

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF
RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

AUTUMN 2019



TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS PHASE TWO

TACKLE
YOUR
FEELINGS

**BLAZING
A TRAIL**

JORDAN CONROY

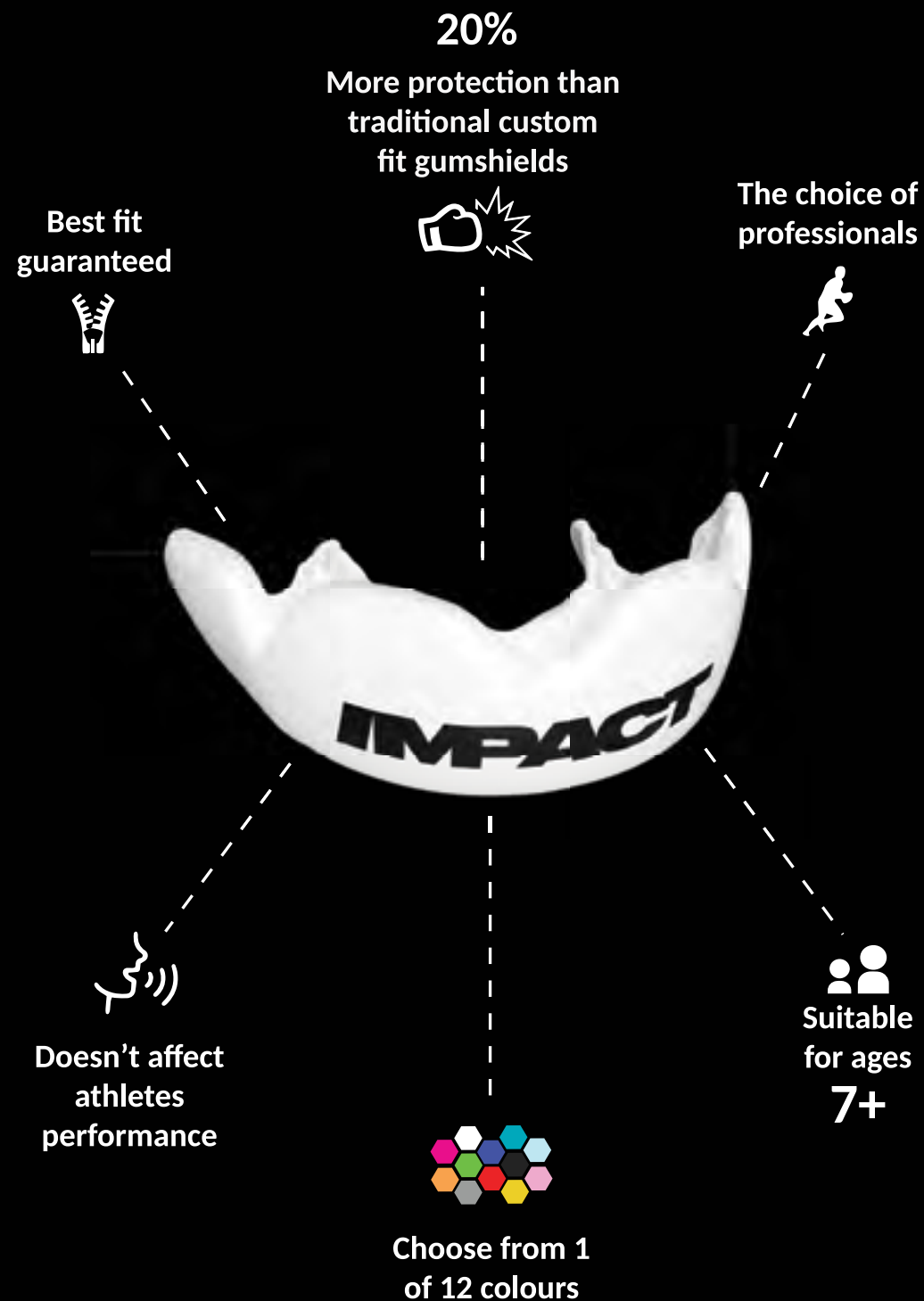
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RUGBY PEOPLE**

