIDE TO MILANO
CORTINA 2026



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MESSAGE FROM THE CEO AND PRESIDENT

Congratulations to the athletes and coaches who will represent Ireland at the Milano Cortina 2026 Olympic Winter Games. Selection for the Olympic Games is the pinnacle of sporting achievement, and we are immensely proud of the four athletes who will wear the green on the world stage this February; Anabelle Zurbay (Alpine Skiing), Ben Lynch (Freestyle Halfpipe Skiing), Cormac Comerford (Alpine Skiing), and Thomas Maloney Westgaard (Cross Country Skiing).

Ireland's presence at the Winter Olympic Games continues to reflect the ambition, resilience and determination of our winter sports community. While the team may be small in size, the significance of representing Ireland at the Olympic Games is profound. Each athlete joins a small and distinguished group that has earned the right to compete at the highest level of international sport. Since 1992, thirty-three athletes have competed for Team Ireland at the Winter Olympic Games, and we look forward to adding some new names to this list.

Delivering an Olympic campaign is a collective effort. We want to extend our sincere thanks to our sponsors and partners for their continued support, and to Sport Ireland. Their commitment plays a crucial role in contributing to the Irish athletes preparation and performances on the global stage. Over the Olympic cycle they have invested €200,000 into winter sports, and through these Games, we continue our partnership with Sport Ireland Institute, benefiting from their performance support.

We also acknowledge the dedication of our coaches, support staff and the wider team behind the athletes, whose expertise and commitment underpin every performance. The road to Milano Cortina has required perseverance and adaptability, and our athletes have demonstrated outstanding professionalism and resilience throughout their journeys.

As Team Ireland takes to the snow in Northern Italy, they do so with the pride and support of the entire nation behind them. We wish each athlete every success as they pursue their Olympic ambitions and inspire the next generation of Irish winter Olympic hopefuls.



Peter Sherrard
Chief Executive



Lochlann Walsh
President

MESSAGE FROM THE CHEF DE MISSION



The road to the Milano Cortina 2026 Olympic Winter Games has been defined by exceptional standards and relentless ambition. Over recent seasons, Irish winter athletes have competed in some of the most demanding international environments in sport, raising the level of performance required simply to qualify for these Games. To stand on an Olympic start line is never accidental; it is the result of years of discipline, sacrifice and the courage to measure oneself against the very best in the world. These athletes are the best of us.

This team marks an important moment in the story of Irish winter sport. Three athletes – Anabelle Zurbay, Cormac Comerford and Ben Lynch – are set to become Olympians for the first time, fulfilling a dream shaped by countless hours of training, setbacks overcome, and belief sustained by those closest to them. Alongside them, Thomas Maloney Westgård will become Ireland's second-ever three-time Winter Olympian; an achievement that speaks to his continued excellence and an enduring commitment to performance at the highest level.

Behind every Olympian stands a wider team. Families who have supported long journeys across borders and seasons, coaches who have shaped potential into performance, and support staff who ensure that every detail is aligned with the pursuit of excellence. Their contribution is inseparable from the performances we will see on the snow in Italy.

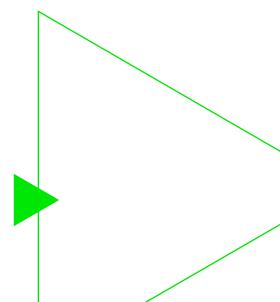
Milano Cortina will present unique challenges, with competition for Team Ireland spread across four distinct clusters and demanding logistical realities. Yet, regardless of distance between venues, our team culture will remain united. Connection, trust and high standards will define how we operate and how we perform.

As Chef de Mission, it is a privilege to accompany this group on their Olympic journey. They arrive at these Games prepared, tested and ready to compete with confidence. In Milano Cortina, Team Ireland will strive not only for results, but for performances that honour the journey, inspire those at home, and reflect the very highest ideals of sport.



Nancy Chillingworth

Team Ireland Chef de Mission, Milano Cortina 2026



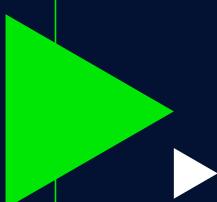


GAMES SCHEDULE



Date	Start Time (Local*)	Sport	Event	Athlete	Venue
6 Feb	20:00	Ceremony	Opening Ceremony	All	Various
7 Feb	11:30	Alpine Skiing	Downhill	Cormac Comerford	Bormio
8 Feb	12:30	Cross Country Skiing	10km + 10km Skiathlon	Thomas Maloney Westgård	Predazzo
11 Feb	11:30	Alpine Skiing	Super-G	Cormac Comerford	Bormio
13 Feb	12:00	Cross Country Skiing	10km Free	Thomas Maloney Westgård	Predazzo
14 Feb	10:00	Alpine Skiing	Giant Slalom Run 1 & 2	Cormac Comerford	Bormio
15 Feb	10:00	Alpine Skiing	Giant Slalom Run 1 & 2	Anabelle Zurbay	Cortina
16 Feb	10:00	Alpine Skiing	Slalom Run 1 & 2	Cormac Comerford	Bormio
18 Feb	10:00	Alpine Skiing	Slalom Run 1 & 2	Anabelle Zurbay	Cortina
19 Feb	10:30	Freestyle	Halfpipe Qualification	Ben Lynch	Livigno
20 Feb	19:30	Freestyle	Halfpipe Final	Ben Lynch	Livigno
21 Feb	11:00	Cross Country	50km classic	Thomas Maloney Westgård	Predazzo
22 Feb	20:00	Ceremony	Closing Ceremony	All	Verona

