



# Cora Staunton

ISBN 978-1-78849-105-1  
eBook ISBN 978-1-78849-157-0

## Eimear Ryan

### Teaching Guide

By Peter Heaney

#### RATIONALE & THEMES

For Cora Staunton, the Gaelic football community is intimate and close-knit, beginning and ending with the local club. Her passion is driven by the fact that she plays with and for her friends and neighbours.

This biography charts her footballing journey from her national school team, where the encouragement of a teacher sows the first seeds of self-belief, to All-Ireland success with her club and county.

Along the way, Cora comes to understand that during difficult times, the support of her family, her team and her community is always there.

The themes explored are:

- Friendship
- Bereavement and loss
- Dedication
- Gender stereotyping
- Peer pressure
- Rivalry and sportsmanship
- Perseverance
- Winning and losing

#### SUMMARY

Lifting the trophy as an All-Ireland champion with her club, Carnacon, Cora looks back on a journey that has taken her from a young, football-mad girl to a national star on the threshold of starting a new career with the Australian Football League.

Her national-school principal, Mr. Ó Súilleabháin, doesn't believe in segregation in sport, and Cora is encouraged to participate in mixed teams at U-12, developing her skills and building her reputation.

Still, as the only two girls on the U-12 team, Cora and her friend Michelle have to change in the bathroom before their games, rather than in a proper changing room like the boys, and they are sometimes teased by their fellow players.

A chance meeting with Beatrice, a mentor for the Carra girls U-13 team, results in an invitation to join them and the opportunity to compete in the Community Games in Mosney. Cora is devastated when they lose the final, and the disappointment almost stops her career in its tracks. However, the attraction of the game is too strong to resist, and she is soon back training.

As her skills develop, Cora advances to senior levels of competition, playing for both club and county.

When her mam is diagnosed with cancer and treatment is unable to prevent the inevitable, Cora is inconsolable, and her anger prompts her to make bad choices. But the support of her mentors and teammates remains constant and helps Cora to get back on her feet.

During Cora's tenure, Mayo becomes the team to beat. But later in her career, as the county's fortunes dim and retirement age approaches, Cora decides to move to Australia, where she has been scouted for an Aussie rules team in Sydney.

#### APPROACH

This biography highlights the determination needed for any sport and illustrates how participation in sport can encourage resilience.

It appeals generally and provides many opportunities for discussion.

The themes sit firmly within the remit of the SPHE and PDMU guidelines.

Development can be more effectively facilitated with small group discussion.

This guide has been divided into three sections to reflect the development of the story.

## Section 1 The Killer Instinct Pages 7–56

#### SUMMARY

A lifetime of memories flows through Cora's mind during her final match as captain of Carnacon Ladies, before she begins a new phase of her career in Australia. As the siren goes and her team have won the All-Ireland, Cora sinks to her knees before the celebrations begin.

It all started in national school, where the principal, Mr. Ó Súilleabháin, spotted Cora's talent and encouraged her to play. In her first match for local U-12 team Ballintubber, Cora encounters gender prejudice, but when she scores the match-winning goal, her marker is left without reply.

Later at home, her mother notices a bruise on her arm. Cora is firmly hooked by the excitement of the game and reassures her that she can cope fine.

Cora practises kicking with both feet and does training drills; combined with Mr. Ó Súilleabháin's mental preparation, she is honing her skills.

By chance Cora meets Beatrice, her former babysitter and a mentor for the Carra U-13 girls' team. Cora joins Carra, who are about to participate in the Community Games.

Cora is Carra's secret weapon: small in stature but lethal in front of goal, she plays a major part in securing a place for them in the final in Mosney.

The qualifying games pass in a blur and Cora finds herself in her first All-Ireland final against a team from Kerry. When they lose by a single point, her disappointment is overwhelming and despite Beatrice's encouragement, Cora decides to abandon football for good.