GORDON D'ARCY & JERRY FLANNERY



RUGBY PLAYERS
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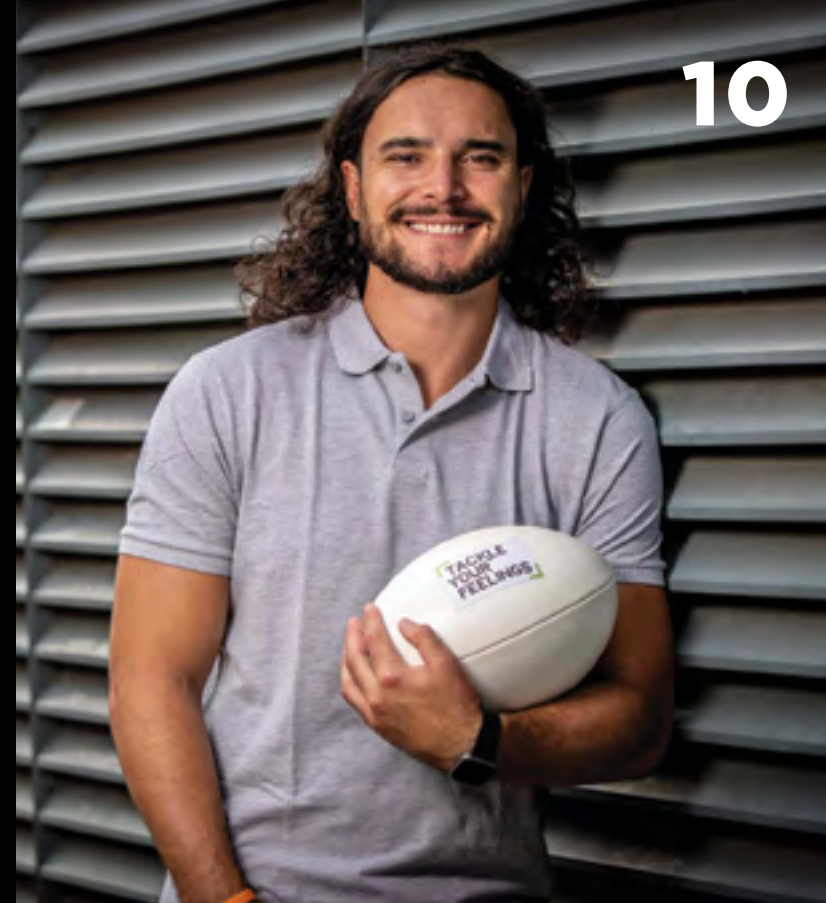
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Directors:

R. Kearney, J. Sexton, S. Jennings, Peter O'Mahony, A. Trimble, P. McKenna, J. Treacy, E. McKeon, 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

Instagram: @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



Like a first day at school, the first day of pre-season brings with it a whole sense of nervous energy and apprehension. When entering the school threshold, you're eyeing up the new kids in the class and wondering where you might all place in the pecking order.

Every school journey meanders through a series of experiences within and outside of the classroom. However, much of it pales into the background when a significant exam looms on the horizon.

For our members, there is no bigger test than a Rugby World Cup - especially when there is such high expectations of your results. For those who have returned to provincial rugby, the examination is no less challenging. A new season means new opportunity and without a good proportion of the star pupils in attendance there is a chance to get to the front of the class.

The off-season also provides Rugby Players Ireland with a chance to re-examine itself. Over the summer, we worked hard with the IRFU to introduce the first collective agreement between the players' association and the Union. This we believe, is a ground-breaking and progressive step for the relationship between the professional rugby players in Ireland and the IRFU. This work has seen both Rugby Players Ireland and the IRFU, listen to, learn from and negotiate with each-other to reach agreement on matters of importance to players and the Union.