* Italy is 1 hour ahead of Irish time





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HISTORY OF TEAM IRELAND AT WINTER OLYMPICS

Team Ireland first competed at the Winter Olympic Games in Albertville, France in 1992, when Ireland entered two bobsleigh teams. Summer Olympians Terry McHugh and Pat McDonagh finished 32nd in the 2 Man event, and Gerry Macken and Malachy Sheridan finished 38th in the same event.

Terry McHugh is the Irish athlete who to date has competed in the most Olympic Games, having competed in four summer games in the Javelin, and two winter games in the bobsleigh.

The first female to compete at the Winter Olympics was Tamsen McGarry in Alpine Skiing, in Salt Lake City in 2002. This was the same Games where Ireland achieved the top result, when Clifton Wrottesley finished just outside the medals in fourth place in the Skeleton.

TEAM IRELAND WINTER OLYMPIANS

1992 Albertville, France (4)

Bobsleigh

Terry McHugh & Pat McDonagh – 2-man Bobsleigh

Gerry Macken & Malachy Sheridan – 2-man Bobsleigh

1998 Nagano, Japan (6)

Pauli Schwarzacher-Joyce – Alpine Skiing

Terry McHugh & Jeff Pamplin – 2-man Bobsleigh (27th)

Peter Donohue & Simon Linscheid – 2-man Bobsleigh

Pamplin, McHugh, Linscheid & Gary Power – 4-man Bobsleigh

2002 Salt Lake City, Utah (6)

Clifton Wrottesley – Skeleton

Pauli Schwarzacher-Joyce – Alpine Skiing

Tamsen McGarry – Alpine Skiing

Peter Donohue & Paul Kiernan – 2-man bobsleigh

Paul O'Connor – Cross-Country Skiing

2006 Turin Sestriere (4)

Thos Foley – Alpine Skiing

Kirsty McGarry – Alpine Skiing

Rory Morrish – Cross-Country Skiing

David Connolly – Skeleton



2010 Vancouver/Whistler (6)

Shane O'Connor – Alpine Skiing
Kirsty McGarry – Alpine Skiing
Aoife Hoey & Claire Bergin – 2-woman Bobsleigh
Peter-James Barron – Cross-Country Skiing
Patrick Shannon – Skeleton

2014 Sochi Russia (5)

Seamus O'Connor (16) – Snowboard
Conor Lyne – Alpine Skiing
Florence Bell – Alpine Skiing
Jan Rossiter – Cross-Country Skiing
Sean Greenwood – Skeleton

2018 PyeongChang (5)

Tess Arbez – Alpine Skiing
Patrick McMillan – Alpine Skiing
Seamus O'Connor – Halfpipe Snowboard
Brendan Newby – Freestyle Skiing (Halfpipe)
Thomas Maloney Westgård – Cross Country Skiing

2022 Beijing (6)

Tess Arbez – Alpine Skiing
Jack Gower – Alpine Skiing
Elsa Desmond – Luge
Seamus O'Connor – Halfpipe Snowboard
Brendan Newby – Freestyle Skiing (Halfpipe)
Thomas Maloney Westgård – Cross-Country Skiing

2026 Milano Cortina (4)

Cormac Comerford – Alpine Skiing
Ben Lynch – Freestyle Skiing (Halfpipe)
Thomas Maloney Westgård – Cross-Country Skiing
Anabelle McCarthy Zurbay – Alpine Skiing



