

10 Irish sporting gods who became business champions

It takes intense physical and mental stamina to become a sporting legend. The same applies to success in the business world. Ireland has a wealth of sports stars who went on to be business champions. Here are ten of the most successful Irish sportsmen who made the transition to entrepreneurship and succeeded.

1: Sir Tony O'Reilly

Sir Anthony O'Reilly towers above the field of Irish sportspeople who moved into the world of business. As a rugby player, O'Reilly made his debut for the Irish international team aged only 18 in 1955. He went on to win 29 caps for Ireland as a winger including a surprise final appearance against England in 1970 after a six-year absence from international rugby. He also featured on two British and Irish Lions tours in 1955 and 1959 and, with a total of six tries, remains the record highest Lions Test try scorer to this day.



Outside of rugby, O'Reilly became one of the most successful Irish businesspeople ever and can lay claim to being Ireland's first billionaire. His business career began with Bord Baine, the predecessor of the Irish Dairy Board, where he is credited with launching the Kerrygold brand before he moved to American food giant Heinz of which he eventually became Chief Executive in 1989. Once Ireland's richest person, O'Reilly has been a major shareholder in Waterford Wedgwood as well as Independent News & Media, over which he had a well-publicised battle for control with Denis O'Brien. Since then his business fortunes have changed but O'Reilly's careers in both business and sport remain spectacularly successful.

2: Eddie Irvine

Co. Down born Irvine competed at the highest level of motorsport in Formula One between 1993

and 2002 when he raced for the Jordan, Ferrari and Jaguar teams. The highlight of his Formula One career was in 1999 when he finished runner-up in the Driver's Championship after winning four races with Ferrari. Over the course of his career, he competed in 148 Formula One races and achieved 26 podium finishes.



Irvine was known for his flamboyant lifestyle as a driver and has maintained his wealth since the end of his racing career, with the Sunday Independent valuing him at €77 million earlier this year. Much of his wealth is earned from his high-end property development business that has seen him develop and sell on exclusive houses in Florida and the Caribbean, among other locations. Aside from property development, Irvine owns Eddie Irvine Sports, a sports facility featuring a 400m indoor karting track in Bangor, and is an investor in Belfast-based Jenkins Shipping.

3: Brian McEniff

A legend of Donegal GAA, McEniff has served no fewer than four terms as manager of the county of his birth. His first term, as a player-manager, began in 1972 when he led Donegal to its first Ulster Championship and won an All-Star award. He went on to win a second Ulster Championship as a player-manager in 1974 but is best known for engineering Donegal's first ever All-Ireland victory when his team shocked a highly fancied Dublin side to win the 1992 final. He also served as manager of the Ireland International Rules team in 2001 and 2002 and managed Ulster to twelve Railway Cups.



McEniff took over the running of the family hotel in Bundoran in the mid-1960s after studying hotel management Cathal Brugha Street and spending some years working in the business in North America. His management skills appear to have been just as strong outside of Gaelic football as within as he succeeded in expanding the business to create the Brian McEniff Hotel group. Today the group owns six hotels in counties Mayo, Donegal, Sligo and Dublin.

4: Leo Ward

Possibly the least well-known individual on this list, Leo Ward's career nevertheless fully merits his inclusion. Born in Fairview on Dublin's Northside in 1919, Ward (on the right of the photo) won two FAI Senior Cup medals in 1943 and 1946 with former giants of Irish football Drumcondra FC. Prior to this, he won two FAI Junior Cup medals with Drums and spent a brief spell playing for Manchester City but his career in England was cut short by the outbreak of the Second World War.

Together with his half-brother Kevin Anderson, Ward entered the cinema business in the mid-1950s when they purchased a cinema in Lucan. The brothers expanded their business across the country and achieved a major coup in 1983 in when they bought the Savoy in O'Connell Street in Dublin. The WardAnderson Group eventually became the biggest group in Irish cinema and were better known under the names of the Omniplex and IMC chains. The group was valued at €91 million in 2010 but split in 2013 following a dispute between the Ward and Anderson family, just prior to Leo Ward's death at the age of 94.

5: Jamie Heaslip

Born in Israel while his army officer father was stationed on duty with UNIFIL, Heaslip has been an

ever-present figure in the Irish international rugby team after the disappointment of missing out on a place in the 2007 World Cup squad. He played an important role in Ireland's second ever Grand Slam in 2009 and back-to-back Six Nations Championship victories in 2014 and 2015. Heaslip is currently club captain with Leinster with whom he has won three Heineken Cups. He has also played on two Lions tours, in 2009 and 2013.



