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Directors:

R. Kearney (Chairman), L. Galvin, C. Griffin, I. Henderson, E. McKeon, P. O'Mahony, G. O'Shea, J. Sexton, P. McKenna, M. Quinn, S. Keogh

CREDITS

Published by:

Rugby Players Ireland, Irish Rugby Union Players Association, Unit 8, Richview Office Park, Clonskeagh, Dublin 14

- Phone:** +353 1 676 9680
- Email:** info@rugbyplayersireland.ie
- Web:** www.rugbyplayersireland.ie
- Facebook:** facebook.com/RugbyPlayersIreland
- Twitter:** [@RugbyPlayersIRE](https://twitter.com/RugbyPlayersIRE)
- Instagram:** [@rugbyplayersireland](https://instagram.com/rugbyplayersireland)
- LinkedIn:** www.linkedin.com/company/irupa

Photography by Inpho (www.inpho.ie) unless otherwise stated.

Written & Edited by: Richard McElwee & Finola Roache

Design by Brian Gillis & Laura Wilkinson (brian@loudandclear.ie)

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CEO ADDRESS

SIMON KEOGH



We are living through a very strange and concerning time in our history. As we move toward increasing social isolation, Ireland and its people are standing shoulder to shoulder like never before. However, in doing so we are being forced to stay further and further apart.

If you've ever wondered what it's like to be part of a team, this is it. Every player has to take individual responsibility. By making sacrifices for the greater good, the team will ultimately get its reward.

Over the coming weeks and months, the whole island will be making sacrifices. The prize will be in safeguarding of the health and wellbeing of our people.

We are team Ireland.

In the wake of the outbreak of Covid-19, Rugby Players Ireland and the IRFU have been working hard to protect the livelihood of our members and to ensure that the professional game survives this crisis.

Over the past number of weeks, we have maintained a close line of communication with our members through our Executive Board representatives and our Player Development Managers. As much as possible, we have been contacting our members directly to advise them on updates in what is an ever-changing situation.

Despite the gravity of the issue at hand, I found it heartening that I did not experience a difficult conversation over this period. Any player I spoke to accepts that the changes they have had to make are for the greater good, for their own families and for the loved ones of their teammates.

As we delve further still into this crisis, it is increasingly evident how much of an impact is being felt in local communities throughout the island of Ireland. I am extremely proud of the empathy that our players have shown and how they have been using their considerable influence to amplify the government's messaging on preventing the spread of the virus.

Despite this period of great uncertainty, Rugby Players Ireland will continue to offer its services remotely to our members, catering for their needs and acting in their best interests. To this end we would encourage all players to utilise this time to engage with their Player Development Manager.

What will come to pass remains unknown.

However, we know one thing for certain - the career of a professional rugby player is finite. While this may represent an unwelcome break, it serves as a reminder of the delicate nature of our sport and the need to be continuously developing ourselves. Though disconcerting, we all have plenty of time to reflect, take stock and set out a plan for the future. View this period as an opportunity.

The idle time now on your hands may also stir mental challenges. Our members have been to the fore in the development of some tools and techniques to overcome these challenges. The Tackle Your Feelings campaign is an initiative by Rugby Players Ireland in partnership with Zurich Ireland and the Z Foundation. Through tools such as the TYF app, the initiative aims to break down the stigma around mental health and also provides testing methods to help improve your mental wellbeing.

The term 'hero' is often attributed to our members for the courage they display on and off the field. I'm sure you'll appreciate that while rugby takes a backseat, there are others who are displaying great courage and resilience at this time.

We hope we can play our small part in supporting all those on the front-line by making sacrifices. We also know that when this crisis ends, the game will emerge stronger than ever and our members will be better prepared for whatever the future holds.

We look forward to coming together in time but for now we hope everyone stays safe and healthy.

“

If you've ever wondered what it's like to be part of a team, this is it. Every player has to take individual responsibility. By making sacrifices for the greater good, the team will ultimately get its reward.



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



Coronavirus COVID-19



CORONAVIRUS FEARS PUTS RUGBY CALENDAR ON HOLD

A clean sweep of victories leading into the third round of the Six Nations led many to believe we might be on the cusp of multiple Grand Slams. Unfortunately, disappointing results in Twickenham and Doncaster put paid to such hopes before Covid-19 intervened putting an end to the international season until further notice.

While the U20s remain on course for a tilt at consecutive titles, they will have to wait until later in the year for it all to play out. As the situation develops, European and domestic games also remain in the balance.



Speaking at the announcement that Ireland's Six Nations campaign was being postponed, Simon Keogh said: "The unpredictable nature of the threat posed by Coronavirus is worrying. We therefore welcome any necessary moves deemed necessary to safeguard players and supporters against any spread.

"Whilst we appreciate the magnitude of the Six Nations Championship, a health risk of this scale undoubtedly supersedes any rugby game."



A POWERFUL VOICE

As the impact of Covid-19 continues to be felt around the world, Ireland has been getting to grips with one of the most uncertain periods in our history. Unfortunately, while most people acceded to the guidance and took to their homes, the magnitude of the situation was lost on others.

Despite Leo Varadkar’s implementation of social distancing, some revellers betrayed the advice in the early stages. Their actions prompted Irish and Munster Rugby player Keith Earls to take to Social Media to appeal for greater caution. Though generally private, Earls felt compelled to speak to the public as his daughter lives with a serious respiratory lung condition.

Within hours Earls’ influence was keenly felt throughout the country. While social disapproval of some people’s actions was already ramping up, within days many pubs and restaurants opted to close their doors owing to the public backlash with the winger’s tweet playing no small part.

Many of Earls’ peers duly followed suit.

Numerous players followed Irish Rugby’s lead in asking the public to answer Ireland’s Call in a different way - by listening to the experts.

Josh van der Flier admitted that while the uncertainty surrounding the rest of the season feels strange, the more important thing at the moment is to think of the vulnerable and elderly. Van der Flier asked the public to reach out via text or phonecall and remind them that we are all in this together.

John Cooney also reached out to those who might be struggling at this time. Cooney referenced a passage from Epictetus, a Greek philosopher:

“ In life our first job is this, to divide and distinguish things into two categories: externals I cannot control, but the choices I make with regard to them I do control. Where will I find the good and bad? In Me, in my choices.

Greg O’Shea told his 1.3million followers on Instagram to treat Covid-19 with the utmost respect. O’Shea, who was diagnosed with respiratory problems at an early age, recommended that people use the time to their advantage to learn or up-skill.

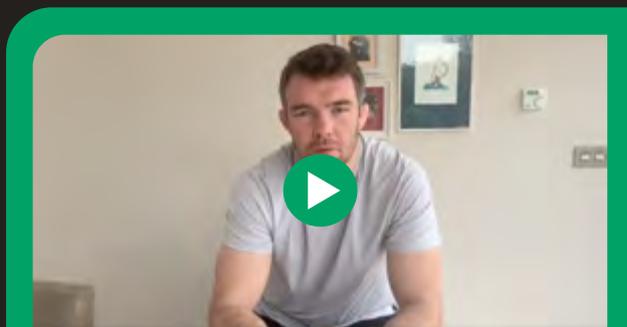


O’Shea’s Irish Men’s 7s captain Billy Dardis similarly advised people to give a helping hand by keeping a distance, while their 7s teammate Bryan Mollen asked for people to respect each other. Irish Women’s 7s starlet Eve Higgins urged her followers that in order to do our best, we must stay apart.

Members of the Irish Women’s XV’s also took to Social Media in their droves. Claire McLaughlin, a practicing doctor in Northern Ireland, urged everyone to listen to the experts. Research scientist Ciara Cooney stated that while we all love to hang out with our friends, now is not the time.

As the realities of working from home began to sink in, Connacht Rugby’s Robin Copeland exhorted the importance of structure and purpose. His fellow Tackle Your Feelings ambassador Eimear Considine also shared some tips as to how best manage the coming days of working from home.

Ireland’s rugby players – setting the standard!



The collective voice of rugby players throughout Ireland was represented by our Executive Board members who helped to impart a special message from the HSE. Rob Kearney, Ciara Griffin, Greg O’Shea, Louise Galvin, Johnny Sexton, Eoin McKeon, Iain Henderson and Peter O’Mahony all featured in a video that was viewed almost 500,000 times in the 24 hours after its release.