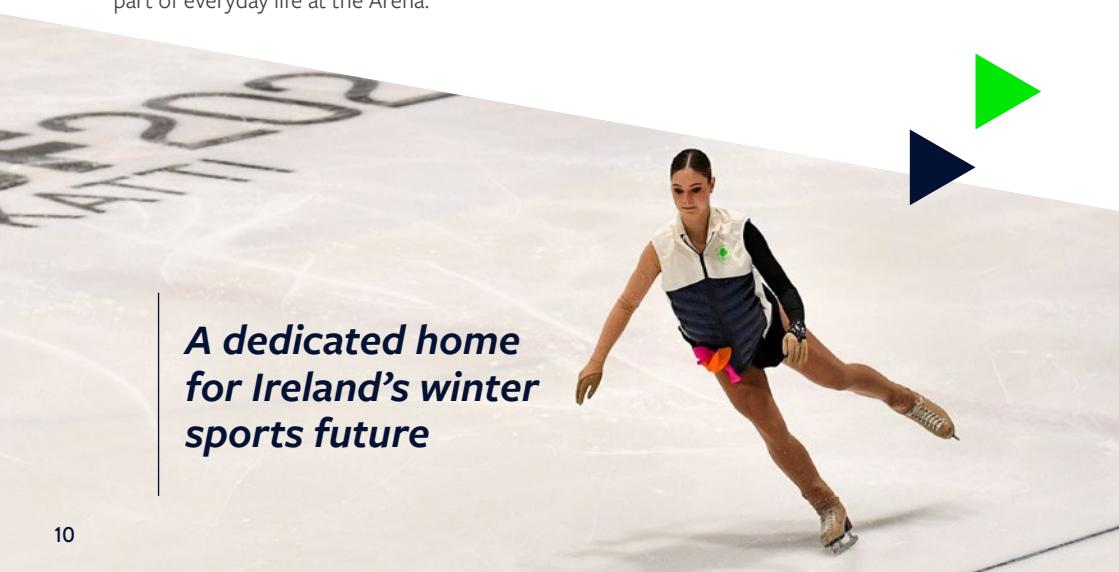
PRIME ARENA: AN ICE DREAM FOR IRELAND

For a country that has consistently punched above its weight on the world sporting stage, Ireland's relationship with winter sports has been defined less by infrastructure than by ambition, with athletes forging international careers despite never having access to a permanent Olympic-standard ice facility at home. As the Winter Olympics move to Milano-Cortina for its 25th edition, that reality is beginning to change, and with it, the future of winter sports in Ireland.

Prime Arena Holdings plans for a new multi-purpose arena (the Arena) in Dublin represents more than new infrastructure; it signals a turning point. For the first time, Ireland will have a national home for winter ice sports, with two Olympic-sized rinks designed to support both elite performance and everyday participation including meeting rooms and elite athlete gym facilities. This dual approach matters. International experience shows that high-performance success is built on broad, accessible grassroots foundations. When facilities are available year-round, pathways open, not just for the few who already have access, but for the many who have never had the chance to step onto the ice.

A facility based south of the border will dramatically reduce the barriers that currently exist: the financial burden of training abroad, the difficulty of talent identification, and the challenge of sustaining participation at youth level. With consistent access to ice, more athletes could realistically aspire to represent Ireland, and more families could see winter sport as a viable, local option rather than a distant dream.

Crucially, the Arena is designed with community at its heart. Alongside elite competition, the second rink is intended as a permanent public facility with 2,500 hours of public skating per year, supporting schools, clubs, and community groups. Learn-to-skate programmes, grassroots ice hockey, figure skating, and inclusive sessions for para-athletes would become part of everyday life at the Arena.



***A dedicated home
for Ireland's winter
sports future***

That is why the project has secured the formal endorsement of the Olympic Federation of Ireland (OFI) and all six Winter Sport National Governing Bodies, following extensive consultation through the Winter Sports Working Group. The Arena may enable Ireland to host international competitions for the first time and aligns with Sport Ireland's High-Performance Strategy as well as the OFI's Winter Sports Strategy. Crucially, it will give Irish athletes an option to train, develop, and progress domestically rather than relying exclusively on overseas pathways.

Peter Sherrard, OFI CEO has commended the plan saying, “*the development of a permanent ice facility as proposed by Prime Arena Holdings is a strategic priority for the OFI and would represent a significant step forward for winter sports in our country.*”

As Ireland looks ahead to Milan and beyond, the Arena offers a compelling vision: a future where winter sports are no longer peripheral, where athletes in the Republic of Ireland could train at home, and where communities can share in the excitement, accessibility, and joy of ice. It is an ice dream rooted firmly in opportunity, for sport, for participation, and for Ireland itself.

DID YOU KNOW?

Dublin is currently the only European capital city without a permanent ice facility. Prime Arena will change that with two Olympic size ice rinks, establishing Ireland's new hub for winter sports.



Building Ireland's Pathway to the World Stage

Prime Arena delivers on all four pillars of the OFI Winter Sports Strategy

-  **Facility Development** Two Olympic size rinks
-  **Visibility & Growth** National, international and community events
-  **Athlete Pathways & Participation** Year round public access, including 2,500 hours of public ice time, a dedicated training base for elite athletes
-  **Governance & Partnership** Collaboration with national partners



TEAM BEHIND THE TEAM

HQ

Nancy Chillingworth – Chef de Mission
Martin Burke – Deputy Chef de Mission
Ciara McCallion – Head of Performance Support/Physiotherapist
Dr. Frank O’Leary – Chief Medical Officer
Heather Boyle – Head of Communications

Alpine Skiing

Giorgio Marchesini – Male Coach
Geertje Derkson – Female Coach

Cross Country Skiing

Hans Kristian Standheim – Team Leader
Markus Forsberg – Sport Support
Christian Nordkvelde – Ski Technician

Freestyle Skiing

Rex Thomas – Coach

Pre-Games

Linda O’Reilly – Camp Manager
Mark MacNamee – Sport Services Manager
Suzanne Casey – Social Media Executive

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GAMES VENUES

At the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games, competitions will be spread across four distinct “clusters” across Northern Italy, with the athletes spread across six separate athlete villages depending on their sport, presenting somewhat of a logistical challenge. In advance of the Games the athletes and support staff gathered together at the Team Ireland HQ base in Bolzano.

