



Sonia O'Sullivan

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Teaching Guide

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RATIONALE & THEMES:

Sonia O'Sullivan was born to run. It was this ability that she used to express herself, whether she was running through the fields with her friends as a child or competing as a world-class athlete on famous tracks across the world.

This biography follows her journey from her club days in Cobh to World and European champion and Olympic silver medalist, as she plants the Irish flag firmly on the peaks of women's middle and long distance running. Her story also illustrates the commitment that is needed to develop a talent to the point where it can take on and beat the best in the world.

The themes explored are:

- Dedication and commitment
- Winning and losing
- Making choices
- Racism
- Healthy lifestyles
- Choosing priorities
- Dealing with disappointment
- Rivalry
- Dishonesty
- Sportsmanship

SUMMARY

For Sonia, running is as natural as breathing. Her first major event is the annual Milk Run around Cobh, where she is surprised by a prophetic comment from another runner on her potential.

She joins a local athletic club where coaching begins to hone her talent.

At school, her PE teacher recognizes her talent and enters her for the local Community Games, where her win allows her to compete in a bigger event in Cork.

Moving to secondary school, Sonia tries different sports including camogie. However, she knows that her talent lies on the track and decides to concentrate on running.

Her local club are rarely beaten with Sonia

leading and she is encouraged to join forces with a specialist coach. Her performances continue to improve and when she wins the senior Cross-Country title she realizes that she wants to chase the dream of the Olympics.

She secures a sports scholarship to an American university; however, the regime doesn't suit her and injuries begin to interrupt her progress. A change is needed and after graduating, she moves to London.

Her first Olympics, in Barcelona, sees her make a tactical error which denies her a medal. The following year at the World Championships, she secures a silver in the 1500m against formidable opposition.

Her first gold comes in Helsinki as she prepares for the Atlanta Olympics.

In Gothenburg she takes gold in the inaugural World 5000m however, a misunderstanding over the Irish flag creates negative comment.

Atlanta is a disaster. Sonia is unable to recapture her form, abandoning one race and finishing at the back of the field in the other. Medical advice back in Limerick confirms that she had trained to the point of exhaustion.

Recovering on holiday with her coach, romance blooms and she decides to settle with him in Australia.

A new training regime restores her confidence and brings double gold in Budapest at the European championships.

When her first child is born, her priorities shift seismically and her preparation for the Sydney Olympics finally delivers the elusive medal. A fitting conclusion to a spectacular career.

Settled in Australia, she watches her daughter take silver for Ireland at the European championships, the story paused not ended.

APPROACH

This biography highlights the determination needed for any sporting skill to develop and

illustrates how participation in sport can encourage resilience.

It appeals generally and provides many opportunities for discussion around the pivotal points in the story.

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

Development can be more effectively facilitated with small group discussion.

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

Section 1 Running Pages 7 - 63

SUMMARY

Sonia loved to be out and about in the fresh air with her friends, entertaining themselves. However, it is when she is running that she finds the most satisfaction.

During the annual Cobh Milk Run, it is suggested to her that she has potential in cross-country running. She and her friends join the local athletic club where she develops under the praise of the coach.

School preparations are underway for the Community Games. Sonia is selected to represent Cobh and is thrilled to win her first serious race.

In the autumn, she transfers to secondary school and after a brief dalliance with camogie, she decides to concentrate solely on running.

Club outings continue and the atmosphere sparkles with sing songs and picnics as they travel around the county events collecting prizes.

Pat, the club coach, suggests Sonia contact a local coach whose approach has delivered impressive results. Sonia does so, and confides in him her dream to be the best in the world.

A flaw is revealed when she hides symptoms of being unwell in order to continue training and compete. Fortune smiles on her this time and she takes the Munster Under-14 schools title, irritated that there is no national event in this category.

A club outing to the running track in Santry provides another harvest of medals and an opportunity for high spirits with water balloons at their hotel.

Her coach enters her in the National Junior Cross-Country event and despite his reservations she also enters for the main event, determined to measure herself against the best in the country.

Her win in both events catapults her into the public eye and during the post-race interview she declares her dream to run for Ireland in the Olympics.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **(Read pp 8-9):** Sonia and her friends play a game of knocking on doors and then running away. The girls think it fun, however, the people who live in the houses are annoyed and think it selfish. Who is right? Should the girls be more considerate or should the homeowners be more tolerant?
- **(Read pp46-51):** Sonia hides being unwell in case her mum stops her from training. Is this a sensible attitude? Does competition encourage us to make foolish decisions or is risking your health part of the price of success? Why are people willing to take these chances with their health?
- **(Read pp53-55):** Sonia and her friends have a plan to cheat the train company out of the price of three tickets so that they can buy sweets. Is this stealing? Is some dishonesty acceptable if no one is hurt or if the amount is trivial? Is it only theft if a large amount is involved?
- **(Read pp59-60):** At Thurles Sonia is devastated to lose and is only content when she finally beats Anita. Should running only be about winning? If you know that you are not going to win, why would you want to compete? What other benefits are there in competition and why are these not rewarded nor recognized?