#BRAVELIKEEMMELINE

January 2020 will live long in the memory for Billy Holland and his wife Lanlih Keane. Speaking on the Late Late Show with Ryan Tubridy, the couple shared the story of their courageous daughter Emmeline who passed away aged just 6 months.

In the days following their appearance on the show, over €500,000 was raised for Our Lady's Hospital in Crumlin, Cork University Hospital and Ronald McDonald House. Quite a legacy for little Emmeline!



STRATEGIC PLANNING

In order to deliver the very best for our members, we gathered as a team to map out 2020. Many thanks to our Executive Board members Louise Galvin and Peter McKenna who joined us at Druids Glen and provided some valuable insights and opinions.

ON THE ROAD

With a break in the domestic season during the Six Nations, Dr Deirdre Lyons and Pamela Gilpin also took the opportunity to jet off to Switzerland! The pair were in Geneva as part of a World Players Delegation for historic global talks with the International Labour Organization. Discussions centred on the work being carried out in sport across the world.

Pamela was also in Amsterdam in January to attend a meeting of PROLead, a new 3 year project funded by the Erasmus+ Programme and facilitated by EU Athletes. PROLeads aims to improve dual career opportunities for professional athletes by providing tailored leadership training for current and retired athletes.

Additionally, Dr Hannah McCormack was also in The Netherlands representing Rugby Players Ireland and the Tackle Your Feelings campaign at an Expert Meeting for FIFPro's Mental Health Toolkit. A little closer to home, Simon Keogh and Denis Hurley have been catching up with all squad groups to advise them on developments at their association.



PAST PLAYER CLUBHOUSE

The torrential conditions at Energia Park as Ireland took on Wales failed to put a dampener on celebrations at our Past Player Clubhouse at Bective Rangers. While Ciara Griffin's side fought for a well-deserved victory, many of her former teammates (and special guests) joined us in cheering them on!



PLAYER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME



Over the past number of months several workshops have taken place with multiple squad groups. These have included Barista Workshops facilitated by Dublin Barista School, Social Media with Kieran File, Taxation with BDO and Tackle Your Feelings with former Munster Rugby player Cathal Sheridan.

Furthermore, a broad catchment of our members availed of an opportunity to visit Microsoft Ireland in Dublin. Our Player Development team are always working hard to meet the needs of our members and so it was hugely satisfying to see such great numbers travel to the capital for a Career Development Briefing.

AGENTS SEMINAR

As part of the accreditation process across the Home Nations, all registered agents are obliged to attend a seminar in either Dublin or Twickenham each year. Designed to educate, the seminars prove to be a useful way for agents based in England, Ireland and Wales

This year segments included Gambling Awareness presented by Paul Buck (EPIC Risk Management), Crisis Communications with Richard McElwee and Marcus Ó'Buachalla (Leinster Rugby), and a World Rugby Regulations Update with David Quinlan (International Rugby Players). Simon Keogh and Dr Deirdre Lyons also presented on the Collective Bargaining Agreement recently agreed and the Player Development Programme respectively.

ZURICH IRISH RUGBY PLAYERS AWARDS 2020

We regret to inform you that we have taken the decision to postpone our annual awards ceremony until Saturday, September 5th 2020.

Hosted at the Clayton Hotel on the Burlington Road, the Zurich Irish Rugby Players Awards celebrates the great and good of Irish Rugby on and off the field. A highlight of the rugby calendar, we hope that we will have plenty to celebrate in the months to come.

We hope to see you then... in the meantime, stay safe!



MOVING ON...

DR ELLA MCCABE

Sadly, in February we said goodbye to Dr Ella McCabe. Ella, who joined Rugby Players Ireland three years ago, worked with our Leinster Rugby members as their Player Development Manager in addition to heading up our Player Wellbeing Programme.

Ella's energy, diligence and good humour will be sorely missed by all. We wish her well in her next chapter!



LEGENDS ASSEMBLE... AGAIN!

With Scotland in town in early February, Shane Byrne had the opportunity to catch up with Scott Hastings. Hastings, capped 64 times by his country, accepted a cheque for €50,000 on behalf of the My Name's Doddie Foundation. The funds were raised at last year's instalment of the Legends game at the RDS.

More recently, Byrne and his cohorts came to the help of former Scotland and Lions cult hero Tom Smith who has been diagnosed with stage four colorectal cancer. Prior to Ireland's Six Nations clash with England, a host of Irish Legends (ably assisted by Kelly Brown and Ally Hogg) took on their English counterparts at The Stoop and ran out convincing winners!



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FROM THE BACKROW TO THE FRONTLINE

Claire McLaughlin on the biggest contest of her career

CLAIRE MCLAUGHLIN



The conversation opens with a little sigh. “This week has just been mental,” Dr Claire McLaughlin admits. “I can’t even say it’s been massively busy, but all the uncertainty takes its toll.”

The Irish international has just ended a full week of work in the Accident & Emergency Department at Ulster Hospital in Belfast. She has just caught up with her boyfriend for the first time in several days and is looking forward to a long walk.

“I’d been off for the guts of a week before I went in last Monday. I’d been listening to the news about Covid-19 and constantly refreshing my social media for updates. I was worried about what I’d be facing. That seems like ages ago now. It’s such a fluid situation that it’s changed plenty since then.

“Everything has been happening on the go. We have had to restructure and there have been some logistical problems we’ve had to iron out. It’s difficult when you’ve been used to a way of working and things are suddenly changing on a weekly, if not daily basis. You just have to adapt and go with it.”

Structure is part and parcel of her career as a rugby player, but McLaughlin’s evident capacity to adapt will be an undoubted asset as the precarious nature of the situation stoops further still. Though worries beset her downtime last week, she has developed a new mindset.

“I’ve come to realise that, as important as it is, it’s not wise or healthy to dwell on the situation or become too engrossed in it all either. I’ve been telling my friends to get outside, go for walks, go to the parks and climb mountains. Do whatever it takes to take your mind off of it.”

Detaching herself has been no mean feat. Indeed, McLaughlin has also been feeling the impact beyond the hospital corridors. For the past week she has been living out of a local Airbnb to protect herself from the encroaching virus.



“There’s a growing appreciation of the new reality. I do think people are taking it more seriously, but there’s definitely plenty who don’t understand how bad this could get. They just don’t see how they can impact the situation or how the guidance might apply to them.

“It’s frustrating but I can’t control what people choose to do. Part of me is very worried about what we could be facing over the next few months, but all I can do is follow the Public Health advice and try to urge others to do the same.

“Everyone has the potential to slow the spread of the virus. What each of us chooses to do today will impact the number of available ICU beds in the hospitals over the next few weeks.”

McLaughlin, who failed to feature in Ireland’s Six Nations campaign owing to a troublesome ankle injury, has been working hard to get back to full fitness. Understandably, the recent postponement of rugby activity in addition to the closure of gyms and facilities has been a source of frustration for the heavy-lifting enthusiast.

“**There’s a growing appreciation of the new reality. I do think people are taking it more seriously, but there’s definitely plenty who don’t understand how bad this could get.**”



"I love training. It's something I can't live without and so the thought of not being able to do what I normally do is a stressful thought! I'll get around it somehow, but it is definitely challenging. I have been making some desperate pleas for equipment!

"But I know I'm not the only one. I can see it through my teammates and working in the hospital also brings it home to me – we're all in this together. There's a real feeling of solidarity in the healthcare system. It's really quite inspiring. Whenever you go in you know that no matter what, everyone is pulling in the same direction with you."

Since making her interprovincial debut for Ulster Rugby ten years ago, the Old Belvedere player has become a well-established figure on the domestic and international rugby scene. It's only natural then that she draws further comparisons between the two things she pours herself into.

"My rugby experiences have given me skills that are crucial in my other life as a doctor. Without realising it I had the opportunity to develop attributes like leadership and communication skills which you don't necessarily pick up in a lecture hall. Those skills are so crucial especially when you're faced by a situation such as this one when people really look to you.

"More importantly though, rugby has taught me the importance of teamwork. People think illness and automatically think of a doctor, but there is a whole team within the hospitals: the

nurses, the technicians, ancillary staff, cleaners, porters, everyone...

"When our backs are against the wall you appreciate how much we all do for each other – just like on a rugby field. Everyone can have an impact and change the course of its path."