The Games have been organised in this way around the geography of the region. Italy's winter sports infrastructure is naturally spread throughout the Alps and Dolomites rather than concentrated in a single city. Additionally, a core principle of these Games is also sustainability and cost control, so existing resorts and venues are being used; over 90% of the venues are existing or temporary, not new builds.

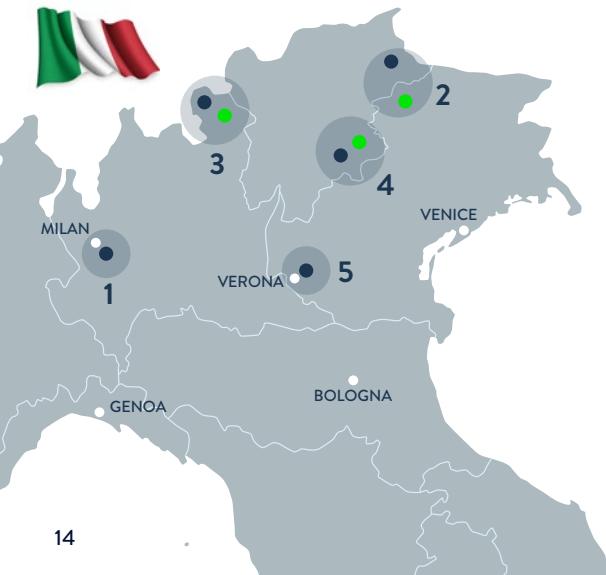
The Milano Cluster will host skating and the Opening Ceremony in the iconic San Siro Stadium. Competitions in figure skating, ice dance, and short track will all take place in this Cluster, as well as hockey. Ireland will not be represented here.

In the Cortina Cluster, women's alpine skiing takes centre stage alongside curling and sliding sports. Ireland's youngest ever Irish athlete to compete at the Games in Alpine Skiing Anabelle Zurbay will race here. The Anterselva/Antholz which will host biathlon is also included here.

The Val di Fiemme Cluster is home to cross-country skiing, and third time Winter Olympian Thomas Maloney Westgård will race here in three events over the course of the Games. Nordic Combined and Ski Jumping also take place in this cluster.

The Valtellina Cluster, centred on separate villages in Livigno and Bormio, will stage men's alpine and freestyle skiing and snowboarding. In Bormio, Ireland's male alpine skier Cormac Comerford will make his Olympic debut on what is regarded as one of the most demanding slopes on the circuit. In Livigno fellow Irish Olympic debutant Ben Lynch will compete in freestyle skiing halfpipe.

Verona will host the Closing Ceremony in its famous Roman amphitheatre and all of Team Ireland will attend together.



1 Milano Cluster

Hockey, Speed Skating, Figure Skating, Short Track, Opening Ceremony

2 Cortina Cluster

Curling, **Women's Alpine Skiing**, Bobsled, Luge, Skeleton, Biathlon



3 Valtellina Cluster

Men's Alpine Skiing, Ski Mountaineering, Snowboard, **Freestyle Skiing**



4 Val di Fiemme Cluster

Cross Country Skiing, Nordic Combined, Ski Jumping



5 Verona

Closing Ceremony

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FIAT



Team Ireland

ALPINE SKIING



ALPINE SKIING EXPLAINED

The birth of modern alpine (also known as downhill) skiing is often dated back to the 1850s when Norwegian legend Sondre Norheim popularised skis with curved sides and bindings with stiff heel bands made of willow. Downhill skiing now provides the marquee events of the Games, even though cross-country skiing was included first. Today there are five different Olympic alpine events, all of whom involve making turns around gates on marked, pisted course. Missing a gate results in automatic disqualification.

Downhill is known as the Formula 1 of skiing as it involves the longest and steepest courses with the least gates, but still involves sharp turns and big jumps which sees athletes reach speeds of close to 100mph. Super-G is the other 'big speed' event but involves less gates and more dramatic drops.

Slalom and Giant Slalom are the technical events as they involve more gates and turns on shorter courses. Slalom has the most closely spaced gates (between 40 and 75), and Giant Slalom has between 30 to 65 gates. Team Combined sees two athletes representing the same country race in one discipline each (downhill and slalom).

FORMAT

In speed events athletes just get one run and the fastest time wins. In technical events athletes get two runs and their combined time is their final score. As a result, if they don't complete their first run they don't get a second. In the second round athletes compete in reverse order on their first round so times so the fastest athlete races last. In the team combined the final ranking is determined by adding the times from both races.



OLYMPIC HISTORY

Alpine skiing (for both genders) debuted in Garmisch-Partenkirchen (Germany) in 1936 in a 'combined' format of Downhill and Slalom. Separate Downhill and Slalom events were not introduced until 1948 and Giant Slalom was added in 1952. The combined event was introduced in 2018.

ANABELLE ZURBAY

Sport: Alpine Skiing

Events: Slalom and Giant Slalom

Age: 17

DOB: 19/12/2008

Background: Anabelle's Grandmother Rosaleen McCarthy Miskella was born and reared in Rosemount, Co.Westmeath before emigrating to the USA. Anabelle lives in Vail, Colorado.

