

# Casey McCabe: From Homelessness to representing Ireland

**L**ife can be very challenging even for those old and mature but for a young girl finding her way when family difficulties leads to estrangement and homelessness it's altogether another story, Sam McMurdock reports.

Casey McCabe has not had the easiest of lives but thanks to the IHSL (Irish Homeless Street Leagues), an organisation that uses the power of sport to transform the lives of people affected by social exclusion she has turned her life around and now wants to help change the lives of others. Casey recently represented Ireland at the Homeless World Cup in Sacramento, California.

Casey McCabe may only be 21-years-old but she's gone through more than the average girl her age. Growing up in a flat in Constitution Hill, Dublin with an older sister, younger brother and mother, Casey always naturally gravitated towards sport and in a bid to harness her energy and draw on that proclivity, her dad sent her to a boxing club, something she enjoyed but found quite isolating. At 14 Casey's mum, aware she was more partial to being part of a team, took her up to Home Farm F.C. in Whitehall after she heard they were starting a girls' football team,

"Mam knew I was always playing football at the flats with the boys. I was always that girl who needed to be kicking a ball, always that girl who had all the boys as

friends because I was good on the pitch."



**"I was in this room with three addicts abusing substances and I felt trapped... I'd nowhere to go."**

## Homeless at 18

Three years ago life took a downward turn for Casey. She could not get along with her mother's partner because of this my mam and I, "butted heads constantly" so Casey left the flat and found herself homeless,

"I had to get out... there was no other way and if there was, I couldn't see it. I knew if I didn't leave the flat right there and then that my mental health issues would get worse.... I was terrified of that happening."

Just 18, independent minded and determined to find her own path, no matter how frightening, Casey walked the streets, alone and battling her thoughts. Desperately, she tried to find a hostel and eventually she did, but had to share a room with three older women drug users,

"It was awful, I'll never forget it. I was in this room with three addicts, three women abusing substances and I felt trapped... I'd nowhere to go...."

**You were enrolled in college at that time, that must have made studying a challenge.**

"Yes, I was then in college studying physiotherapy up in

Blackrock and I ended up leaving because I felt I was straddling these two very different worlds.”

### **Why abandon that *one* positive thing in your life?**

“Have you any idea how hard it is being kept awake all night by addicts, then having to find the motivation to get out of bed and get washed and dressed - exhausted by sleep deprivation and the thoughts in your head and step into a completely different world ... a world you now feel alien to.”

### **What did you do after dropping out?**

“I was lost.... I was very lost for months. I just seemed to float through with no interest in life, no interest in anything.... I was functioning but I wasn't living. I felt so down, alone, lost and something I can barely believe looking back at that time - I'd even lost my zeal for football. I just didn't care anymore. I couldn't see a way out and sadly I stated smoking weed. It would numb the pain I felt inside. It was the only time I could feel any relief; it was better than any antidepressant.”

### **How so?**

“My doctor tried me on different medications but I just didn't feel right on any of them.”

### **So you continued with the weed?**

“Yes... for a while, but then I started abusing it, which wasn't so good.”

### **So you think that weed can be a positive thing if**

### **you don't abuse it?**

“For me definitely. I think smoking it in moderation is completely fine. It didn't change me as a person and it doesn't carry the same side-effects.”



### **When did things start looking up?**

“Things were at an all-time low when I got the news I'd got a room in St. Catherine's [hostel] - ironically the home pitch of the Street Leagues is within the complex.

From day one I knew it was a different place. The staff were amazing, the place was for 18-24 year olds, so it was great being away from these middle-aged people who had no interest in me and no idea what I was going through to having young people around me and feeling I could relate. The staff at St. Catherine's are brilliant, they see you, they want to help you, they motivate you and you know you aren't falling through the cracks or are

**I remember the day I was sitting thinking over my childhood and a pattern emerged - it was football.**

going unnoticed because they just seem to care. I slowly started to feel a bit better in myself and every day

I looked for accommodation because I wanted a better life.

I still didn't know how to get better, how to improve things but I decided to take one step at a time - and that first step was

trying to motivate myself and the

second one was devoting myself to finding a home. All the time I was wanting my zest back for football and I just hoped that day would come when I felt a bit better and found things in life exciting and pleasurable again.”

### **You were clearly living with depression.**

“Yes I was. It was a difficult time but after seven months I had secured a private rental home and in myself I truly

believed that life could only improve from there.”

### And did it?

“Life got better a bit at a time. I remember the day I was sitting thinking over my childhood and a pattern emerged - it was football. Every positive memory from my childhood involved playing football so I decided there and then, if I want to start feeling better and do something to move my life in a more positive direction, I need to start kicking a ball again.”

### And how did you get involved again with in the sport?

“I asked a local woman I’d known from childhood and she put me in touch with Mary Byrne who along with Graham Tucker run the Street League in Pearse Street. Mary immediately invited me down to try out and the rest is history as they say.”

### Did you find your mood lifting a bit too?

“Football is excellent for mental health. You know I was in boxing for a long time and it can be quite difficult for you mentally, as if you lose, you’re hard on yourself because there’s only you to blame, whereas with football, you work together as a team, you’re supported, there’s a lot of camaraderie. If you’re having a bad day, you immediately have a team of girls who know you and want to help you, you feel a part of something and I have found that even being a part of something, being involved in some way in your community can really help enormously with your self-esteem. We all know exercise is good for your mental health, but football ... there’s something very special with football ... to me, it can lift

my mood like no other form of exercise can.”

### Over the years when I’ve interviewed individuals from various leagues, they all extol the benefits of football for taking their mind off their problems.



Team Ireland Left to right: Casey McCabe, Kasey McCallig, Amy McCormack, Chloe McInearney, Chantel Pearse, Chloe Kenna & Captain, Lauren Cunningham.

“There’s no doubt about it. As soon as you step on that pitch, your troubles are left at the other side because you now have only one focus in your mind - just one, and that’s ensuring that ball is in the net. I don’t care what anyone says - there’s not another sport in the world that can do what football does for your mind. It’s life changing; I

know that saying that will seem dramatic or even cheesy to most people but football has changed my life.”

**I am testament to the fact that a ball can change a life .... it changed mine.**

**Some might even say that a ball can change a life.**

“[Laughs]... and they’d be telling you the truth.”

When Casey was settled in her new home with her pitbull terrier (who’d been residing with her grandmother) and got her life back on track, thanks to her renewed zeal for football she decided she “wanted to give something back to my community”, so she went along to college and enrolled on a sociology course,

“I want to be a social worker. I know I can help others who’ve been in my position, people who feel there’s no way out. I know how that feels and I want to be that person who can help others find their way through the maze to find happiness and joy again.”

Since getting her life back on track and having a boyfriend and her beloved dog by her side, Casey has reengaged with her with her family,

“It’s not easy, one step at a time, it’s difficult but all concerned have to open up, brushing stuff under the carpet is not the way to heal ... I think most people know that.”

### **How do they all feel about our competing in the Homeless World Cup in Sacramento, California**

“I had my family’s support and my grandmother, her support was never gone ... she has always stood by me and I really appreciate that. My nanny actually kept my dog for me while I was homeless If it wasn’t for her, I really don’t know..... I really don’t. My relationship with my mam, is getting better ... she’s watched every match while I was there ... she’s proud of me and that means a lot.

### **Are you proud of yourself representing your country in America at the Homeless World Cup?**

“I’m so pleased with myself.... I’ve even popped in a few goals.”

As we finish chatting, Casey tells me about her end of year grades “all distinctions” and how “football has given me so many opportunities .... even bringing me to America to represent Ireland” and she goes on to thank every single person from the Irish Street League [yes, every single person ...it took a while] who has “given me this amazing opportunity .... you took a chance on me and I am testament to the fact that a ball can change a life .... it changed mine.”