Following a decent campaign in 2018/19, McLaughlin was keen to progress further this campaign, especially in her new found position in the back-row. However, while she is undoubtedly frustrated to have come through a campaign without her usual impact, her eyes are firmly focused on next season.

"I had surgery on my ankle last June but made the mistake of trying to come back too soon, several times. I was actually on track for the Six Nations before it flared up against Wales in a warm-up game. I continued to come to Dublin every week to watch and participate with the squad. I appreciate that being involved in any capacity is a privilege, but ultimately you want to put that green jersey on and play your part.

"I guess, from a selfish point of view the break in the rugby season has come at a good time for me. I was finding it increasingly frustrating having to look on. Obviously, I'm aware that it's being facilitated by the most awful of reasons but it's easy to be overwhelmed by the negativity.

"It's important that we all look for the positives in this where possible. I have to see this as an opportunity to get myself right and keep myself healthy so that I'm ready - whenever that is..."



My rugby experiences have given me skills that are crucial in my other life as a doctor.

Without realising it I had the opportunity to develop attributes like leadership and communication skills which you don't necessarily pick up in a lecture hall.

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‘I CAN’T SET UP A MAUL IN THE OFFICE!’

Sportsground favourites, JP Cooney and Andrew Browne, soldiered for Connacht for many seasons. Here they speak to Maurice Brosan about life on the other side.

JP COONEY & ANDREW BROWNE



THE PHONE RINGS. JP Cooney has been waiting for the call. He excuses himself and takes it, while his friend and former Connacht team-mate Andrew Browne remains seated in a bustling Salthill cafe.

For seven years, they soldiered alongside each other in green until injury ultimately forced both to retire in 2018 and 2019 respectively.

Now they reside on opposite sides of Galway's big ALL rivalry. Browne is head coach of Galwegians, Cooney with Corinthians. They have come together to discuss that transition from playing to coaching.

"I normally never answer my phone when with people," Cooney offers apologetically.

"Yeah, never," agrees Browne.

They exchange a knowing look. Cooney steps outside, while Browne chats idly about the Six Nations and the weather. Eventually, the former prop returns and lets out a muted sigh. It was not the phone call he had been waiting for.

"I had a tumour removed over Christmas on one of my testicles," he explains. "I'm waiting on a call from the hospital for a follow-up now. They removed it there in NUIG, in the university hospital. It was a real fucking rattle, to be honest.

"I found out the day before we played Blackrock away. It got to me. I didn't want to tell Sarah or my parents. They are at home in Tipp and they were travelling up on the Sunday. I just said I'd wait and tell everyone then. So, I went up to Blackrock and you pretend all is normal.

"It was tough, but it actually helped to have some bit of normality. The lads put in a great performance which made for a bit of good news on a shitty weekend."

It all started with a puppy's paw. A present for his mother, Cooney had the dog on his lap when a stray foot hurt much more than it should have. Two weeks later, his daughter was born. He made use of the paternity leave to visit Connacht's team doctor and get some blood tests done. A few days later he got the results: "red hot".

Then there was surgery, more time off work and a wait. The biopsy results will determine treatment. That is the next step and the toughest part: waiting.

"I may not even need chemo. It is just whatever comes now. Whatever has to be done has to be done.

"I don't know what is facing me yet, which is weird. It could be intravenous, or it might be a tablet. It all depends on what the oncologist says.



"It is so much more common that you think. That's why you have to be open about it. I got so many messages: 'I had this and made a full recovery'. Lads who went back and played some rugby. A friend had the same thing. I didn't know but he rang me and told me after I got it. He had chemo for five months, lost all his hair, eyebrows, hair on his head. He had a really hairy back, that was all gone."

"You could do with that," laughs Browne. He has sat quietly up until this point, nodding gently. Silent and supportive. Connacht's close-knit culture perseveres even post playing.

Their journeys to the province were starkly dissimilar. Browne's was the typical tale; an academy product born and raised in Galway. Cooney's route was more complicated.

His devotion started at Thurles rugby club. Flirtations with the Munster academy came to nought and eventually the plan was to pursue a teaching degree while playing in the AIL. Impressive showings there prompted Connacht to reach out and he joined in 2012.

Some great days together followed. The 2012 Champions Cup win over Toulouse. The 2016 Pro12 final win against Leinster. Brief moments of euphoria that made the hardship worth it. And there was hardship, particularly at the end.

Andrew Browne's final season was restricted to one single appearance. It started with an Achilles injury that refused to heal and when it finally did, his AC joint separated. At 31 years of age, he called it a day.

“
I found out the day before we played Blackrock away. It got to me. I didn't want to tell Sarah or my parents. **They are at home in Tipp and they were travelling up on the Sunday. I just said I'd wait and tell everyone then. So, I went up to Blackrock and you pretend all is normal.**

"I feel way better now," he says with hindsight. "I said it to JP the other week, the effect it has on you mentally. Waking up in the morning constantly sore. I was in a bad mood immediately for my entire last year. I'd my Achilles problem, JP had his hamstring. Coming in every day working on it.

The last couple of years especially. It was niggle after niggle. Injury after injury. It gets you down eventually.

"I left the game and immediately I lost a load of weight, unintentionally. You just don't have that load anymore. I mean I still have the odd niggle, shoulders and knees will always be bad. But I'm grateful of how well I feel now."

The cruel consequence of a serious injury. As much as it does to the body, it does more to the mind. Cooney is a testament to that. In May 2017, he made his 50th appearance for the club against Munster as a 27-year old. Shortly after he suffered an ankle injury. He had only recovered and there was a hamstring issue. Surgery was required in December.

He would never play for the province again.

"That injury wrecked me. Totally ruined me mentally," he says.

"I mean the recovery, I had surgery three days before Christmas. I spent Christmas lying on a coach. I'm a big guy. It is not easy to navigate around on one leg.

"One leg was bent at 90 degrees with a brace locked in that position. I remember the struggle of washing myself. I went home in Tipperary because we had a walk-in shower.

My mam, she could put in a chair for me and that was literally the only way I could do it.

"Where my tendon severed from my hamstring is right beside the sciatic nerve. Obviously, there is the muscular pain and the tendon, but I was getting these pains from the nerve as well. It was honestly like hell. I could be asleep at two in the morning and it felt like someone stuck a cattle prod into the side of my leg. This electric shock going through you.

"I was taking tablets to try and deal with that, but then you are walking around the place like a zombie. It is damned if you do, damned if you don't. I didn't walk properly for 10 weeks. Even at that I had a limp for a long, long time."

The duo hail the work done by Connacht, crediting the medical team and the player development manager. Club transition coach Dr Deirdre Lyons oversaw personality profiles and aptitude tests to determine the best avenue post-playing. They both scored high in empathising and dealing with people. Coaching was an obvious next step.

Former Ireland international and current Connacht coach Johnny O'Connor recommended Cooney for the Corinthians job. Browne went back to his

“
I mean the recovery, I had surgery three days before Christmas. I spent Christmas lying on a coach. I'm a big guy. It is not easy to navigate around on one leg.



boyhood club while the province also integrated him into academy coaching.

Few universal truths emerge from this entire conversation. Coaching is a subjective, mercurial experience. Cooney cites the difficulty in moving from the back to the front of the bus. The fear of being 'a killjoy'. He is in favour of a clear separation. Browne differs and sees room for integration provided it is on the coach's terms. He cites Galwegians pre-Christmas trip back from Wanderers where he found himself mingling amongst the rest of the squad at the back, with a bottle of Buckfast proving the perfect tonic.

Then there is their relationship with the game. More specifically, playing the game. Browne is totally content with being finished. Cooney still has qualms.

"I completely agree with everything Browne said earlier about the physical pain," he explains.

"The hurt. All of that craic. The mental thing of not being picked, contracts constantly up for renewal, not knowing what will happen. All of that resonates.

"But at the same time, I'd give diamonds to go back and play rugby. I would often stand on the pitch at Corinthians as the lads are about to start a warm-up and think 'I'd love to be playing today'. That is just me anyway. I find it was my outlet. To express, I mean... right now I have a job and work in an office. I can't set up a maul in an office, do you know? There is no tackling or hitting a ruck. It was my release.

"In an office you can barely curse, understandably. You have to be so careful of how you let out your frustrations. I can't stand up and kick a chair. Rugby was my release. I think back to Tuesday morning contact sessions. Mauling, scrummaging. Coming off I would be tired and sore. My ear could be in bits, my back would be tight and I absolutely loved it.