There are very few sporting codes in Europe who have such an advanced relationship between employer and employee to allow for the representatives of the playing group to help shape the employment conditions of those it represents.

The new structure gives both employer and employee a medium in each four-year cycle, to revisit its relationship and make any agreed amendments necessary resulting from changes in environment or from learnings over that period. We believe this advancement progresses Rugby Players Ireland

further along its vision "to make Ireland the best place in the World to play rugby.

Whilst we look forward to what evolves in Japan, we must be reminded we are dealing with sport and so many variables - form, weather, on-field decisions and even luck. There is no way of predicting how the team will do in their toughest of examinations of recent times even though we have become accustomed to regular visits to the trophy cabinet.

However, what we do know is, regardless of the outcome in the coming months, we are developing an environment that is nurturing success, which is no bad thing. The players will return to their provinces where winning is now part of the culture and continues to permeate between our professional teams.

Unfortunately, the conclusion of the World Cup campaign will see one of the most decorated pupils bid farewell to the game. Rory Best has been and continues to be a true leader on and off the field. He has instigated change through his involvement at board level of Rugby Players Ireland and brought Ireland to unprecedented successes on the field.

We look forward to celebrating Rory's career at his finale dinner later in the year. In the meantime, there is plenty of work to do in Japan and we wish all involved the very best and we look forward to welcoming them back in November.



“A new season means new opportunity and without a good proportion of the star pupils in attendance there is a chance to get to the front of the class.”

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND / IRFU ROOKIE CAMP

A career as a professional rugby player is a very exciting prospect yet can also prove to be a little daunting. In their first years in the game, players can struggle with various aspects of their new journey. Balancing their workload, managing their wellbeing and coping with added scrutiny can often present problems that might never have registered on their radar before.

As the 2019/20 season loomed large on the horizon, Rugby Players Ireland and the IRFU hosted members of the provincial academies for the second annual Rookie Camp at The Heritage Hotel in Killenard, Co. Laois.

Consisting of a broad range of modules including high-performance communication, mindfulness and self-management, the programme seeks to address the predominant considerations for a player who is setting out on a career in Irish rugby.

As the attendees arrived, former Irish internationals Gordon D'Arcy and Jerry Flannery set the scene by providing invaluable insights into their respective careers and advice on what to expect as representatives of some of the biggest clubs in the rugby world (check out page 36).

Over the course of two days, the Rookie Camp also afforded the players the opportunity to connect with some of the people who will be invaluable allies throughout their career as a professional rugby player in Ireland.

Many thanks to the IRFU and The Tom Maynard Trust for their support of this event.



NEW BOARD APPOINTMENT

Our congratulations to Iain Henderson who has been appointed to the Executive Board at Rugby Players Ireland! We look forward to working closely with Iain, who has also been named as the captain of Ulster Rugby for the coming season, in the years and months to come!

A word of thanks to Darren Cave who acted as the Ulster Rugby representative on the Executive Board for over a year having replaced Andrew Trimble in 2018. Darren's input was much appreciated, and he continues to be a strong supporter of Rugby Players Ireland.



ON THE ROAD AGAIN!

Before the 2019/20 season kicked off in earnest, Simon Keogh and Denis Hurley hit the road to meet with the various national and provincial squads to advise of behind the scenes developments at Rugby Players Ireland HQ. Simon and Denis also took the time to meet with new members and some of the more familiar faces plying their trade in the country!

With five Player Development Managers now based across the country, Rugby Players Ireland is a regular feature in the day-to-day lives of our members.

In July, the staff at Rugby Players Ireland travelled to Killaloe (at the behest of Marcus Horan) for a mid-year strategy review. The team was joined by Mike Sherry, Ronan O'Mahony, Rhys Marshall and Roger Downer, President Emeritus at the University of Limerick.



IRISH MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

Founded by business leaders for business leaders, the Irish Management Institute (IMI) have been empowering world-class executives for over sixty years. The IMI's globally-ranked executive development programmes are designed to challenge, support and inspire participants to unlock their potential and fulfil their ambitions.

Every year, Rugby Players Ireland and the IMI award three places to help inspire our membership and equip them with the tools to lead as professionals and individuals. Previous recipients include Guy Easterby, Ailis Egan, Peter Malone and Michael Swift.

Following an interview process, this year Carole Ann Clarke, Denis Hurley and Paul Wallace have been chosen! Congratulations to all!



ANNUAL GOLF CLASSIC

Following on from a famous golfing weekend at Royal Portrush, there was plenty of enthusiasm for the sport amongst our competitors at the 12th Annual Rugby Players Ireland Golf Classic in late July.

With sunshine in abundance, the stunning setting at Druids Glen was enjoyed by 22 teams comprising of our sponsors, their guests and a member of Rugby Players Ireland. Those who turned out to support their association included Alan Quinlan, Scott Fardy and Robin Copeland, while Luke McGrath and Ross Byrne also took some time out from their Rugby World Cup preparations.

“As a players’ association, we aspire to be one of the best in the world. However, with our increasing membership, it can be a challenge to stay ahead of the curve,” explained Denis Hurley, Operations Manager at Rugby Players Ireland.

“Our sponsors play a crucial role in ensuring that we do our best to set the pace. They are happy to underpin the game from behind the scenes, safe in the knowledge that we are doing what we can for our players.

“Nevertheless, it is important that from time to time our most important stakeholders get the opportunity to interact, to learn a little more about the vastly different worlds in which they live and to take some time out from their hectic schedules.”

Following the four-ball scramble, everyone convened back at Druids Glen Hotel for lunch and the all-important prize giving ceremony. Several teams featured prominently, but it was former Lion Eric Miller and his team from AIB Finance & Leasing who claimed the spoils!



- 1ST PLACE**
AIB Finance & Leasing with Eric Miller
- 2ND PLACE**
Druids Glen with Shane Byrne
- 3RD PLACE**
Vodafone Ireland with Barry Daly

Many thanks to
Druids Glen Hotel &
Golf Resort, Heineken
Ireland and all of those
who contributed to
the Annual Rugby
Players Ireland Golf
Classic 2019

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Over the summer months we were joined on the Rugby Players Ireland team by Dr Vincent O’Flaherty. As Player Development Manager for the Women’s XV’s and both Men’s and Women’s 7s programmes, Vincent replaces Nancy Chillingworth who has joined the Olympic Federation of Ireland as Performance Manager.

A graduate of IT Sligo (Bachelor of Business Studies), UCD (Higher Diploma in Education) and Maynooth University (Certificate in Child Protection), Vincent completed a PhD in Dublin City University which focused on the career decision making of Irish underage international footballers. This research examined how players were supported during their career transitions and how they balanced their elite football development and academic pathway.

Before joining Rugby Players Ireland, Vincent worked with the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) for eight years focusing on welfare, education and football regulation and also worked in a variety of areas such as child protection, agent/scout registration and policy development. As part of his role, Vincent provided advice to players and their families on the transition to the UK. In addition to this, Vincent delivered workshops to international footballers, including the senior team on anti-doping, betting and eligibility.

We speak to Vincent on page 20!

THE GOODBODY RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT BURSARY

This year, the Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary will once again aid the development and progression of 12 players’ academic studies and off-field careers. Ireland’s longest established stockbroking firm will also continue to provide career, business development, retirement and financial guidance to Rugby Players Ireland members.

Over the summer, applicants made submissions to the Board of Trustees which included Professor Roger Downer (President Emeritus at the University of Limerick), Sarah Moriarty (Goodbody), Simon Howley (Goodbody) and Denis Hurley (Operations Manager, Rugby Players Ireland).

We speak to 2019/19 recipient Dorothy Wall on page 24!



Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary Recipients

Michelle Claffey
IRELAND WOMEN’S XV’S

Tom Daly
CONNACHT RUGBY

Linda Djougang
IRELAND WOMEN’S XV’S

Foster Horan
IRELAND 7S

Patrick Kelly
MUNSTER RUGBY ACADEMY

Angus Lloyd
CONNACHT RUGBY

Martin Moloney
LEINSTER RUGBY ACADEMY

Lucy Mulhall
IRELAND 7S

Josh Murphy
LEINSTER RUGBY

Niall Murray
CONNACHT RUGBY ACADEMY

Jack Regan
ULSTER RUGBY ACADEMY

Nick Timoney
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PUTTING IT ALL INTO PERSPECTIVE

James Lowe's love of life and rugby is well grounded

JAMES LOWE

Watching next generation All Blacks play in the highest domestic competition in New Zealand should ordinarily whet the appetite for any rugby fan. But while the game is the predominant religion in the country, it seems the Kiwis don't always flock to their church.

Speaking to a New Zealander during a Mitre 10 Cup game, the small attendances are referenced. "We love our rugby" he says, "but we make the most of our time off by walking up in the mountains, jumping out of planes, sailing and doing stuff!"

This underlined something we already knew – the New Zealanders love of the outdoors and a zest for life. James Lowe suffers from the same affliction. His is particularly acute – and with good reason.

Diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis as a teenager, the Leinster winger's youthful exuberance came under threat. From hours of rugby practice after school to being bedridden for months at a time, life became very confusing.

"I was very, very active as a kid and the one thing I was really good at was sport. Sport was good for me. It kept me out of trouble and that kept my parents happy.

"The arthritis happened so quickly that my dad thought I was joking," Lowe recalls. "He thought I was over sport and tried to scare me out of that mindset by threatening me with moving schools and stuff!"



"To be honest, I was kind of happy that I could stay at home and play the PlayStation all day, things like that. But looking back now, I can remember nights sitting by the fire because the warmth would help me to move. I remember being carried to the toilet, showered, bathed. It was a weird stage of life.

"When the diagnosis finally came, I went through a pretty tough patch. It was something that presented me with a real physical and mental challenge. It took almost two years before medication began to fix it.

"Coming through that I realised how lucky I was to be able to play rugby. To be able to get through it, develop resilience and stay true to myself. Man, I'm pretty lucky to be here now."

Speaking as an Ambassador for the second phase of Tackle Your Feelings which is run by Rugby Players Ireland in partnership with Zurich, Lowe's approach to life embodies the new direction of the campaign.

"Every dark cloud has a silver lining is something that has always resonated with me," the former Chiefs winger states. "Could be a lot worse, could always be better. Bad things happen to good people all the time. It's about learning from those and understanding you're not the only one. Understanding you've got friends that will sit there and listen.

"Especially as a male, you probably don't talk, and you think your feelings are just for you. But don't let things bottle up. It's easier to get them off your chest early instead of watching them explode later on."

Throughout his health problems, Lowe's support network was an undoubtedly important resource. However, in moving to Dublin in 2017 he opted to leave his safety net behind. It was a brave move, but his adventurous nature was not be dimmed.

"When the diagnosis finally came, I went through a pretty tough patch. It was something that presented me with a real physical and mental challenge."



"I had the opportunity at 25 to move to the other side of the world and play rugby. You tell me that when I was 14 years old, I'd tell you to... You know!

"My parents took a while to come around to the idea [of the move], but when they visited last year, they saw that my girlfriend and I were settled and happy," Lowe adds. "It's just the two of us over this side. We're relatively young but I think we're quite mature with how we deal with things. Anyways, with technology these days, I can talk to friends and family quite easily if I need to lean on them.

"Yeh, it was tough to leave home but I was coming to one of the most exciting cities in the world. All my friends went to Uni, moved out of home, had their fun and learned a lot about themselves while I was still chasing this rugby dream. And now, I mean, I'm in Dublin and they're planning on coming to see me play!"

While moving to the other side of the world would have presented its own practical challenges, playing for one of the biggest club sides in the world also brought pressure and responsibility. Most people were excited at the prospect of seeing one of New Zealand's brightest prospects on these shores, but some couldn't wait to knock him down.

"When I was red carded down at Munster, it wasn't ideal," Lowe admits. "People come after you and try to pick at anything they can. Anything they see. Anything they smell. But I don't lose sleep over it anymore. It was weighing me down, so I cut the rope.

"It's all part and parcel of being a rugby player," Lowe adds. "It's actually a very privileged position

to be in. To have people talk and write about you, good or bad, it shows the kind of impact that you have. I've learned walk towards it instead of hanging back.

"We're a professional rugby team that gets judged by our 80-minute performance on a Saturday, but there are so many parts that you have to try and navigate to make sure that you can perform. Whether it's getting your body right, form, family or the stresses of life – you have to try and make sure that you put yourself in the best position so that come Saturday all you're thinking about is playing rugby. The thing that you're here to do."

Lowe's sunny disposition lends itself nicely to the rugby field. Love him or loath him, his infectious energy puts bums on seats but doesn't allow them to get too comfortable there.

"Since I've been here, Leinster have won three out of four trophies. It has been an awesome time. But days like that red card or the Champions Cup Final in Newcastle serve as reminders that it isn't going to last forever.

"You might smash someone one day and then next week you get smashed. It's understanding and making sure you don't get smashed too much and that when you smash someone that you don't celebrate too hard either. Everyone has their sunny day, that's how I see things.

"Perspective is this awesome thing. When you get up early for training, you might be tired and sore. But you just think 'holy crap! It's all pretty good you know!'"

“
We're a professional rugby team that gets judged by our 80-minute performance on a Saturday, but there are so many parts that you have to try and navigate to make sure that you can perform.

TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS TYF 2.0

WHAT IS TYF ABOUT?

Tackle Your Feelings is about helping us all to be proactive and skill up to improve our mental wellbeing. By doing this we can live our best lives and be the best versions of ourselves.

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH AND MENTAL WELLBEING?

For some, the terms 'mental health' and 'mental wellbeing' are interchangeable. Rather, our mental health and wellbeing exist on a continuum. For most people, we exist in the middle of that continuum, it is rare that someone will experience constant optimum mental health. But we aren't stuck there, we move up and down depending on what might happen in our lives. It's totally normal to have good days and to have bad days.

Wellbeing can be defined as the balance point between a person's resources and the challenges they face. When you have the psychological resources needed to meet the challenges you face, you are thought to be well equipped when it comes to your mental health and wellbeing. When there is an imbalance, and the challenge is greater than your resources, your wellbeing will decrease. When your resources are greater than your challenges, you can have increased feelings of wellbeing.

TYF provides the tools which enable people to build their resources should these challenges arise.



WHAT DOES GOOD MENTAL WELLBEING LOOK LIKE?

Some of the signs of good mental wellbeing:

- Being grateful for what you have
- Always working to improve your relationships
- Being optimistic
- Having confidence in your abilities
- Being able to adapt and manage during times of uncertainty
- Knowing you can cope with whatever life throws your way
- Being able to work productively and achieve your goals
- Being able to make a contribution to your community
- Being able to feel and express a wide range of emotions
- Being assertive
- Practicing good self-care
- Being in the present much of the time
- Building a good quality support network and using it as needed
- Having a strong sense of purpose

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE OUR MENTAL WELLBEING?

As elite level athletes, you know more than most, that there will always be areas that can benefit from enhancing your skills. In the same way that you can be fast and still benefit from working on your speed or you don't have to be injured to be able to improve on your balance or coordination, you can always work on the skills to improve your mental wellbeing.

The App and the website can equip you with helpful tools and resources which aim to build these skills, ultimately helping you realise your full potential. These skills can be built into habits which can be incorporated into your daily life. By applying the learnings from Tackle Your Feelings, you'll soon start to make percentage gains on your mental wellbeing.

Life will have its ups and downs and lots of different stresses may put a strain on our mental health. It's ok to have bad days and to feel a bit overwhelmed at times, but if we are proactive about our mental wellbeing, develop good coping skills and use our support network, including professional help when needed, we are putting ourselves in the best possible position to weather any storm.