ACTIVITIES

1. Happiest (Read p7)

Sonia is happiest when she is outdoors playing with her friends.

Describe the activity that makes you happiest.

Use the 5xW & H (**who, what, when, where, why & how**) template to share the details of the activity; who you share it with

and explain why it makes you so happy.

2. The Milk Run (Read pp11-13)

The Cobh event is a run not a race and all the competitors get a certificate on completion.

The organizers want to know what the competitors think of this.

They have a large sheet of paper at the end of the race headed RACE or RUN and have asked the competitors to add their preference for next year with an explanation.

Make a copy of Sonia's entry.

Now add three more entries for each of the choices. What would your entry be?

irishtimes.com/sport/sonia-o-sullivan-what-s-the-motivation-behind-a-charity-run-1.3938435

3. Glowing (Read p15)

Sonia glows when the coach praises her. Praise is important in the development of any skill.

Create two lists of comments; one that coaches should use frequently and one that they should avoid.

If the coach needs to give advice, create a list of positive comments they could use.

sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/2019-10/coaching-ireland-fact-sheet-2-a5.pdf
icoachkids.eu/_assets/files/documents/motivation/coaching-ireland-coaching-children-successfully.pdf

4. Camogie is best (Read pp32-33)

Sonia decides that she prefers running and makes negative comments about camogie.

How might an enthusiastic camogie player respond to these comments?

What sort of comments might they make about running?

Create the response they might make to Sonia about running.

5. A Winning Feeling (Read p36)

Sonia loves being part of a winning team, however, she struggles to express what a winning feeling is like.

Create an exciting poster using lots of images and similes / metaphors to describe the feeling for someone who has never experienced it.

bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zkygrj6
examples.yourdictionary.com/metaphor-examples-for-kids.html

6. An Athlete's Diet (Read pp38-39)

When the girls want to stop at the chip shop, Pat reminds them that they are athletes.

That evening, he decides that he needs to create a chart that will show them easily what foods they should eat and what foods they should avoid. Can you help him?

In groups decide on a clear attractive format for the chart and include the information you think is necessary for them to have.

healthpromotion.ie/hp-files/docs/HPM00796.pdf
irishheart.ie/your-health/ways-to-live-better/healthy-eating/

7. Dear Sir (Read pp53-57)

The hotel manager writes to the athletic club to complain about their behaviour and damage that the girls caused in the hotel.

When the committee speak to Mrs. Murphy they decide to provide a list of DOs and DON'Ts for anyone supervising runners overnight.

Create a copy of the hotel's letter of complaint and the committee's reply along with their guidance for future trips.

Section 2 Olympic Disaster Pages 64 - 125

SUMMARY

The Leaving Cert. signals the end of secondary school and Sonia secures a sports scholarship to Villanova University in Philadelphia to study and also to take her running career to the next level.

The Villanova regime doesn't suit Sonia and injuries become a regular occurrence.

Finishing her degree, she decides to move to London, ready to challenge seriously to be a successful professional athlete.

Barcelona is Sonia's first Olympics; however, tactical immaturity denies her a medal and she vows to return better prepared.

The following year, 1993, the World Championships are held in Stuttgart and Sonia's racing form looks promising. However, in the 3000m, the Chinese athletes run as a team, taking all the medals while Sonia's inexperience relegates her again to a bitter fourth place.

Determined not to be outwitted again, she enters for the 1500m and takes the silver, splitting the Chinese team in the process. She is overjoyed.

1994 sees Sonia's athletics star in the ascendant and she records her fastest times in the 3000m and the 1500m.

At the European Championships in Helsinki she finally translates her potential into gold in the 3000m. She is on top of the world.

Back in London, she eases herself into a

comfortable training community to prepare for the 1995 World Championships in Gothenburg.

She decides to enter for the inaugural 5000m and after a tactically brilliant race, she crosses the line in gold position.

Celebrating after the race, she has a faux pas with an Irish flag and relies on John Treacy to rescue her from a PR disaster during an RTÉ post-race interview.

