

Ben Mullane – Silver Medal Winner 2024

‘Friendships, flashbacks and lessons learned: untangling the threads of school memories.’

The feeling of nostalgia is incredibly potent. Its power can pull us from the present and place us right in the middle of a past memory, making us experience the same feeling we had felt in that certain event or period of time. It brings about a specific catharsis that I personally have not found with anything else. I have gotten lost in the prison of the past many times, but nothing else rewinds the clock like my time at school. The feelings that the memories of sitting in hard, plastic chairs for hours on end, listening to teachers drone on about their respective fields of expertise juxtaposed with Friday evenings at 3:15pm, when the sweet sound of the bell sounded to set us free from our pain for another week, are so strong and ingrained in my mind.

I feel as though I’m old enough now to appreciate the fact that both ends of the scale of emotion that I experienced in school, the good and bad memories and the various kinds of interactions I had with people are all equally valuable. The fights with friends, mixed with the joyous time spend with those friends, are to be appreciated in equal measure as well. This is by far the most important lesson that I have learned during my time in school: to be thankful for every moment, good or bad, because these experiences are fleeting.

I stepped through the high, weathered gates on the first day of my secondary school life as an impressionable and malleable fourteen-year-old boy, with a bag twice my size on my back, and a freshly ironed uniform placed perfectly on me by my mother, like a stylist would dress a mannequin. I was wide-eyed and taken aback by my new surroundings. Grey, metal lockers were reminiscent of the many American high school movies that I had loved from my childhood. Towering sixth years roamed the hallways, preying on us first years and choosing their next victim of corridor attacks. The crick in my neck from gazing up at them in astonishment soon disappeared as I learned to keep my head down and fly below their radar. The contrast between my final year in primary school, where I was a senior figure with the delusion of authority over the younger pupils, and my new position in the pecking order in secondary school, acted as a humbling lesson. Now, as I step into the newer and even more surprising surroundings of college, I imagine that that same feeling of fear I had when I was fourteen will come flooding back, and I’ll start at square one again.

However, above anything else, I find myself thinking of the close bonds I developed with people during my time in school. I was extremely lucky to find my tribe of like minded people whom I learned from every day. For me, there is no school memory I have that was experienced in the absence of my friends. Whether it be moments at lunch break, hurling abuse at one another to amuse ourselves, or triumphs with the rowing team, made special by the fact that we were experiencing it as a group, my friends have been there on every step of the journey. The friendships that I have gained have helped shape the person I am today. They have also given me a chance to escape from the various stresses that have appeared throughout my school years. Once jokes started flowing and I immersed myself in conversation, the problems that weighed on my mind evaporated.

Sport has played a huge role in my enjoyment of school. It was a something to turn to to relieve stress, while also meeting new people. As mentioned, the rowing club gifted me with so many great memories. I now look back and cherish the mornings of waking up at the crack of dawn

for training and the dreaded alarm clock sound that sent shivers down my spine. The cold, refreshing air of a freezing cold winter morning, mixed with the camaraderie of the crew made the dark mornings worth it. The sound of the oar dipping and breaking the stillness of flat water and the sight of a crew of 8 rowers moving in sync with one another is something that I am grateful to have experienced. The sport taught me the importance of hard work and helped me to appreciate the journey towards a goal. Every training session felt like placing a brick in the wall. The patience and discipline required to build that wall gave me huge self-belief and moulded me into the man I have become.

Now that I'm coming to the end of this chapter of my life, that feeling of nostalgia and the catharsis that comes with it is stronger than ever. I'm beginning to live out old memories again. I can smell the fumes of car engines in rush hour traffic as I make my way into school on a crisp autumnal morning; I can feel the unrivalled stress of exam season and the joy of completing those exams. More than ever, I'm relating to my younger self and experiencing the emotions that that innocent, scruffy haired boy went through. Whatever lies ahead of me in my life, whatever bumps in the road I'm yet to experience, I will always have the memories of my time in school to look back on and sustain me in life. For this I am truly grateful.

DYLAN SWIHART – Bronze Medal Winner

FRIENDSHIPS, FLASHBACKS.....untangling school memories.....

Aaah... Childhood memories. Personally, nothing beats reminiscing over the echoes of my youth that occasionally clog my mind. At any time in my life, the unbeatable delight of recalling my own nostalgic experiences never fails to disappoint. My memories take place in a myriad of settings. Do you know what the most prominent, memorable, and universal one is? That's right, It's School! I am incredibly grateful for my impressive collection of school memories locked away in the old noggin, but I am keen to share a few of the unforgettable friendships, intriguing flashbacks, and valuable lessons derived from my own schooling.