"I just loved it. Some people go out and walk dogs every day. Whatever. That was my vent."

Browne immediately and wholeheartedly disagrees. The joint wearying. The nerve numbing. The uninterrupted ache. It grinds you down. He had enough.

"I'm the opposite. I knew my time was up. I had no interest in it.

"The more I was away, the less I wanted to go back. I knew I was done with it. I am standing in training and watching matches now and I've no interest in being out there. The only thing I miss is that feeling after, that reward when you put yourself through a lot of hard work.

"But watching training and the Connacht lads now, I think of Monday meetings. The cardio sessions.



Double session Tuesday. Mauling in the morning, another session in the evening. I'd have no interest in that."

The view from the sideline is a complicated one. Victory remains sweet, but defeat is crushing. A sense of responsibility they couldn't even contemplate during their playing careers. Browne is visibly excited as he reflects on new emotions.

"All the credit should go to players, but a win is seriously satisfying. You could implement something in the week, like I did with a lineout move against JP there, I knew they would bite in at the front of a lineout and we scored off it. They still beat us quite well, but it is those little wins that you never got before.

"You take wins better. At the same time, losses are harder. Really fucking hard. Everything falls on you."

One of the most difficult aspects of it all is the constant learning. Not in the overused clichéd sense of the word; genuine, day-by-day learning.

There were the coaching badges which they did together. Lectures on those courses which they gave together. Browne lets out a hearty laugh as he recalls one particular Cooney presentation. A South African onlooker took it upon himself to rigorously challenge each and every detail. The ensuing debate was explosive.

“
The more I was away, the less I wanted to go back. I knew I was done with it. I am standing in training and watching matches now and I've no interest in being out there.”



“One of the funniest things I’ve ever seen,” he declares with a chuckle.

“That’s gas,” responses Cooney. “One of the funniest things I ever saw involved you to. It was last year when Ger Earls, Keith’s father, bounced you flat on your back during a game of touch.”

The hardest part of coaching? They are both in full agreement: changing a culture.

Browne came back to a club that had suffered three relegations in four years. This was a world of amateurs, not professionals. What they knew to be second nature now had to be instilled. Thankfully, past experiences equipped them to do so.

“We learned from Pat (Lam) in Connacht and you can see it again in Bristol now,” Browne says. “So much of coaching is about building an environment. It is really hard in the AIL, as we have found out.

“Every club has its habits. Take or leave training, if they look out the window and it is raining some might not fancy it.

“Not giving an excuse is the worst thing. That should be non-negotiable. If you are not coming or have something on, fine. This is the AIL and lads need to have some craic. But text the group and say it. That is harder said than done for some. You need lads to do that. Be accountable.”

Then there is the tiresome task of keeping up with the game. There was a recent catch-up over coffee with current Connacht out-half Jack Carty that left Cooney dumbfounded. Midway through their meeting, the Ireland international pulled out his phone with a video of a specific defensive system.

“I couldn’t even comprehend it until he explained it to me. I had so many questions.”

Hours spent playing the game have been replaced by days spent watching it. For JP Cooney, that means infuriating his parents and partner as he pauses and rewinds, constantly on the lookout for applicable concepts. Andrew Browne spends more time watching rugby now than he ever did.

The former second row still wants his future to be wrapped up in rugby, yet he knows it is a double-edged sword.

“I would love to (stay in coaching) but the reason I am doing a masters right now is because coaching is so fickle. More than playing. Man, I had 12 years of one- and two-year contracts. It gets you in the end.

“There is a lot of me that cries out for a bit of stability in my job. At the same time, I’d love to coach as a job. That is a dream. Once I get this masters done, who knows?”

Cooney is similarly battle-scarred.

“I’m blessed right now in that I have the best of both worlds. I have my career but at the same time I am coaching senior rugby. I am still involved in the game. God only knows what is around the corner sure. I learned that the hard way. You don’t know what is in store for you.”

They live in a world of few constants, but rugby will always remain one of them.

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A NEVILLE HOTEL

TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS

UPDATE



IN FEBRUARY, THE TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS SCHOOLS MENTAL WELLBEING PILOT PROGRAMME AND APP WERE LAUNCHED AS PART OF THE SECOND PHASE OF THE #IMTAKINGCONTROL CAMPAIGN.

Led by Ireland & Munster Rugby Player and campaign ambassador, Eimear Considine, the programme is designed to instil a positive approach to mental health and wellbeing among young people, reducing stigma around mental health and encouraging the development of positive wellbeing habits which they can bring into adulthood.

The Tackle Your Feelings (TYF) campaign, which is funded by the Z Zurich Foundation, aims to promote a proactive attitude towards mental health and to provide people with the tools to 'Take Control' of their mental wellbeing using principles from both sport and positive psychology. The TYF Schools App has been designed to work as part of a classroom programme with students guided through relevant resources, completing exercises which enhance their awareness and knowledge of relevant mental wellbeing topics.

The programme is aimed at Transition Year students (or equivalent) who are about to embark on their next steps into the senior cycle of their secondary education. Multiple schools across the island of Ireland have been recruited to pilot the programme, the students will develop coping skills and enhance their support networks, putting them in the best position to 'Take Control' of their mental wellbeing.

Anthony Brennan, CEO, Zurich Ireland said: "We at Zurich are delighted to support this schools pilot programme for Tackle Your Feelings with Rugby Players Ireland. The research shows that Irish parents recognise more can be done in schools to help their children to take control of their mental wellbeing in the same way as they do for their physical wellbeing. We believe the new schools pilot programme and App will encourage students to be more proactive when it comes to mental health and wellbeing and incorporate mental wellbeing into their daily routine as they move towards adulthood."

RECENT RESEARCH, COMMISSIONED BY ZURICH & RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND AND CONDUCTED BY IREACH WITH PARENTS ACROSS THE ISLAND OF IRELAND REVEALED:

1/5

parents don't believe their child understands the importance of mental wellbeing

68%

of parents agreed that schools prioritise their child's physical health over their mental health

1/4

children have missed school due to issues around their mental wellbeing

86%

of parents believe more needs to be done in school to help their child take control of their mental wellbeing

84%

of parents agree that seeing role models like rugby players 'taking control' of their mental wellbeing empowers their child to start talking

68%

of parents believe their child will be more likely to discuss the topic of mental wellbeing with their friends if they download the Tackle Your Feelings App and complete the programme

DOWNLOAD THE FREE APP



BEING HER BEST

THE IRISH RUGBY STAR AND TEACHER IS SHOWING STUDENTS THE WAY THROUGH TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS

Perhaps the most likely explanation for Eimear Considine's popularity is contained in that familiar saying about the difficulty of keeping good people down.

Good though she is, it is a concept that implies a world free from chance, resilience and hard work. It is too simple an explanation for there was plenty of toil and heartache along the way.

Sitting in a Dublin café just a couple of years ago, she would not have been instantly recognisable. Yet if she were to swivel around with her coffee today, the 'Eimearnator' would get more than a few knowing looks.

However, while punditry has become part of her ever-evolving portfolio, the Clare woman remains steadfast in her commitment to her primary duties. She sees her TV work as an endorsement of the growing influence of women's sport, an influence she has helped to foster.

From running out at her local GAA club in Kilmihil to the vast expanses of Croke Park, Considine's sporting trajectory was already enviable before she opted to challenge herself in yet another field.



Despite being at the peak of her powers with the Banner County, Considine felt that there were more places to go. As Vince Lombardi once said, “perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence.” To her mind, there was no merit in stifling aspiration. It is something she impresses upon her students.

“One of my traits has always been in wanting to be the very best at what I do,” she candidly admits. “As a competitive athlete you set very high standards in all that you do. As a result, it’s very hard to let them dip in anything else. It can be a great characteristic to have but it can also be a massive burden.

“Whether it’s the punditry, whether it’s working or playing, you want to be the fittest and the fastest. You want to be the best analyst, the best teacher, the funniest teacher... you want to be doing everything at your very best.

“It took time, but I’ve come to accept that I’m not going to be the best at everything. You can strive for excellence for sure, but there will always be room for improvement. Every day is a learning day.”