Coaches: Jess Hasslau and Charley Stocker



@anabelle.zurbay

Team Ireland's sole female representative in Milano Cortina will be seventeen year old Alpine skier Anabelle Zurbay, who lives in the world renowned ski town of Vail, in Colorado.

Born the second of two children to Sarah and Dale, the teenager unsurprisingly started skiing at the very young age of two, beginning racing at the age of six, keen to follow in her older brother William's footsteps; himself a very accomplished skier who also represents Ireland when competing.



Anabelle's Grandmother Rosaleen McCarthy Miskella was born and reared in Rosemount, just outside of Moate in Westmeath before heading to Baltimore to study a semester in college at the age of 20. She met Michael Miskella at a college party, the pair married a year later in Ireland before moving back to Green Bay, Wisconsin where Michael was from, and where they still live today. Anabelle's mother Sarah was one of their four children and was herself an international Ski racer, and alongside her husband Dale spent thirty years coaching a ski programme in Minnesota where they lived until their move to Vail in 2019.

Anabelle currently attends the Vail Ski and Snowboard Academy where she balances training and schooling. The school itself is quite unique as the only public school in America that runs a programme like it. Day to day they spend the morning training on the hill for three hours with school in the afternoons, with additional training and racing on the weekends. A keen gymnast also she devotes time to it in the evenings but 'just for fun now', although finds it very helpful in terms of the strength needed for skiing. Alongside that strength as a vital skill needed for her sport she feels Apline Skiing is very much a mental game. "You need lots and lots of confidence, and definitely grit, so much grit - for sure that is key."

Anabelle, who only turned 17 in December will be focusing solely on the technical events at these Games; the Slalom and Giant Slalom. She became eligible to compete at senior level just over a year ago at the age of 16, and while she is young to have qualified for an Olympic Games her mother Sarah says it is not that unusual. Anabelle cites her Dyslexia as her superpower and said she cried 'tears of joy' when selected for Team Ireland.

While not yet on the FIS World Cup circuit Anabelle is ranked in the top 100 in the world for her birth year in Slalom, and notably had three top 12 finishes at the USA Junior National Championships (Under 18) last year in Aspen.

Her proud parents will travel to Italy to watch Anabelle (Annie to them) make her Olympic debut on the famous Olympia delle Tofane slope in Cortina, with her Irish grandmother tuning in from Wisconsin. Many Aunts, Uncles and cousins will also be cheering on from Leixlip, and Moate where Sarah's cousin owns The Pantry bakery.



CORMAC COMERFORD

Sport: Alpine Skiing

Events: Downhill, Super-G, Slalom, Giant Slalom

Age: 29

DOB: 11/09/96

Background: Born in Dublin, lives in Glenageary

Coaches: Giorgio Marchesini and Gareth Reilly



@cormaccomerford

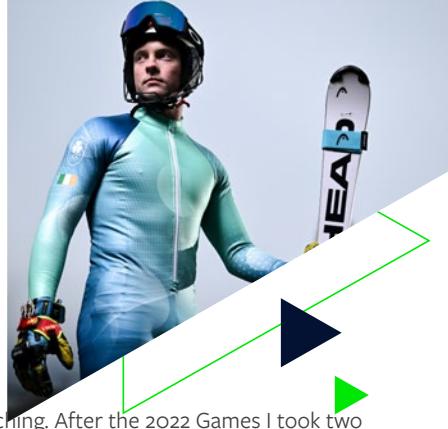
When Dubliner Cormac Comerford takes to the Alpine slopes of Bormio at the 25th Winter Olympiad it will be the realisation of a dream twenty years in the making.

The Glenageary native first encountered the sport by chance at the age of eight. “My Auntie lives in the Kiltinan area so we were close by and just went for a look at the artificial slope for something to do. Somebody convinced us to stick on the long sleeves and long trousers and give it a whack; I was really enthralled by the whole sport. When I was around 10 we would have done a taster ski lesson up in the Ski club there before going on our first ski holiday to Austria, and I’ve been just madly obsessed with it ever since!”

The twenty nine year old went to the Harold National School in Glashule, and then onto Newpark Comprehensive in Blackrock, where he also played lots of rugby and hockey, alongside football and hurling for local club Cuala. All the while he was continuing to ski internationally regularly traveling to France for training before joining a well-established British racing circuit in the Alps. At the age of 16 he actually raced the slope they will be competing on in Bormio; considered the most dangerous downhill slope on the FIS World Cup circuit. For the last number of years he has wintered in the same region in Italy where the Games are taking place, training and competing there.



Regarding Kilternan and the Ski Club of Ireland Comerford feels like he has a lot to thank the racing programme there for. “Ronan and Conor Columb were up there and skiing internationally at the time I started, as well as Shane O’Connor. They really helped drive on those programmes, it was a good time to be at the club and they really fostered the love and the drive for the sport. I was really lucky to have that there because without it I wouldn’t be here.