However, as the sting of the experience fades, Cora returns to training. Beatrice is committed to her development and offers her a place on the Carnacon junior ladies' team.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read p14:** It is common to have mixed teams at U-12 level. How does this affect games? Should all team sports, at every level, include both male and female players? What benefits might this have for spectators, and in terms of participation?
- **Read p18:** Cora admires Maurice Fitzgerald but can't think of any famous female players. How important are recognisable role models to encourage people to take up sports?
- **Read p41:** Cora is small and slight, so no one expects her to be a threat. Why do we rely so much on first impressions? Are they the best way to judge things? How can we prevent our judgements from being influenced by first impressions?
- **Read pp44–48:** Cora and the team are thrilled to reach the final – and then devastated when they lose. What is special about winning? Why is participation not enough? How can a sense of competition spoil the enjoyment of participation?
- **Read p51:** Cora is a talented player, but since losing at Mosney, she struggles with commitment. Which is more important for a player to have: ability or commitment? In any team sport, which quality is more essential and why?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. Staunton's Final: Read pp11–12

This is Cora's final game with Carnacon before she moves to Australia, and she is determined to win. The last few minutes are frantic as both teams battle it out.

RTÉ Radio is broadcasting the match.

Create a 20-second commentary for the scenes and atmosphere at the final whistle to create an impression of the excitement and drama.

#### 2. Farewell: Read p13

In the dressing room after the match, Cora's coach and teammates present her with a farewell card. They have all written a personal message and included an illustration for her.

Create the card with at least five of the messages and illustrations.

#### 3. You're Only a Girl:

##### Read pp15 & 18

One of the boys on a rival team makes a sexist comment towards Cora. Discrimination is a problem for many people, for lots of reasons.

In small groups, decide on the three most common ways that people are discriminated against and list five things that might be said or done to them.

Now create a poster to educate others about why discrimination and prejudice is wrong.

#### 4. 'Hiya!' Read p43

While she is in Mosney, Cora sends two texts back home, one to her mam and one to her older sister Collette.

What would she say, and how might the two texts be different?

Create the texts she sent.

#### 5. Disappointment: Read pp49–52

After the defeat at Mosney, Cora is so disappointed that she doesn't feel like playing football any more.

What could her friend Michelle say to Cora to help her realise that she is allowing her disappointment to influence her?

In small groups, decide three things that Michelle could say to help Cora realise that her decision is a poor one.

#### 6. What's Best: Read pp54–56

Cora suspects that Beatrice is looking out for her but doesn't realise that she and Jimmy have been discussing how to support her.

The author considered including the discussion they had about Cora and her footballing skills, and how best to make sure she continued playing.

Create the discussion they might have had and what they decided to do for her.

## Section 2 Mam's Gone Pages 57–121

### SUMMARY

Cora's first outing for Carnacon junior ladies team gives her the chance to impress, and she takes several scores against an experienced marker who also plays for the Mayo senior panel.

Out shopping with her mam, Cora chooses an elegant Confirmation outfit that isn't a dress.

As the end of the school year approaches,

Cora and her family must make a decision about secondary school. Mr. Ó Súilleabháin advises that Ballinrobe Community School has a strong football tradition, and Cora is determined to go there, despite her mam's preference for the local school Cora's siblings go to. Her mam agrees to her wishes.

Settling into her new school is not what she expected, and Cora begins to doubt her decision. However, she is picked as the only first year on the award-winning school team, and things start to look up.

As Cora's list of footballing commitments grows, her performances impress, and she is stunned by an invitation to join the Mayo senior ladies' panel at age thirteen. Her mother is concerned about overload, and it requires considerable persuasion to secure approval.

Despite her age, Cora is accepted by the rest of the team and is able to contribute effectively to their game.

Then without any warning, her mother is taken ill and diagnosed with cancer. She undergoes an exhausting regime of treatment and trips to the hospital in Dublin.