Finding the energy for learning must count as one of Considine’s primary attributes. Simply scanning her daily schedule is a tiring exercise. It’s hard to fathom that at one point it was even busier as she juggled camogie, football and sevens rugby. With her teaching in tow, something had to give.

“Looking back, I had burnout and I didn’t realise it,” she reveals. “I got to the stage of being overwhelmed. I was trying to do too many things at once and by the time I realised it, it had gone too far.

“Sometimes it’s very hard to say no. You want to do everything all at once, and well. But it’s not about making everyone else happy. You have to be happy in yourself and there was a period when I wasn’t enjoying my work, I didn’t enjoy training, I didn’t enjoy my free time because I was so tired.

“If you stand back, you might be able to catch it. You’re the only one that knows what’s going on inside your head, so you have to acknowledge it before it happens and talk about it.

“Having a chat with somebody makes them aware, it doesn’t make you a weaker person or not a better rugby player. If anything, it makes you stronger for it. As a result, you’ll perform better, play better and enjoy life more!”

Speaking as she fronts Rugby Players Ireland’s latest phase of Tackle Your Feelings, you get the sense that Considine’s work is only just beginning. She has plenty of life experience to



share and wisdom to impart, not least having lived through the experience of her father’s passing while she was a teenager.

“My mam is the most amazing person ever. She had three children to rear. She threw us into sport, into music, into art and kept us going. Obviously, it was a very sad time and looking back it was very difficult, but we didn’t dwell on it, we had to move on as a family.

“When you’ve been through something like that it really does put life into perspective. You might have picked up an injury, or you miss a tackle and you think it’s the end of the world when it genuinely isn’t.

“You have to live in the moment. Celebrate the successes, accept the defeats and then park them. The exact same scenario could face you two minutes later. You have to be ready for the next ball - on and off the field.”

Despite injury ruling out of Ireland’s opening game of the Six Nations, Considine returned to the fold to help the side to an impressive win over Wales. While victory was savoured, Considine’s experiences in the Irish jersey have taught her not to get ahead of herself.

“We’ve endured some difficult times as a national squad. Sometimes, the only good thing was that I could get back into work the next day and get on with things. But out of every difficulty there comes an opportunity. Those tough days helped me to develop my resilience and bounce back to focus on the other purposes in my life like my job and the people around me.

“I love the job I’m in. It’s challenging to manage 800 girls in class every day, but it’s absolutely motivating. Then my support network – my fiancé, my mam, my sister, the girls I play rugby with. I’m lucky that I have good people in my life. They want the best for you, but they keep you grounded too - that’s for sure!

“It’s not about being the best. It’s about being your best. That’s the most important thing.”



IT'S NEVER AS BAD AS YOU THINK IT IS

JACK CARTY JOINS THE
TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS TEAM



“I have something more than courage. I have patience.”

“I guess it kinda sums up the early parts of my rugby career,” Jack Carty surmises as he is asked to reflect on phrases he lives by. “I always knew that I could get to a certain point, but I had to go on quite a journey to get there... I had to remain very patient.”

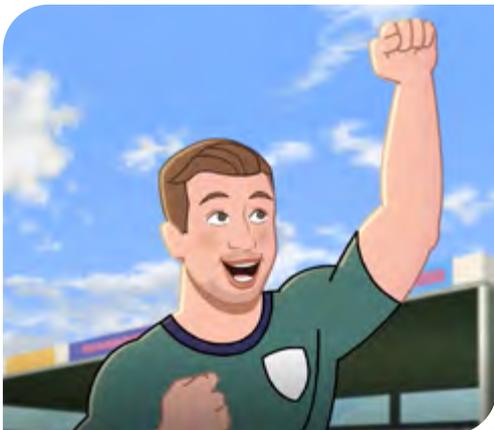
It’s quite remarkable that Carty’s Irish debut only came a little over a year ago. A trip to Japan and a further 8 caps followed in a whirlwind start to his international career. However, when Andy Farrell reconvened the national side for Guinness Six Nations duty in January, the Connacht Rugby out-half and several of his Rugby World Cup teammates missed out.

Having landed back in Galway hungry for action, the Irish player management programme meant that Carty had to bide his time before taking to the field. The delayed return was then compounded by injury and a loss of form. With Covid-19 wreaking havoc with the season, one might assume that Carty would be happy to consign the 2019/20 campaign to the rear-view mirror. Yet the Athlone man would see it otherwise.

“I wasn’t so great at dealing with things as a younger player. I would say that non-selection impacted me greatly in terms of how the rest of my week went and how I carried myself until the game was done with. I used to internalise it and it would bubble and bubble away. Something small, anything at all, would flip me off.

“For example, if what I experienced earlier in the season had happened a few years ago I would have been in a state of panic, thinking worst case scenario in terms of my career and wasting energy on external things I had no control over.

“I’ve flipped the narrative on it a bit. If I see an obstacle, a new signing in my position, an injury, I think of it as an opportunity to get better or to grow. You need obstacles and tests in rugby. You need them in life too. It gives you a completely new perspective on everything.”



Of course, the Athlone out-half didn’t just wake up one day with a new sense of understanding. Over several months Carty paid regular visits to Niamh Fitzpatrick, a Dublin based Sport and Performance Psychologist, who instilled greater discipline in his thinking. In more recent months, the Tackle Your Feelings campaign has also enabled him to talk about how he has overcome the challenges he has faced.

“Reflecting back, there was a lot of wasted energy and the way I carried myself affected other people too. I sometimes wish I could feed all that I’ve learned back to who I was a few years ago. I wonder if I had a better understanding of where my thoughts went and how they impacted me, how it might have turned out. But that being said, I probably wouldn’t be where I am without the years I had to go through.

“I still have to work on it regularly. It’s difficult to block out the way I feel when certain things aren’t going the way I want them to. Just like anyone, I can get caught up in the daily stresses of life. I had to develop an understanding that they don’t have to be any bigger than they actually are.

“I think we’re experiencing that more than ever at the moment. I do believe that being able to be present can help a lot though. Not thinking about things that happened in the past or that will happen in the future. None of us know. Just be present in the moment and take each day as it comes. That will help us through it.”

Named as the Supporters’ Player of the Year in 2019, Carty is a popular figure in the Irish rugby community. Now in becoming the latest ambassador for the Tackle Your Feelings campaign, his stock as a role model is set to rise further still.

“It’s a strange tag to have,” he admits. “I still find it strange when people ask me for photos and autographs. I always appreciate it as I know how much of an impact 10 or 20 seconds of my time will have on their day. I was just like them once.

“With all sport being knocked on the head for the moment, I know that people are missing that connection. At Connacht all the players have been getting on the phone to some of our season-ticket holders and checking in. Again, it’s something small but it can make a huge difference.”

While Carty is regularly cited by young fans as their favourite player, the former Marist College schoolboy star doesn’t recall having a specific idol in sporting terms. While he leans in on the musings of Michael Jordan and the late Kobe Bryant, special space is reserved for someone closer to home.

“My cousin Brian was a constant support to me throughout my career. Unfortunately, he passed away two years ago now, but right up to his final days he had advice for me. Now I can’t really repeat some of the stuff he might say to me... especially if I’d played poorly. He always had a few choice words!

“I remember before he passed away, he spoke about not having any regrets when I was finished. He asked me if I was doing everything that I could do? You could see he felt the frustration I was having. He was frustrated too because he knew what I was able to do but then he’d see me making silly mistakes.

“Brian had a lot of time to think and I think about him a lot too. He was someone who enabled me to get to where I am. Of course, I’d love if he were still here to experience it with the family, but in another sense anytime I go out onto the pitch, I know he’s there with me. That’s what made playing for Ireland in a World Cup so special.

“At the end of the day, rugby is something I’m blessed to do. It’s a job I love. I see my friends everyday. Yes, it can be a frustrating game, but I’m incredibly fortunate to be here.

“The patience paid off.”

NEVER BOTTLE IT UP!

AS THE LATEST PHASE OF TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS WAS LAUNCHED, STUART MCCLOSKEY SPOKE TO JONATHON BRADLEY OF THE BELFAST TELEGRAPH TO EXPLAIN WHY HE IS SUPPORTING THE CAMPAIGN





Neither the life of a new father nor that of a professional sportsman leave too many seconds to one's self.

Whether it be the next game or next training session, the next changing or next feed, more immediate concerns are many.