The last couple of years I’ve been involved up there coaching. After the 2022 Games I took two years away from the sport – I was graduating, I was trying to set up a bit of a life for myself so I was up at the club coaching a lot. They have been really good during qualification; I owe them a lot. It’s kind of full circle. When I joined Shane O’Connor would have been competing at the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver and I remember watching him on the TV imagining skiing like that, so it’s kind of full circle now me going, I’m very proud.”

A graduate of Mechanical Engineering from DIT Cormac has been working full time with Atlantic Projects Company in Limerick for almost two years; a job he got through the Sport Ireland Athlete Friendly Employee Network. While he spends a lot of time working on their various sites around the country, they have also afforded him the necessary time off to secure Olympic qualification, and have been nothing but supportive of his ski career.

Cormac’s preferred alpine event is the slalom but all going well he intends to do all four at the Games; the Slalom, Giant slalom, Super-G, and Downhill. Team Ireland Head Coach Giorgio Marchesini who he has worked with for many years will be by his side in Bormino. “Giorgio has been a huge help really to pull me through, to keep me on skis; it’s been really challenging at times but thanks to a lot of people it’s worked out, and I’m very proud.”

Comerford joined up in a team of four other skiers from emerging nations in Austria this season in preparation for the Games. Collectively known as the ‘Untitled’ Ski team they pool their resources to access regular coaching, physio and other supports, he feels it has pushed him on in training and been beneficial across the board. Having competed at five World Championships in his career with a best of 23rd in 2021, and a top 30 in the European Cup in 2024, racing at the Olympics will be the ‘cherry on the cake’ for the 29-year old Dubliner. Comerford has previously stated a big goal for these Games would be a top 30 finish; something that he thinks would be a great achievement for him.

A sizeable Irish travelling contingent, which Comerford says is ‘growing by the day’, will be in Bormio for the occasion. Led by his mother Anna, dad Lyle, twin brother Lorcan and younger sister Áine, they will all be there to witness everything come full circle when he makes his Olympic debut.

CROSS COUNTRY SKIING



CROSS COUNTRY SKIING EXPLAINED

Cross country skiing is the oldest type of skiing with origins in Norway whose athletes are regarded as the best of the world at it. The word 'ski' is a Norwegian word that comes from the old word 'skid'; a split length of wood and cross-country is often described as 'Nordic skiing'. Originally born as a means of transport in Northern Europe because of the need to travel for long distances across snowy terrain it became a sport in the late 19th century. The skis used are much longer, narrower and lighter than alpine skis and only the tip of the boot is attached to the bindings. It is the original test of speed and endurance raced over steep climbs, fast flats and downhill fields.

FORMAT

Races are run over a variety of distances and styles and first over the finish line wins. In the races with interval starts athletes go out in the wood fighting the clock. There are two very different techniques.

'Classic' cross-country is raced in pre-made snow tracks with a striding, parallel motion.

'Freestyle' involves pushing side-to-side skiing, rather like skating.

The International Ski Federation (FIS) designates which technique will be used for each event (it varies with each edition of the Games) and both techniques must be used during the relay and skiathlon.

In terms of Irish interest the Men's 50km mass start will be raced in the 'Classic' technique at these Games.

At Milano Cortina there will be 12 events (six each for men and women) in 10km Interval Start Free, 10km + 10km Skiathlon, 4 x 7.5km Relay, 50km Mass Start Classic, Sprint Classic and Team Sprint Free.

OLYMPIC HISTORY

Cross-country skiing has been part of the Winter Olympic programme for every Games, beginning with the men's 50km and 18km in France 1924. The first women's event (the 10km) was contested in Oslo in 1952.

THOMAS MALONEY WESTGÅRD

Sport: Cross Country Skiing

Events: 10km (Classic) + 10km (Freestyle) Skiathlon, 10km Freestyle, 50km Classic

Age: 30

DOB: 10/10/95

Background: Norwegian born to Irish mum Celia from Dunmore in County Galway. Lives in Trondheim, Norway

Coach: Hans Kristian Standhjem



@tommaloneywestgard

From the tiny island of Leka off the coast of Norway, which boasts a mere 600 inhabitants, Irish cross country skier Maloney Westgård represents Ireland thanks to his mother Celia Maloney from Dunmore, Co. Galway. Celia moved to Norway over 35 years ago after meeting her husband Ove on a holiday in the Canaries. Ove sadly died from cancer not long after he got to witness Thomas realise a lifelong dream when he made his Olympic debut at the 2018 Games in Pyeongchang. “I was really happy that I could finish the races and that he witnessed that. It was huge for both of us.”

When Thomas takes to the start in Predazzo he will become only the second Irish athlete ever to compete at three Winter Olympic Games alongside snowboarder Seamus O’Connor, something he was unaware of but describes as ‘very cool’ in his characteristically understated way.

Growing up in Norway with cross country skiing the national sport there were no shortage of stars for a young Thomas to watch on TV. However he always found himself wondering why there were no Irish skiers, so thought it would be something to be the first one, and set about achieving that. “The biggest dream for me was to become an Olympian for Ireland and that has been really strong from a young age. It’s the proudest moment of my life to ski for Ireland, especially in the Olympics. I feel the privilege of doing what I love to do, and living my dream.”