Cora and her siblings assume the bulk of the household responsibilities as their mother begins her recuperation at home. When the opportunity to take on a part-time bar job is offered, Cora agrees. As well as providing a distraction, it helps her to develop her own sense of independence.

Captaining the Mayo U-16 team to the All-Ireland, a missed penalty by Cora gifts the game to Laois by a point. When the senior men's team fall to Meath too, Cora begins to believe in the Mayo curse.

Her mam's condition deteriorates and the family gather at the hospital to comfort one another. Late one night, her mother takes her last breath.

Cora blames herself for not spending more time with her mam while she was alive and decides to give up football for good.

### Discussion Points:

- **Read pp63–64:** Cora and her mam are shopping for a Confirmation outfit and Cora decides on a trouser suit. Should girls be encouraged to wear dresses for formal occasions? Should children be allowed to wear whatever they feel comfortable in? Why are there different clothes for boys and girls? Is this reasonable?
- **Read p72:** Cora and Grace are friends even though they have completely different interests. Do opposites really attract? What are the main qualities that attract people to each other?

- **Read p76:** Sinéad tells Cora that winning can be addictive. What did she mean by this? How would you recognise addictive behavior? How do participants and spectators see sport differently?
- **Read p99:** Mayo believes that it has been cursed. Is this a real threat or simply a myth? How can superstition affect how people think and behave? Are they behaving rationally? Are there any superstitions that you believe in?
- **Read pp119–120:** Cora is overcome by grief at the death of her mother, and her bereavement is affecting her behavior. What is grief and how does it affect people? Does everyone experience grief in the same way?  
[www.liveabout.com/the-stages-of-grief-in-children-2997220](http://www.liveabout.com/the-stages-of-grief-in-children-2997220)  
[www.verywellhealth.com/grief-and-mourning-process-1132545](http://www.verywellhealth.com/grief-and-mourning-process-1132545)

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. The Compliment: Read pp61–62

When Bernie O'Neill compliments Cora, she feels a surge of pride. Compliments are important as they help to strengthen our self-confidence.

Describe a compliment that you received for something that you did or said. Who gave it to you, and how did it make you feel?

### 2. The Outfit: Read pp63–64

Cora is with her mam shopping for a Confirmation outfit. She wants to feel comfortable in it, and she thinks the clothes will say something important about her.

Draw a model of yourself in your own favourite outfit and explain what the colours, cut and style say about who you are.

### 3. Féile na nGael: Read p78–79

The Carnacon girls have won the Féile na nGael U-14 trophy in MacHale Park in Castlebar. It is a great occasion, and Cora and her teammates are bubbling with excitement.

Féile na nGael need a match report for their web page, announcing the winners and describing the atmosphere during and after the match.

Write the report for them, and include some interview material.

### 4. Dad Says: Read pp80–83

When Cora is asked to join the senior panel, it is her mam who gives her opinion. The author decides to include a paragraph to

allow her dad to give his opinion too.

What might he have said? Write the paragraph she should include.

### 5. I'm Ill: Read p92

Cora's mam has taken seriously ill and the family are very upset. There are many questions they want to ask – and others they are afraid to ask.

Telling children about a parent's illness is a difficult thing to do, especially when some of the family are very young.

Should the younger children be told something different?

What advice could you give to help Cora's mam and dad say the right things? Make a short list of what should be said and to whom.

[www.brighthorizons.com/family-resources/talking-with-children-about-the-serious-illness-of-a-family-member](http://www.brighthorizons.com/family-resources/talking-with-children-about-the-serious-illness-of-a-family-member)

[www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/diagnosed/family-friends/children](http://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/diagnosed/family-friends/children)

[www.winstonswish.org/serious-illness/](http://www.winstonswish.org/serious-illness/)

[be.macmillan.org.uk/Downloads/CancerInformation/ChildrenAndYoungPeople/MAC5766TalkingtochildrenE2.pdf](http://be.macmillan.org.uk/Downloads/CancerInformation/ChildrenAndYoungPeople/MAC5766TalkingtochildrenE2.pdf)

### 6. The Semi: Read p103

Cora can't believe she missed the penalty that would've won the game.