As such, with balancing the needs of three-week-old son Arlo alongside his responsibilities as a key cog in Ulster's machine and being a part of Ireland's Six Nations squad, there has been little chance of late for Stuart McCloskey to process much more than the task at hand.

Quite suddenly, in the aftermath of Ulster's surprise defeat to Ospreys, he found himself in need of a moment's pause.

"The Tackle Your Feelings campaign, it's been more appropriate to me this week than at any other stage of my life," reflected the 27-year-old, who is the latest Ulster star to lend his time to Rugby Players Ireland and Zurich's mental wellbeing campaign, on this occasion a pilot programme and app aimed at school children.

"I was sat after that Ospreys game and I could feel myself getting emotional about losing. I was annoyed. I was annoyed at the result, I was annoyed at a few of the decisions that didn't go our way and I was getting emotional.

"I was sat there thinking, 'What is going on with me?'"

"Like, it's a game. A game we should have won that we lost but it wasn't the biggest game of the season, let's be honest.

"It's not going to cost us our season but I'm sat there feeling emotional, wondering what's going on.

"I've just had a baby and then lost both my grandparents in the space of 10 days. It wasn't unexpected, it happens, but it's tough and it's trying to deal with all that and cope with it.

"I guess it was like a release or something, just getting to the end of the game before you stop to think about any of it. Something clicks, something triggers it, and you're emotional.

"It has shown me definitely that you can bottle stuff up without even realising it and then it can hit you at any stage.

"I sat there for a few minutes, thought about it, rationalised it, and that sort of brought me back. But you can't do that, bottle it all up."

Both time and recent fatherhood have matured McCloskey. In years gone by, he admits he was not always as adept at recognising and processing such emotions.

While his Ulster career has been one of steady ascent since the day he was belatedly brought into the fold having been a stand-out for Dungannon in the All-Ireland League, his time with the national side has required more fortitude.

“

I've just had a baby and then lost both my grandparents in the space of 10 days. It wasn't unexpected, it happens, but it's tough and it's trying to deal with all that and cope with it.

In February 2016, alongside Josh van der Flier and Ultan Dillane, he was given a debut by Joe Schmidt in no less a fixture than against England in Twickenham.

Reports on his performance that day ranged from “promising” to “made for this level”. Having carried well and seen two offloads go to hand, it certainly seemed sure to be a taste of things to come.

He has pulled on a green jersey just twice more, on both occasions as part of much-changed sides against lesser opposition.

“It’s only the last year-and-a-half, two years that I’ve really learned how to cope with it,” he said of those frequent omissions under Schmidt.

“When I was younger I probably listened to too many people and got more annoyed about it than I should.

“When I missed out on the Six Nations squad (initially), I was disappointed but it wasn’t the way it would have been, say, three years ago. Probably just a bit mature, and then becoming a dad as well, there’s more important things. But it’s a learning process, learning from how you react to things.

“People wouldn’t have seen it necessarily but I probably didn’t react the way that I should have in the past, when I wasn’t getting a look in and personally thought that I should have been.

“It’s hard not to bring home. You speak to guys in a normal job, rugby is something that you always take home. Even when you’re off for the summer, you’re thinking about staying in shape or even at the weekend, you’ve a day off on Sunday and

“

People wouldn’t have seen it necessarily but I probably didn’t react the way that I should have in the past, when I wasn’t getting a look in and personally thought that I should have been.

you’re sat there thinking, ‘What could I have done better? Why did we not win that game?’

“You have to do that to make yourself better I suppose, but you have to take the emotion away from it almost.

“I wouldn’t say I took it out on those around me but I was certainly a bit down, a bit grumpy with my girlfriend or my mum and dad. They certainly had to listen to some amount of rubbish from me.

“My girlfriend will tell you that I’ll watch every rugby game that’s on but it’s trying to separate the two things now.

“(Having a son), it’s life-changing. It puts everything into perspective. Rugby is important, it’s my job, but he’s the most important thing in the world to me, and he always will be.”

Now with a child of his own, McCloskey was struck by the statistic that 84% of parents believe role models such as rugby players ‘taking control’ of their mental wellbeing would empower their child to start talking about their own, a key reason behind him acting as an ambassador for this latest campaign.

“As a rugby player, you get chances to help people and this was something I thought I’d be able to do,” he said.

“Unfortunately at the minute, you hear so much about people struggling and how that can be.

“If me talking about how important it is to talk helps one person open up or talk, then that’s great, isn’t it?”



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IT'S A LONG WAY TO INTERNATIONAL ACCLAIM

Tipperary flyer Ameer-Leigh Murphy goes back to her roots

AMEE-LEIGH MURPHY CROWE



Amee-Leigh Murphy Crowe probably struggles for space to house her individual accolades. Rugby Players Ireland's Women's Sevens Player of the Year in 2016, 2017 and 2019 deservedly added international accolades to her cabinet of domestic awards last year.

But despite being named in the World Rugby Sevens Dream Team having topped the try scoring charts on the series last year, Murphy Crowe took just as much pride in being named the South East Sports Star of the Year in January.

"To be recognised locally was massive for me," she acknowledges. "I appreciate that not many people know much about Sevens rugby, particularly in my part of the world. So, it was significant that it was registering on the local radar.

"To be honest, I went down there just looking forward to a nice night out because I don't get many of them! The Tipperary hurlers were also nominated for the award and like most people I genuinely thought 'c'mon, they've just gone and won an All-Ireland!' This is hurling country after all!

"It really took me aback how much they were aware of my own story and the history of the team and the influence they felt I was having on young girls in the region. When you're going about your rugby sometimes you don't realise that there are people looking in and taking an interest in you."

The way 2020 is panning out, Murphy Crowe is aware that there might not be much of a season to celebrate when the next awards ceremony comes around. The Irish try machine is making the most of the downtime at the moment and ensuring sure that it doesn't go to waste.

"It's been ok actually but I'm sure it'll get harder over the next few weeks if this continues," she appreciates. "We were due to have a few training camps which I suppose is bound to impact on the development of the team. Above all you miss the pure fun of playing matches and just seeing the girls.

"It's going to be a test for us as a team but strangely enough it might bring us together in a way we might not have realised. We have to trust that everyone is taking their own individual responsibility, and they are. We speak a lot about the extra 1% and those little wins will be huge in the greater scheme of things once we come out of this situation."

While some will study match footage and others will rehab niggles, Murphy Crowe is availing of the fresh country air as she works her way through the programmes set out by management back at Abbotstown. This has been further complimented by her learnings from her course at Setanta College.

"I think it puts me at a great advantage," she says



of her studies in Strength & Conditioning at the Thurles facility. "For someone from a sporting career, you come armed with a lot of knowledge already. As a result, I think there is a greater appreciation for the content and the study materials. When you're in the gym, you have a better understanding the body - how it works, the importance of rest and recovery.

"As I've said, everyone looks for that additional 1% so while I'm in the course I'm trying to soak up everything I can. The same goes for when I'm at HQ and working with our S&C coaches and physios. Not many people can go into that world on the back of career in professional sport where you are thinking along these lines every day."

Despite making her Irish debut six years ago in Guangzhou, Murphy Crowe is just 25 years of age. Naturally, she hopes her life beyond the game doesn't have to take off for some time. Nevertheless, she is grateful to have something to turn her attention to so that her rugby doesn't become all consuming.

"I haven't quite decided what the future holds," she admits, acknowledging that Dr Vincent O'Flaherty has been helping her to look at her options. "I may continue my education but if something crosses my path before then I will have to consider it. For now, Sevens rugby is my main focus."

Her commitment over the years cannot be questioned. Last year was an extraordinary one by any standards. While this season may never be realised on the same scale, it is unique in its own way.

"It was a surreal year for me personally" she reflects. "A few awards came my way alright, but I always take a step back and recognise that they don't come off the back of my work. The girls and the backroom staff are the ones who have manoeuvred me into this position. A lot of work goes into me scoring tries! What I cherish the most is what the team can do for me. What I give back is something their work enables.

"Unfortunately, we don't know what's on the horizon as everything changes so quickly at the moment. Hopefully when the restrictions lift we'll all be hitting the ground running again! I'm looking forward to it!"

SKY'S THE LIMIT

The former Ireland and Leinster No.8 on taking his considerable frame to unprecedented heights

VICTOR COSTELLO

"I remember sitting beside you on a flight going to an international game one time," Marcus Horan reminds Victor Costello. "You grabbed the arms of the seat so tight that they almost came off!"

Looking at the 6ft 5' colossus, you begin to wonder how heavy duty the chair was.

"I guess I saw a lot of similarities between flying and playing rugby," Costello surmises. "I've never really been able to say that my fear of flying has gone but it enticed me because of the challenge. Rewards for overcoming challenges drive you on both as a player and as a pilot."

While some players give little thought to life after rugby, Costello was particularly assertive in his plans. As the curtain was drawing to a close, he regularly took to Westin Airport in an attempt to make up his training hours... despite the best efforts of Irish weather.

When the former Leinster man's contract finished up on June 30th 2005, the very next day he was on his way to a flight school in the sunnier climes of Florida.

"One of the first times I came home was for the Heineken Cup semi-final between Leinster and Munster in 2006. At that stage I was 9 months out of the game and although my mind had wandered back on the odd occasion, I had a new focus and I had to see that as a positive.

"I had stayed in touch with a few Leinster lads although back in those days any phone numbers I had were scrawled on the back of a card. They had just come off that great win over Toulouse and any of them I managed to speak to really thought they'd beat Munster.



"Now, I didn't want Leinster to lose but I had been 10 years there and yet here they were on the verge of winning the European Cup within months of me leaving! I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a bit of a conflict. Munster subsequently ran riot but standing in Lansdowne Road with 40,000 people that day was when I went 'Jesus, it's really over!'"

Costello enjoyed a varied career, encompassing stints in Galway, London and even in Barcelona where he finished 22nd in the shot-put event at the 1992 Olympics. Capped 39 times by Ireland, his service to elite sport in the country remains highly regarded.

"I had to make a lot of sacrifices for my sporting career," he says. "Before Brian [O'Driscoll] retired, he was chatting to Derek Hegarty and I. We spoke about what we missed and what we didn't. Hego said he loved having his Saturdays back. I couldn't agree because I'm still towing the same line!"

"But that's just it, I do believe a career in aviation works for rugby players. What are they good at? They're good at making sacrifices, making decisions. They're disciplined, loyal, prepared to work in a team and towards goals. You're yards from the line at Thomond Park and know the game is in your hands – you back yourself to do the job."

"I always remember going through severe turbulence over the Alps one time. I knew if we climbed we could get above it but we had to wait for Air Traffic Control at Milan to clear us."

"It was one of those times where you couldn't see the flight deck because everything was jumping and moving so quickly. You're trying to control the rate of climb; the thrust levers are moving so fast and you're bouncing around. Even the crew you rely on are strapped to their seats."

"Eventually we got the go ahead and we bounced all the way to 38,000ft. It was heart pumping stuff and highly pressurised, yet I was at my calmest."



"All the way home I was numb, but at the time I dealt with it. To my mind, that ability came from sport. From being on the backfoot, people doubting your ability and you rise above it. It was hugely satisfying and something I'd only ever experienced on the rugby pitch."

Together with FK Snepvangers, whom he met during his time with Ryanair, Costello has established Flying Start Flying Smart, a community of pilots for pilots who need information, advice, coaching, training and new jobs. Both men appreciate the aviation world is a daunting one, therefore from the start of a pilot's career they will establish a relationship and guide them through until retirement.

According to their research, the next 18 years will see almost one million pilots come into the aviation industry. Plane leasing is at an all-time high as companies race to facilitate those who have never flown – surprisingly, the vast majority of people on Earth.

"There is an unprecedented demand for pilots but we know that for all the good, there is the bad and ugly too. The view from the office is great but it is a rigorous training process and the lifestyle can be quite hampering. Ultimately, we think that rugby players fit the bill," Costello reiterates.

"Ah, but there is no mould!" Snep interjects with his dulcet Dutch tones. "In fact, Victor is a great example of someone breaking it! He was afraid of flying for God's sake! You don't have to have model planes at home or have a particular set of characteristics. People do it for many different reasons."

"Very true!" Costello chimes back in. "But when you're the captain of an airline, you have to make decisions. I've been on a flight when there has been a sick person on board. Thankfully we had a doctor, so you're talking to the doctor, talking to air traffic control, weighing up your options. Trusting people around you. Everything is happening very quickly."

"The fast-paced environment of a rugby game is exactly the same. You're talking to the referee, dealing with teammates, hearing the fans. Sometimes the game comes down to split-second decisions. Do I pass? Do I go myself?"

"All the time you're doing your job, you're also dealing with people, but as you do so you're relying on the same attributes that brought you to the fore of your rugby career."

"That's what guys miss, being at the fore of their chosen career and reaping the rewards of a result. They don't want to disappear; they want to be at the top. You're very tired landing an aircraft after five days of work, but my God are you hugely satisfied!"

INTERNATIONAL RUGBY PLAYERS



TRIO JOIN BOARD

Former British & Irish Lions and Ireland captain Brian O'Driscoll, Pacific Rugby Players founder Hale T-Pole and Dr. Sharron Flahive, Waratahs team doctor for over 20 years, have joined the board of the global players' association.

Brian O'Driscoll said: "I'm joining the board of International Rugby Players as the game enters a defining period in its history. It's clear to me

that rugby needs to change in order to properly grow and players need to be at the forefront of shaping this.

"There are many areas that need to be addressed, from player burnout to reform of the international season and the laws of the game itself and I'm really looking forward to the role."

Dr. Sharron Flahive said: "After 20 years with the Waratahs in Super Rugby, I'm delighted to be able to use my knowledge and experience on a global scale with International Rugby Players. From concussion and player load to the effects of long-haul travel, there are many areas that we need to work on to ensure the long-term welfare of our players and I'm really excited to work on these issues."





Former Tongan international Hale T-Pole said: "As chairman of the official Pacific Players representative body, I have been working closely with International Rugby Players, but my appointment to the board is an even better opportunity to raise the issues and concerns of Pacific Island players at the highest level.

"We've accomplished a lot but have much more to do and I look forward to joining Brian, Sharron and all the board as we focus on having our voice heard in the years to come."

The new members were welcomed by the existing board; Chairman Patrick Manley (Independent), Vice-Chairman Damian Hopley (RPA, England), Eugene Henning (My Players, South Africa) and Rob Nichol (NZRPA, New Zealand).

International Rugby Players CEO, Omar Hassanein said: "The addition of Sharron, Hale and Brian is great news for our organisation. Collectively, they bring great experience to our set-up, as well as a huge depth of knowledge that will be important in shaping our strategy for a new era in the game.

"They recognise the need to amplify the player's voice globally and ensure a genuine representation in the game, especially when it comes to the big issues such as global calendar, the growth of emerging nations, player load and laws of the game. It's certainly an interesting time ahead for our organisation and our sport."



PLAYERS OUTLINE MINIMUM CONDITIONS FOR GLOBAL SEASON

International Rugby Players has announced a list of Players' Principles that must form the basis of any future global tournaments.

The player body formulated the principles last year, after plans for the proposed Nations Championship were scrapped. They were again discussed when the organisation's General Executive and Players' Council met last month, with the issue of a global season still firmly on the agenda.

The focus of the Players' Principles is on ensuring that all tournaments include:

- An equal playing field with more meaningful matches for emerging nations, with a view to removing the current tier system and allowing the game to grow
- An optimal match, training and travel load which protects the physical and mental well-being of players, allowing them to consistently perform at their best
- A balance between club and country, ensuring that clubs adhere to Regulation 9 and that players don't feel compromised when leaving their clubs for international duty
- A commercially viable model that allows players to be paid a fair revenue share
- A competition that works for the fans

World Player of the Year, South Africa's Pieter-Steph du Toit said: "One of the things that was lost in the mix last year during the Nations Championship

debate was that players are actually in favour of a proper global season that works for everyone.

"But we're against anything that burns players out, excludes emerging nations and doesn't grow the game. These principles are a sound basis from which to start the discussion and of course we expect the players' view to be properly considered from the outset of any talks."

The Players' Principles were presented to World Rugby and Unions at the Rugby Athletes Commission in December and again at a forum in London last month.

International Rugby Players board member, Dr Sharron Flahive said: "We are consistently reviewing statistics around training load, optimal match load and long-haul travel. It is important that any future tournament focuses on getting this right in order to have better performing players and, as a result, a better product for fans to enjoy".

USA captain Blaine Scully added: "It is very important that any tournament structure is clear, easy to understand and works for the fans.

"As players, we recognise the importance of a commercially viable model that engages all stakeholders. Our aim is to work with the relevant bodies within rugby to build a global product that grows the game for all and delivers value to our supporters."



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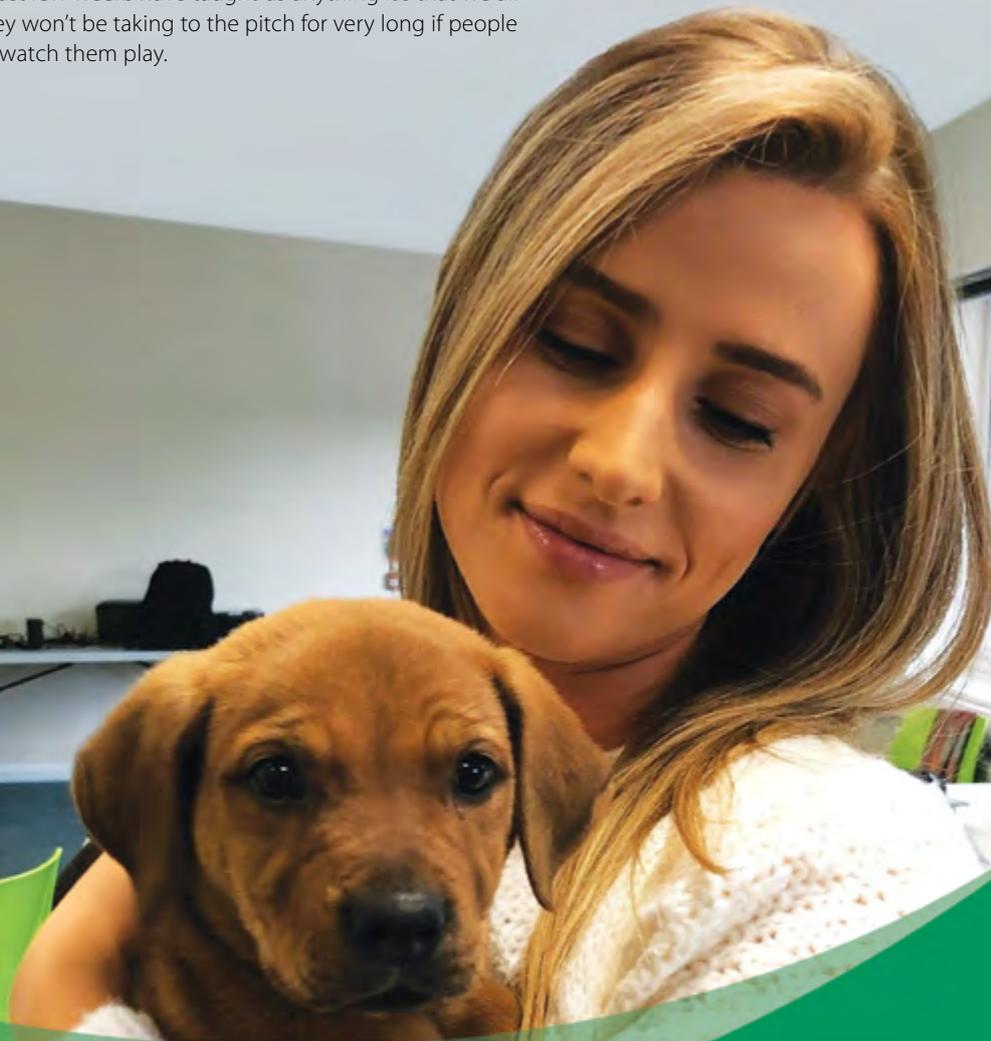
Christina Mahon is the Community Engagement Manager
at Rugby Players Ireland

CHRISTINA MAHON

With Covid-19 continuing to blaze a trail across the country, everything has been put on hold. Homes have become makeshift offices, gyms, restaurants and playgrounds - life as we know it has come to a standstill.

“Our members are going to have an extremely important role to play in the months ahead,” Christina Mahon tells us. “Obviously they’ll be busy in their own right, but if the past few weeks have taught us anything it’s that we all rely on each other. They won’t be taking to the pitch for very long if people can’t afford to go and watch them play.”

“All businesses and charities are going to need a helping hand. Though they mightn’t acknowledge it yet, our members will have an influential role to play in helping them to their feet again.”



Since Rugby Players Ireland underwent something of a reboot in 2017, engagement with the community has been established as a core principle of the association. Viewed as key role models by any standard, the association reminds its membership of their responsibility to contribute to society in meaningful ways. Through their engagement at both a commercial and local level, they can become valued members of the community.

“While we do all we can to facilitate relationships,” Christina adds, “ultimately it has to be led by the players to be successful. That’s key. When I first came into this role, I spent a lot of my time banging my head against a wall because I had some great charities willing to work with us but the players just weren’t biting.

“I identified that we needed a core member of each squad to take it on. Any of us could go in and speak to the group at length, whereas one of their peers can ramp up support in as many words. Ideally, they are also someone who leads the way in terms of their own engagement. If one sees the benefit, that influences the entire squad.”

The nominated Community Engagement representative works alongside their Player Development Manager to determine influences and interests within the group. Thereafter, Christina will research the viable options which have included hospital visits, DIY in the locality and volunteering at animal rescue centres.

“Once it gets off the ground, it can be a very rewarding experience. In my time I’ve come across many players who’ve had a tough week in rugby terms. Their teammates convince them to join us on an outing and I think they realise that there is so much more out there than not being selected for a game. It’s an awesome way to give them perspective.”



While there is definite encouragement from Rugby Players Ireland for its members to become involved with charities, there is also a balancing act to perform. The players are where they are for their performance on the rugby field. Therefore, that must be protected insofar as is possible.

“It’s the difficult part of my role,” Christina admits. “Naturally charities are very excited to get the players into them, but I like to think that most organisations see them as individual people rather than as a rugby player. In that way I have to set expectations.

“I have come across charities that appreciate that the players are training 5/6 times in the week and need to prioritise their rest periods. In the ordinary scheme of things, a charity wouldn’t ask someone working in an office to skip out for a bit during the day, so the same applies to the players. They aren’t here to sift through hundreds of autographs either. Rather, they are there to give some tangible benefit to the charity and that should be respected.

“Thankfully we have established several good relationships between charities and individual players. I never dictate it because it has to be player led – that player has to develop the connection and align for the right reasons. Becoming an ambassador is a very worthy thing, but it also brings expectations of that role.”

In addition to managing players’ charitable interactions, Christina works alongside Dr Hannah McCormack in the delivery of the Tackle Your Feelings programme. Since TYF 2.0 was launched last September, Christina has been across the rolling out of workshops in offices and school throughout Ireland in addition to being a direct contact between the initiative and the players and assisting with PR activity.



“There is a certain amount of crossover between my charity work and TYF. I guess the nature of some people is that they gravitate towards helping others. For example, with TYF we want to give people the chance to develop a skillset that they can have in their backpocket if ever something challenging in their life arises. It’s a privilege to help facilitate that and bring good into people’s lives. It’s quite humbling.

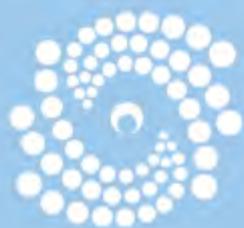
“I’ve always had a keen sense of perspective from a young age,” she adds. “As a result, I wasn’t phased by some of the problems that might ordinarily face a teenager for instance. I had a good grasp of what was a real issue and what wasn’t - the difference between caring for a sick relative and dealing with something trivial. I knew what was important in life.”

While the key to corporate engagement is often the face-to-face interaction, the current situation dictates that such interaction won’t be possible for some time. Nevertheless, players can still play their part from the safety of their own homes.

“We had a number of things lined up to bring us to the end of the season. Obviously, it’s very disappointing for everyone that they won’t be happening. We just have to appreciate that by staying home we are already playing our part for the greater good.

“If any good is to come of this, I think it will be that a real sense of community will have been established again. People have started to realise just how fast they were moving, and we were always looking beyond the horizon. Through Covid-19 I believe people will start to look closer to home. Our players will, and they’ll be at hand to help anyone that needs it.”





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