Although introduced to skiing in school as a youngster it wasn't until relatively late age of sixteen when he went to a skiing school that he became serious about it. Thomas first represented Ireland in 2015. Over the intervening decade has worked tirelessly to rise through the rankings and record his best ever finish of a remarkable 13th place at the 2025 World Championships in the 50km mass start.

Thomas finished an incredible 14th at the 2022 Olympics Games in Beijing and it was after that he signed with the professional Team Aker Daehlie based in Trondheim, which has been a gamechanger for the thirty year old, and points to why he has doubled his World Cup points in the last two years.

"There are world class skiers on the team such as Andrew Musgrave from the Great Britain team who has been seventh in the Olympics so when you have guys like that training with you on a regular basis you see where the level is – it's a great measurement right there."

Training between 3-5 hours a day would be norm. They do two high altitude training camps a year and have access to enclosed ski tunnels for year round training when snow is scarce. Hans Kristian Standheim is head coach of the pro team and will be by his side in Italy as part of the Irish delegation, with access to key support staff another notable benefit, and crucially a contract with a ski manufacturer ensuring access to ski testers and technicians.

The support of the Flogas Make a Difference programme has been instrumental in allowing him chase the gains when it comes to the equipment. "Equipment is very important in cross country skiing. For example between a very good ski and a medium ski it can easily be a minute over 10km; it's like Formula One really where equipment matters."

Thomas' mum Celia will travel to Italy to watch her son compete, with her siblings and many family he is close to watching on from Galway and Dublin. Of the three events he is set to contest the 50km mass start is his favourite and will be raced in his preferred Classic style also. Nerves are not something he feels and instead says 'I try always to encourage myself to enjoy the moment more. I have this saying that as long as you are improving yourself and become better you are winning, it's a competition against yourself and I guess by taking every step at a time it has got me far really.'



FREESTYLE SKIING



FREESTYLE SKIING EXPLAINED

Freestyle Skiing first emerged in America in the 1960s with the emergence of snow-parks and skiers going off piste to try aerial tricks. Freestyle was recognised as a discipline by the international ski federation (FIS) in 1979 and the first Freestyle World Championships took place in Tignes (France) in 1986. There are seven freestyle disciplines and most are judged on skill, form and flow.

Aerials – Similar to a vault in gymnastics. Skiers perform as many flips and twists as they can off a jump that is 2-4m high that throws them up to 60ft in the air. They are judged on take off, jump form and landing.

Slopestyle – contested over a much longer course with rails and jumps designed to mimic a snow-park, finishing with several big ramps and jumps.

Halfpipe – the skiing version of halfpipe, contested on the same 22 foot high course – a halfpipe of snow, with competitors performing a series of tricks in the air, and judged on amplitude, execution and difficulty.

Big Air – new to the Olympics in 2022. Athletes launch themselves off a very steeply banked and longer ramp so they travel faster and higher.

Ski Cross – the ski version of ‘bordercross’ which is a race, in groups, across a cross-country course. Despite it being a ‘racing’ event it is considered part of freestyle skiing because it incorporated off-slope, varied terrain.

Moguls – In moguls athletes ski down a steep course full of bumps, combining technical turns, jumps, aerial manoeuvres, and speed.

Dual Moguls – In dual moguls, which will debut at these Games two athletes compete against each other on the same track.

FORMAT

In judged events the best of two rounds counts in qualifying and best of three in the final (top 12). In some events the numbers of competitors reduces during each round of the final. Ski Cross, as a race, is simply first across the line and it is raced, in heats, in a knock-out format to a straight final.



OLYMPIC HISTORY

The first Olympic event was moguls in Albertville in 1992 and Aerials followed in 1994. Ski Cross made its Olympic debut in Vancouver in 2010, with Slopestyle and Halfpipe added in 2014. Big Air and Mixed Team Aerials (for teams of four) were new in 2022 with Dual Moguls debuting in Milano-Cortina.



BEN LYNCH

Sport: Freestyle Skiing

Events: Halfpipe

Age: 23

DOB: 08/09/2002

Background: Born in Dublin (Rathmines) and moved to Vancouver aged two. Lives in Calgary, Canada where he trains.

Coach: Rex Thomas



@benlynchh

The youngest of four boys to Irish Dad Kevin and Mum Claire from South Africa, Ben spent his first couple of years in Dublin before the family emigrated to Canada. It was there where he learned to ski on Grouse Mountain close to their family home in Vancouver. His three brothers all skied and he wanted ‘to be cool like them.’

His mum, who he cites as ‘the biggest believer in me from the get go’ put him in the racing programme at the age of six, but he found it restrictive and just not for him. “My original thing that I did was trampoline – that was where this all stemmed from. I had a trampoline in my backyard and I would do corks, and spins and flips and stuff and then I was like why don’t I just do that on skis, and that was how it started.”