After the match there are many comments on the club's Twitter page.

In small groups, create a collage of the comments that were posted. Were there any negative ones?

### 7. Mam: Read p121

Cora will miss the hugs and cups of tea and chats she shared with her mam; all the things that made her smile.

Think of your own parents or grandparents and make a list of five things they do or say that are guaranteed to make you smile.

Make a card featuring illustrations of these things to let them know how you feel.

### 8. Support: Read p121

Cora has been left confused, guilty and angry by the death of her mam.

What could her friend Michelle say or do to help her to cope with her bereavement?

In small groups, create a list of five things that Michelle could do or say to help and support Cora.

[www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/bereaved-family-friends/dealing-grief/supporting-a-grieving-family-member-or-friend](http://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/bereaved-family-friends/dealing-grief/supporting-a-grieving-family-member-or-friend)

[www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/apr/15/15-ways-support-someone-grieving-recently-bereaved](http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/apr/15/15-ways-support-someone-grieving-recently-bereaved)

[www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/about-grief/how-to-help-someone-bereaved](http://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/about-grief/how-to-help-someone-bereaved)

## Section 3 Born to Sport Pages 122–188

### SUMMARY

Cora is devastated by the death of her mam and has difficulty coping with her bereavement, seeking numbness in anti-social behaviour, turning her back on football and stepping away from her circle of friends.

A chance meeting with Beatrice helps Cora to realise what football means to her, and she returns to the game, leading Carnacon to All-Ireland victory and finding purpose again in what she does.

When she eventually returns to the Mayo team, she is warmly welcomed by a new manager. Their intensive training regime gains them a place in an All-Ireland semi against Meath, where a win secures their first appearance in an All-Ireland final against Waterford.

During training, Cora takes an awkward fall and the X-ray confirms a broken collarbone. She will miss Mayo's first appearance in an All-Ireland final.

A visit from Beatrice consoles her and the disappointment subsides.

Cora dreads having to watch the final from the sidelines and is delighted when Finbar, the manager, arranges for her to tog out and be on the pitch for the first minute of the game. She is exuberant when Mayo take the trophy, vowing to return the next year to play a full part.

Cora and her friend Crazy do their Leaving Cert and secure places in a Sports and Recreation course in Athlone I.T.

Mayo reach the All-Ireland finals again. The determined team secure a second successive title and spend the following week touring the county to display the cup.

Playing for Athlone, Cora shatters her jaw, but this doesn't prevent her from attending the All-Star banquet, where she collects an award to a standing ovation.

Another injury to her cruciate ligament

interrupts her playing, and she and Crazy are delegated to manage the county minor panel.

Tragedy strikes when an up-and-coming young player, Michelle's younger sister Aisling, is killed in a car accident. It is deeply traumatic for everyone who knew her.

Manager Finbar reaches the end of his contract. Despite the enthusiasm and talent of the younger players, Mayo are unable to convert appearances into trophies and a dry spell results.

Cora is tired and decides to take up an offer to play Aussie Rules in Sydney, wintering in the Australian sunshine and then returning to Ireland in the spring. Her life is revitalised.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read pp122–124:** Feeling vulnerable after her mam's death, Cora begins to spend time with a group who are drinking and misbehaving. How important is it to choose the people we spend time with carefully? How can they influence our behaviour? What advice would you give Cora about those she spends time with? [wikihow.com/Stay-Away-from-Friends-Who-Are-Bad-Influences](http://wikihow.com/Stay-Away-from-Friends-Who-Are-Bad-Influences)
- **Read pp126–127:** Cora is asked to be captain. Jimmy tells her that the team see her as their leader. What is a leader? Is it someone you follow or someone who tells you what to do? What is the difference? How would you recognise someone as a leader?
- **Read p135:** Cora and Crazy are excited that RTÉ will do a live broadcast of the ladies' All-Ireland semis for the first time. However, all the men's matches are broadcast regularly. Has ladies GAA achieved equality? What still needs to be done? Should their matches be treated equally?
- **Read p161:** Cora has nightmares about the final against Laois when her mistake cost Mayo the match. We all make mistakes, but how do you move on from a mistake and prevent it from causing you unnecessary feelings of guilt?