I think I'll go in chronological order. It all began one faithful day in September 2018, the beginning of my journey at PBC. I knew no one. I was socially awkward. The thought of conversing with my newfound classmates appealed to me and terrified me simultaneously. Luckily, the teachers knew exactly how to reinforce early friendships: through the school's traditional sport of rugby! Everyone in our year was initially encouraged to play, regardless of skill level. I must say, it was surprisingly effective. Before long, I familiarised myself with everyone and solidified various friendships. I was even given a nickname that stuck with me permanently, all thanks to this phenomenal method of bonding.

From the very outset, the school fostered a sense of enthusiasm, passion, and attachment to rugby amongst students, including me. I would regard the junior and senior cup finals as the prime moments of my time here at Pres. Each year climaxed with these games; the sheer power and energy of their atmospheres alone was something to behold. The togetherness of the pupils, the ultrasonic noise of cheerleaders' chants, the cheeky flares and smoke bombs that inevitably snuck their way into Musgrave Park, the gargantuan teddy bear catapulted at unsuspecting students, and the mixture of purple, white, and black clotting the stands. It was mesmerizing to me! It taught me the very meaning

of this school. It proved to me that pride and collectiveness can completely connect a school as a whole and individually between teachers and students.

1st year and 2nd year seemed to meld together, a stream of miscellaneous classes and exams, and then WHAM! In March 2020, COVID-19 hit me like a freight train when it came to alter the course of history. Online classes were something else! I remember my routine like it was yesterday, sleeping in 'til eight o'clock, no uniform, strategically clicking in and out of chrome tabs when the teachers asked questions, the chat logs between friends; oh I could go on! The glory of it all didn't last forever. Boredom, laziness, and repetition took its toll on me. I longed for school. The lack of stimulation really enlightened me on the crucial engagement of school life and physical friendships. It drastically changed my perspective. I took school for granted until that ordeal.

Following that, 3rd year was quite eventful. As Covid's rampage on the national population continued, I was condemned to school with restrictions imposed. My God were the masks awful, and being stuck in just one classroom for the year? Yikes! Nevertheless, I can recollect the positives. Sanitiser bottles instantly became an effective weapon of mass destruction. The number of times my hair got covered in the ooze of the alcohol-scented contents of these bottles was insane! Videogames such as 'Among Us' and 'Clash Royale' were the fan favourites during lunch breaks. The rate of food fights spiked too. The state of the classrooms afterward was always comical, especially in my class of 3A. That was a goated class back in the day I must say! I still miss it to this very day.

With Covid eventually dead and gone, exciting times awaited me. 4th year was jam-packed with non-academic activities, but Ballyhass Water Park proved to be the cherry on top. It adequately kickstarted and ended the year, capitalizing on the start and finish of the fresh Summer weather. Axe-throwing, the aquapark, and wakeboarding immediately spring to the front of my mind. Hurling hefty chopping tools at a target with success or just wielding them like a Viking was empowering to me. The maniacal mayhem of over one hundred Pres boys fighting for their lives on a floating battleground was downright hilarious. I found Wakeboarding challenging yet contrastingly exhilarating and enjoyable. However, I recall it so fondly due to my friends' futile attempts at the sport. It was similar to watching an epic fail compilation on YouTube when we face-planted or pounded against water like pavement!

However, all good things must come to an end. Unfortunately, in 5th year, Leaving Cert began to loom overhead, approaching slowly but surely. On one hand, it was a vigorous, rigid, and intense year. On the other hand, we still had the Ski tour to Polsa, Italy! My enthusiasm for the holiday was ground-breaking and boy, did it exceed my expectations. Considering I have over twelve years of experience and a fierce passion for skiing, I was eager to show off and gracefully cruise the slopes alongside buddies. We had countless wipeouts, ranging from petty falls to broken bones. Everyone looked forward to the rambunctious 'Après Ski' sessions as well, scoffing pizzas from that one pizzeria and rushing each night to the closest bar, which was a half-hour trek away from the minuscule village.

At long last. 6th year. It's almost over. It's weird, to be honest. I faintly remember the time when I was chatting with my mother, strolling along the wooden boardwalk parallel to the coast during my annual holiday to our dinky mobile home in Youghal. It was the August

before my enrolment in this school. The sea breeze from the shore brushed our right shoulders. All we muttered about was what Pres would be like. I was consumed by thought of all the possibilities. And now here I am... I seriously wish I could reflect more on this. The sports days, the free classes, the small but precious stuff. So much to say, but such a small word count! I guess all I can say is that I'm grateful I was able to relay my school memories, but I can't wait to make more!

'There are far, far better things ahead than any we leave behind' - C.S Lewis