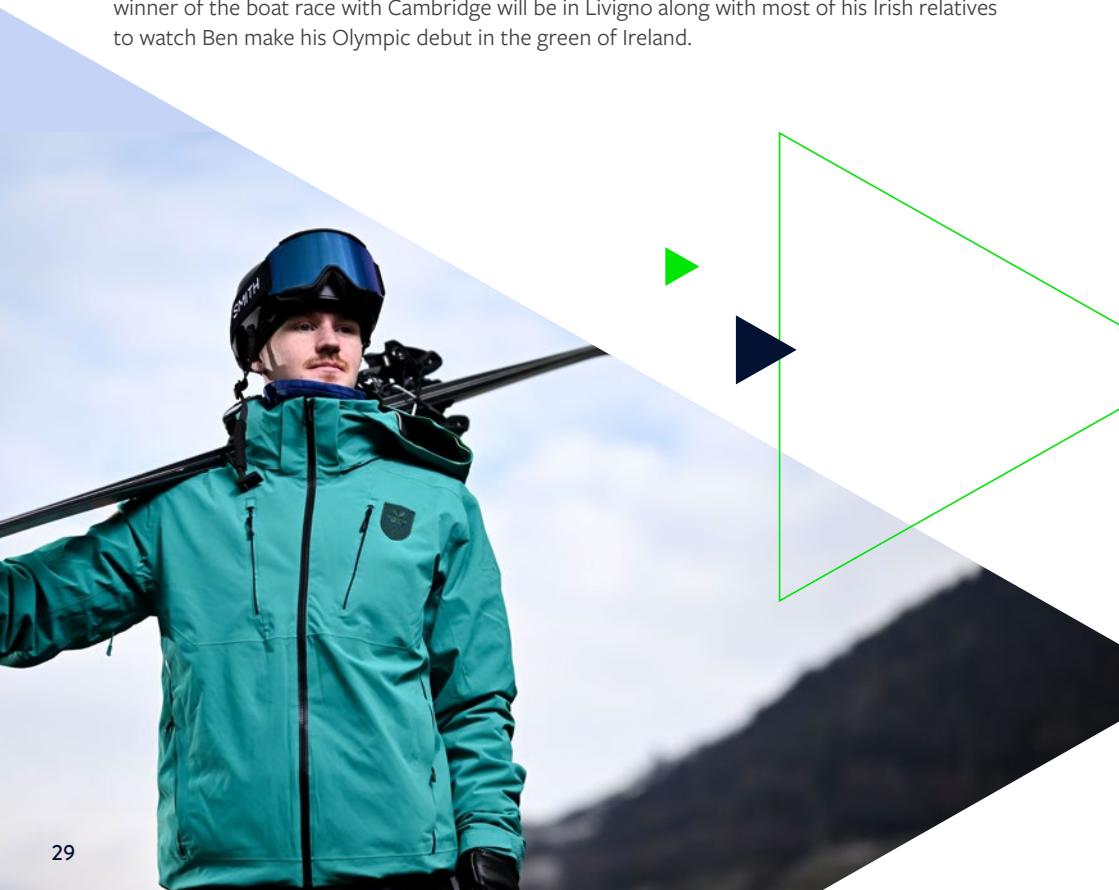
His mum would drive him to the Vancouver Freestyle club on the weekends where it was all ‘jumps and bumps’ and he would spend the day there just freestyle skiing for fun. He started competing at the age of 12 and concentrated on Slope Style and Big Air until he switched to the halfpipe at the age of 19. For halfpipe he trains in Calgary – where the only halfpipe in Canada is, a 12 hour drive from home which means he has had to relocate to pursue his dream. He spent time on the Canadian development team before changing course to Team Ireland last year citing it as a really good opportunity to represent the country where he was born at the Olympics.



Halfpipe involves competitors on skis performing a series of tricks in the air while launching off the steep walls of a large 22 foot high U shaped halfpipe of snow; 'it feels very free; like you're flying sometimes' Amplitude, execution and difficulty are the criteria by which they're judged. "Usually you're going for perfection – that is the goal, but everyone does tricks a little differently and that uniqueness is accounted for and will almost benefit you, although it's hard to be unique in the halfpipe because it's so difficult but if you can do something that's different but it's still hard then that will be rewarded."

Renowned as one of the most dangerous skiing sports Lynch says it's definitely a sport for the younger guys with few continuing past the age of 30; 'as it carries such a high risk of injury you kind of have to have a wreckless mentality towards it'.

A broken collarbone – twice, fractured thumbs, torn ligaments, a few 'head hits but knock on wood never a serious concussion' and a broken orbital bone in the face make up Ben's injury shortlist. An old knee injury flared up last October while competing in New Zealand at the World Cup and forced him to sit out a couple of events but has settled now after plenty of gym rehab. Ben placed 23rd at the most recent World Cup in Calgary just in January. His proud Dad Kevin; himself an accomplished rower with Trinity in his time winning two Henley medals, his mum Claire, and eldest brother Thomas who lives in Oxford and twice a winner of the boat race with Cambridge will be in Livigno along with most of his Irish relatives to watch Ben make his Olympic debut in the green of Ireland.



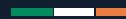


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