Heaslip has not let his successful rugby career get in the way of his other interests. He has a degree in medical engineering from DCU and has invested in some businesses. This includes a share in Bear restaurant on South William Street, Dublin and in the company behind the [Lovin' Dublin](#) website. He also became involved in the pub trade in 2014 when, along with publican Noel Anderson and his Leinster teammates Sean O'Brien and the Kearney brothers, he opened the Bridge 1859 in Ballsbridge. Heaslip recently [spoke to ThinkBusiness](#) about his experiences as an entrepreneur.

6: Hugo MacNeill

The second ex-Irish rugby international to feature on this list, MacNeill won 37 caps for Ireland between 1981 and 1988, scoring ten international tries. He also played in the 1983 Lions tour to New Zealand. One notable moment of his sporting career was his decision, alongside teammates Tony Ward and Moss Keane, to boycott the 1981 Irish tour to South Africa in protest against apartheid. He continues to be involved in rugby both as a pundit and, most recently, as a member of the Oversight Board for Ireland's 2023 World Cup bid.



MacNeill, who was educated at Blackrock College, Trinity College Dublin and Oxford, worked as a management consultant with the Boston Consulting Group before joining American investment bank Goldman Sachs in 1988. In 2004, he became managing director of Goldman Sachs in Ireland and has held that position ever since. He is also involved in philanthropic activities with the [Ireland Funds](#).

7: Pat Gilroy

Pat Gilroy achieved national prominence as manager of the Dublin football team who, under his management, won the 2011 All Ireland. He also played a role when Dublin previously won Sam Maguire in 1995, coming on as a substitute in the final against Derry. Gilroy experienced further All-Ireland success as a player at club level with St Vincents in 2008 at the age of 36.



In his business career, Gilroy has also been remarkably successful. He studied engineering in Trinity and is currently Country Director of Veolia Ireland, previously Dalkia. Veolia is a French multinational company that provides energy management and environmental services to large companies in Ireland where it employs over 500 people. He is also a former President of the Ireland-France Chamber of Commerce.

8: Tommy Bowe

Monaghan born Tommy Bowe made his Irish debut in 2004 and is currently the second highest Irish try scorer behind Brian O'Driscoll. Among these tries was the winning try in the 2009 Grand Slam decider against Wales. His club career began with Ulster but in 2008 he left for the Ospreys in Wales with whom he won two Pro12 titles before he returned to his native province in 2012. He also played on the 2009 and 2013 Lions Tours. Alongside his fellow rugby-international-cum-businessman Jamie Heaslip, Bowe is a member of the Ireland squad for the 2015 Rugby World Cup.



The world of fashion is where Bowe has chosen to make his mark outside of rugby. In 2010 he entered into collaboration with Monaghan-based company Lloyd & Pryce to create the Tommy Bowe collection of shoes. In the wake of the success of this venture, Bowe moved into the clothes market in 2013 with the launch of the XV Kings range of clothing.

9: Liam MacCarthy

The inclusion of Liam MacCarthy, of the Liam MacCarthy Cup fame, in this list may be seen as controversial, but he ticks the boxes of being both a sports and business person. MacCarthy was born in London in 1853 to Irish parents. He played hurling along with other London Irish in Clapham Common and was a member of the Exiles of Erin club. He also served as chairperson of the London County Board for two terms from 1898 to 1907 and from 1909 to 1911, with the role filled in the intervening period by a certain Sam Maguire.



After initially working as a railway fitter, MacCarthy established a box-making business in 1880 in rivalry to his father-in-law's existing business. The business still operates under the name William MacCarthy & Sons Ltd, five generations and 135 years later. MacCarthy, a member of the IRB, used some of the proceeds of his business to purchase £50 worth of certificates for the "National Loan" for the first Dáil. On redeeming this money in 1921, he commissioned a cup for the use of the GAA, who decided to use it as a "Perpetual Trophy" for the All-Ireland Hurling Championship. The cup gifted by MacCarthy was used up until 1992 when it was replaced by a new trophy of the same name and design.

10: Martin Dunphy

Waterford city born Dunphy is a former Irish schoolboy football international. Like his father, who played League of Ireland for Waterford FC, he was a goalkeeper. He was part of the first Irish football team to win an international tournament when the Ireland U-15s beat Italy on penalties to win the Montaigne Tournament in 1982. Later he went on to win a sports scholarship to the George Mason University in Virginia.



In 2002, Dunphy established a debt collection agency in the UK which became known as the Marlin Financial Group. He earned £5 million when he sold his majority stake in 2010 and a further £25 million when the group was taken over by Cabot Credit Management for £295 million in 2014. His wealth was valued at €37 million in 2015.

Main image: Brendan Moran / Sportsfile