A successful series of races leads her to a second Olympic appearance at Atlanta. There are great expectations for this appearance, however, failure to appreciate the strain she has endured and her exhaustion from the regime she has been following sees her crash to complete disaster in both events.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **(Read pp71-72):** Sonia is on a sport's scholarship at Villanova. Her college pays her fees and she has to win races for them. Why is success so important for them that they have to pay athletes from across the world to come there? Is this a fair way to choose their students?
- **(Read pp95-98):** Why did the crowd react this way to the Chinese team. Were they being racist? Did Liu Dong deserve to be applauded? How might she have felt about the crowd's reaction?
- **(Read pp99-102):** Sonia's winning time is 8:31.84. In some races, the athletes' times are separated by hundredths of a second. This is a fraction of the time for a heartbeat. Can someone really be called a winner / runner-up when they are separated by less than a heartbeat? In some cases, cameras are needed to separate them because we are unable to even see the differences. How can this be fair?
- **(Read pp97-98 & 110):** After winning, Sonia is expected to go on a lap of honour and wave to everyone. Why do the fans want her to do this? They have been entertained by watching the race. She is only able to recognize who is Irish from the flag they carry. Why does she need to run around the track waving to strangers?
- **(Read pp110-111):** Sonia doesn't carry a large Irish flag around the track and this provokes a lot of negative comments. Why does she need to signal her Irish identity in this way? Is this really a sincere thing to do or just something that is expected?

ACTIVITIES

1. Good Luck (Read p66)

When Sonia opens her suitcase that night in Villanova, she discovers a card from her

family.

Her mum, dad and sister have added comments, pictures and cheerful advice to help her settle in.

Make a copy of the card.

2. Yearbook (Read p75)

It is customary for every new student to enter a short statement about themselves for the college yearbook. The statement explains who they are, what their ambitions are and what they think that they will be able to contribute to the college community.

Help Sonia to write her statement for the yearbook?

3. Team Ireland (Read pp79-80)

For every Olympics, the Olympic Federation of Ireland design a new kit for the Irish Team. This time they have asked schools to suggest a design for the athletes for the next Olympics.

In groups, design a complete outfit for the team.

What items should be included in the kit? Should the kit be identical for male and female athletes?

Apart from colours, can you design a logo that best represents the ambitions of Team Ireland?

olympics.ie

4. The Race (Read pp83-84)

As the runners come off the final bend with the finish in sight, Sonia is leading. However, on the straight she is passed by two Russians and a Canadian and finishes a disappointing fourth.

Imagine that you are in the commentary box listening to the commentaries.

Make a copy of the commentaries from the Russian, Canadian and Irish reporters.

Create it as three separate podcasts covering the last 10 seconds of the race.

5. 4th Place (Read p92)

At Stuttgart, Sonia finishes fourth again and realizes that the feeling is hard to explain to someone who has never experienced it before.

That night she decides to write a short haiku poem to describe her feeling of disappointment at missing a medal by such a slim margin.

Help her to write the poem?

irishhaiku.webs.com

imaginationsoup.net/teach-your-child-how-to-write-a-haiku/

poetry4kids.com/lessons/how-to-write-a-haiku/

5. Insult (Read pp95-98)

Watching the race, the reporter from the *China Daily* news agency initially feels great pride at the Chinese runners winning, then outrage at the way the crowd responded to Liu Dong's lap of honour and their interference with the coach Ma Junren.

He writes a blistering report for the paper accusing them of great discourtesy and racism.

Make a copy of his report and the headline he used.

6. Atlanta (Read pp119-120)

When Sonia abandoned her race, everyone was shocked.

Everyone wondered what had happened and why she had done it.

It was front-page headline news both in Ireland and globally.

In groups create a copy of those headlines and opening comments from both the sports and news reports and paste them as a collage on a large sheet of paper.

How will the news and sports headlines and reporting be different?

Section 3 Passing the Baton Pages 126 - 180

SUMMARY

After Atlanta, Sonia seeks answers from the National Coaching Centre in Limerick. The answer is simple, she needs a rest. She has become close to her coach, Nic, and romance has bloomed. After another lacklustre performance in Athens, they decide to take a holiday together in Sicily.

A new, less intense training regime begins to show results and she decides to enter the World Cross Country Championships in Marrakech. Despite her coach's reservations, she enters for both races and harvests twin golds. She is back at centre stage.

Her homecoming to Cobh is joyous and she opts to run in a charity race instead of the traditional open-top bus celebration.

As the European Championships approach she is tempted to enter the 10,000m, a distance she has never raced before. Not only does she take the gold there, but she also takes gold in the 5000m. All the disappointment from Atlanta is now in the past.