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. What's Important: Read p128

Experience has taught Cora not to worry about trivial things.

To remind herself of what is really important to her, she has written a list of three things on a card that she carries everywhere with her.

In small groups, make a copy of her list. How does she rank them?

### 2. Remembering: Read p137

Back in the same hospital where her mam died, the memories flood sharply for Cora.

The author wants to include a short paragraph here to describe how Cora's senses reacted to her visit to the hospital and how she remembered every detail of her last visit when her mam was ill.

Can you write the paragraph?

### 3. Ideal: Read p149

Cora is determined to get a job that will allow her to be involved in sport.

Explain what your ideal job would be, and why it would suit your talents and dreams.

### 4. All-Star: Read p159

After receiving a standing ovation at the All-Stars awards, Cora is interviewed for the *Sunday Independent*. The reporter is writing a feature about outstanding Irish women.

Work in pairs to compile a list of five questions it would be interesting to ask her, and then create the answers you think Cora might give.

### 5. Aisling: Read pp167–168

When her friend Michelle's younger sister is killed, Cora thinks her own experience of bereavement might be helpful. She decides to write a letter to Michelle reassuring her and explaining some of the emotions she might face as she deals with her loss.

Compose the letter she might send to Michelle.

[www.writeexpress.com/How-to-write-the-perfect-sympathy-letter.html](http://www.writeexpress.com/How-to-write-the-perfect-sympathy-letter.html)

### 6. Travellers: Read pp172–173

Working with the Travelling community, Cora learns about their heritage and wealth of stories.

Determined to challenge the negative comments she hears about them, she creates a leaflet about Traveller culture and customs, about well-known members of the Travelling community and their contribution to Irish society.

Create the leaflet including illustrations and photos.

[youtube.com/watch?v=aBiOLwXkr40](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBiOLwXkr40)

[www.rte.ie/culture/2018/03/14/947314-celebrating-traveller-customs-and-folklore-a-bird-in-the-house/](http://www.rte.ie/culture/2018/03/14/947314-celebrating-traveller-customs-and-folklore-a-bird-in-the-house/)

[wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Irish\\_Travellers](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Irish_Travellers)

### 7. Memories: Read pp185–186

Before she leaves for Sydney and the AFLW, Cora creates a memory box to take with her, so that when she feels homesick she can open it and the items will remind her of Mayo and her family and friends.

Can you suggest five items she might take with her and explain how they might help her to remember important events?

### 8. Dear Cora: Read pp187–188

On the evening after her first match with the AFLW, Cora reminisces about her life journey, remembering her school days with Mr. Ó Súilleabháin, playing on the Ballintubber U-12 team, and everything that has happened to her since.

She decides to write a short letter to her thirteen-year-old self, to support her through the challenges she now knows that she will have to face.

Make a copy of the letter you think she might have written.

## CLASS PROJECT

This story is part of a series of sporting biographies that offer the opportunity to explore a diverse range of topics from;

- Healthy diet
- Importance of good social networks
- Good mental health
- Importance of resilience
- Importance of positive self-image

You can use the sample worksheet here [obrien.ie/media/SportingHallofFame.pdf](http://obrien.ie/media/SportingHallofFame.pdf)

These activities ask pupils to examine the qualities outlined for each of the sports people and to prepare a proposal for them to be inducted into a fictional O'Brien Press **HALL OF FAME**.

The activities also ask them to consider how they themselves can aspire to inclusion, encouraging them to identify and celebrate their own strengths.

Also available:

