

Next month's Winter Olympics will have its fascinating Irish storylines. You just have to work hard to find them. **Eoin O'Callaghan** gives you a head start



# The greening of Sochi



**E**ARLIER this year the biggest story from the Alpine World Ski Championship in Austria came in the women's Super-G event. Lindsey Vonn, the superstar winter athlete, crashed. She tore the anterior cruciate ligament in her right knee. The whispers around Schladming suggested that she would never ski again. Of course, there was a better story. You just had to do some digging to find it. But it was there. The 20-year-old downhill skier with number 98 on his back who finished on the cusp of the top fifty. The UK-born, Utah-raised kid wearing the Irish suit. The guy with the Kerry accent. Conor Lyne was the better story. "I wasn't even expecting a second run because you have to make the top 60 to qualify for it. I came down and I was 55th. I said to

myself 'My God, what just happened?' I was so taken aback. I was exhausted but told myself 'Push it again'. I came down 52nd — not too bad for an Irishman!" An Irishman. But Lyne has no reason to call himself that. Mother from Hospital, father from Brandon, neither a skiing stronghold. He was born in Reading, outside London, but the family re-located to Logan, about 90 minutes north of Salt Lake City when he was just four years old. He can't really explain the accent. "I spent the summer training in New Zealand and it's one of two summers when I haven't been in Ireland. My brother and I would be over there for a few months, the majority of time spent in Kerry, fishing, hanging out with the cousins. I still call Ireland home." Lyne stepped on the slopes for the first time aged five. There was an instant high. Weekly trips to a local ski site got old quickly. He wanted more. He joined a racing

team and things got serious. Ever since his mid-teens, the goal has been the Winter Olympics. In 2012, he took a sabbatical from his Mechanical Engineering degree at the University of Utah. He was awarded an IOC scholarship. Prior to the Worlds, he was selected for a three-month FIS training camp, spending time in Austria, Italy, France and Slovenia. "I spent 130 days on skis during that season. Previously, I had racked up 50 or 60. Europe has that passion for racing. You go to resorts in the US and it's about the tourists and the family whereas in Austria, racers are the kings. Their level of commitment, their focus is incredible. It doesn't seem human." Lyne's focus isn't bad either. He's on the slopes for 8am and skis until lunchtime. There's conditioning and gym work in the afternoon. There's the preparation of equipment. He normally gets two hours to himself. Then there's the

**■** Conor Lyne reacts after the first run of the men's giant slalom at the Alpine skiing world championships in Schladming, Austria, in February 2013.

Picture: AP/Kerstin Joensson

diet. An intake of between four to five thousand calories a day. "There's months and months of preparation. It all comes down to two minutes. One minute for each run. Before a race, I tend to get a little nervous. But if you're thinking too much as you take your starting position, you're not going to ski well. I throw everything out of my head. I tell myself to give 110% and attack, attack, attack." Lyne speaks purposefully. There's a confidence, a positivity that's not over-bearing but relentless. "There's a tiny bit of fear. It can be fear of falling down, missing a gate, skiing poorly. But that's what you have to kick out of your

mind. You make the course fear you, not the other way around. You need the courage to push the limits." There isn't a support network of coaches, agents, psychologists and business managers offering advice and guidance. His success at the Worlds barely registered. Any similar result in Sochi will do likewise. So why do it at all? "You do it because you love it. But on par with that, maybe even above it, is the country. When you have the Irish suit on, you're not Conor Lyne. You're a representative of a nation. Your actions reflect upon the nation." Lyne has many goals. To make the top thirty or forty in Sochi, to compete at the 2015 Worlds in Colorado and to return to Ireland once his degree is completed. As we leave each other's company, Lyne says he's been told by his cousins that there's snow on the Conor Pass. A sign if ever there was one.