Living in Australia and pregnant with their first child, her life takes a new rhythm. She resumes training gradually and enjoys jogging while pushing the pram.

Sydney is buzzing with preparations for the Olympics and Sonia needs to record a qualifying time. A win in a 10,000m race in Milan provides the perfect boost to her morale.

In the 5000m final Sonia comes off the bend a stride behind Gabriela Szabo, with the finish in sight finally in a position to achieve her Olympic dream.

She takes the silver and is overjoyed.

Determined to have a final attempt for Olympic gold she enters for Athens four years later. However, age and a bout of food poisoning conspire against her. Struggling and way off the pace on her final lap, she is overwhelmed when the crowd rise to their feet for a standing ovation for her.

Honours follow, including inclusion in the relay of runners for the Olympic torch in London 2012. She is also appointed as Irish Chef de Mission.

Standing in the Gyor Stadium Sonia watches as another O'Sullivan, her daughter Sophie accelerates off the final bend to claim a Junior European Silver for Ireland.

The baton has been passed on. Sonia, as a previous champion, has the honour to present the medal to her daughter, both of them beaming gloriously at each other.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- **(Read pp136):** When she wins in Marrakech, Sonia feels like a star again. Why was this important for her? Why did she need media attention? What did this have to do with her running? What does it mean to be a star and why do people want to be one?
- **(Read pp156):** Sonia wants an Olympic medal more than anything. What makes an Olympic medal special? Is it really special or is this just part of the media hype that surrounds it? How is an Olympic medal better than a World Championship medal?
- **(Read pp177-178):** Sonia's daughter Sophie has been selected for the Irish team. However, is she really Irish? She wasn't born in Ireland. She lives in Australia and her dad is Australian. Is it fair to people who were born here that foreign sports people are able to compete for Ireland? What should the rules be to qualify for an Irish team?
- **(Read pp174-175):** Sonia has retired and now runs only for enjoyment. Should sport really be about participation rather than competition? Do we encourage competition by watching it on TV or by buying a lot of merchandising? Does playing any game really feel more enjoyable if you are wearing a particular

team's outfit? Is this a sensible way to enjoy sport?

ACTIVITIES

1. Look after Yourself (Read pp128-129)

Sonia has failed to look after her health and the doctor warns her that she needs to rest.

In groups, choose the three most important areas of our health and highlight the best advice you could give someone to make sure that they are as healthy as they can be.

Create three posters, one for each area and include the best advice in an easily remembered format. You could make a list of key DOs and DON'Ts.

hse.ie/wellbeing/healthy-eating-for-families.html

2. Objection (Read pp138-140)

After the race, Team UK lodge an objection, claiming that because Sonia did not run the last section of the race correctly, she should be disqualified.

The officials only have a very short time to adjudicate.

Divide yourselves into groups of 3, one to represent Team UK, one for Team Ireland and one for the organizers

Each representative has 30 seconds to make their case and then the group must decide giving their reasons.

You can perform this for the class.

3. The Sydney Medal (Read pp165-167)

After her race in Sydney, Sonia had her photo taken and decided to write the result on the back.

She could have described the result in one of three ways:

- I got an Olympic medal
- I got a silver medal
- I came second

She also wrote an explanation for her choice. Make a copy of the photo and her comment.

4. The Pram Run (Read pp153-154)

When the newspapers learned that Sonia had begun training again by pushing a pram, one of the Irish papers published a lighthearted cartoon of her training and pushing Ciara at the same time to accompany the story.

Create a copy of the cartoon and give it a comic headline and comment.

wikihow.com/Draw-Cartoon-Characters

5. Gabriela (Read p160)

Sonia and Gabriela have managed to avoid each other, however, on the boat back to Stradbroke Island they come face to face.

The author thought that she might add a paragraph here to describe their meeting and what was said.

Using the same style as the author, create the paragraph describing the meeting.

6. The Torch (Read pp173-174)

The torch is a powerful symbol of the Olympic ideals. For the next Olympics, the Olympic Federation of Ireland have organized a painting competition for Irish schools.

The theme is

"What the Olympics means to me"

Each entry must include a painting of the torch and at least three statements of the ideals included as part of the flame.

Submit an entry?

olympic.org/about-ioc-olympic-movement

7. Sonia and Sophie (Read pp179-180)

Sonia and Sophie are to be interviewed together and they need to prepare.

In groups, prepare a list of five questions for each of them and then create the answers that they might give which will show what ambitions they may have for themselves and each other.

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

The focus of the activities asks the pupils to examine the qualities outlined for each of the sports people and 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.