GETTING HELP / WHEN MIGHT SOMEONE NEED PROFESSIONAL HELP?

If we're finding that problems in our feelings, thoughts, behaviours or relationships are negatively impacting us and are getting in the way of us living our day to day lives, then it might be a good idea to seek out professional help.

One of the biggest differences between physical and mental health is that when we have an injury we tend to go and get help straight away, while sometimes with our mental health we don't seek out that help as quickly. We can end up bottling it up or find ourselves left alone with our troubles. Fears that people will think less of us or treat us differently (i.e. stigma) can be a big barrier and with TYF we want to break down that barrier. We want people to tackle their feelings, draw on their own resources and recognise when they can seek out help from friends, teammates, family and professionals, when necessary, so that we can all live our best possible lives.

#IMTAKINGCONTROL

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BLAZING A TRAIL

**JORDAN CONROY
ON LIGHTING UP
THE WORLD RUGBY
SEVENS STAGE AND
STAYING AHEAD OF
THE CHASING PACK**

JORDAN CONROY



Jordan Conroy is ambling down along a Dublin path minding his own business on a midweek afternoon. It's sunny, so the shades are on and there's a swagger about his gait. Life is good.

Suddenly, a car travelling along the road comes to a screeching halt by his side. There's a yelp from the passenger seat. Onlookers reach for their mobile devices presuming they're about to witness a drive-by and the race to social media gets up.

"Hey, you!!" comes a strained voice from the vehicle. Conroy, caught off guard and confused, struggles to respond quickly enough. The voice, happier now, continues. "You're some man on the rugby pitch! Keep it going!"

Drive-by compliments have become a more regular feature of Conroy's day. On the one hand, it's probably the only way people can keep up with the Tullamore flyer. On the other, it's indicative of the fact that fans of Sevens rugby in Ireland now extend beyond those prone to parties and eccentric costumes.

"Generally, I'm pretty oblivious to anything going on around me, but I've definitely found that people notice me a bit more recently," says Conroy, whose name is increasingly synonymous with the code in Ireland.

"Not so long ago we were unheard of. We were just a bunch of lads training on a field out the back of UCD. Now we're training at the high-performance facility at the National Sports Campus and have a World Series to prepare for... It's mad when you think of it!"

“

Not so long ago we were unheard of. We were just a bunch of lads training on a field out the back of UCD. **Now we're training at the high-performance facility at the National Sports Campus and have a World Series to prepare for...**

Indeed, just six years ago Conroy had barely touched a rugby ball. A lone striker with Athlone Town, Conroy thrived on flick-ons and through balls as he tormented League of Ireland defences around the country. That is, until a game of tag rugby in Tullamore pitched him against some key figures in the local rugby club.

"The captain, Ivor Scully, came up to me and said, 'I want to see you at training on Tuesday.' I wasn't keen but he wasn't taking no for an answer. He's a Garda like! They were all massive lads. I was small, skinny and perhaps a bit body conscious. But when I started running around a few fatties, the interest was sparked!"

Interest in Conroy was also forthcoming. Although raw and lacking in some of the fundamentals of the game, he was running in tries for fun. Game plans revolved around getting the ball into his hands and there was a blissful ignorance of some errors. However, a subsequent step up to AIL Division 1B with Buccaneers prompted swift action.

"Game by game, I was making so many mistakes. There was so much to think of. Out-halves were picking me apart and my defensive positioning was exposed. None of the wingers might have had my pace, but my God they had experience. It would get to me."

Conroy proved to be a quick learner. Despite running a few wrong lines along the way, he still contributed 18 tries to a record winning streak with the Athlone side, resulting in him being named the Ulster Bank 1B Player of the Year in 2017. People far beyond the midlands were talking about him. Anthony Eddy was one to sit up and take notice.





In the past two years, many more eyes have been trained on Conroy. World Rugby's social media gurus are big fans – hard not to be when he leaves the likes of Carlin Isles trailing in his wake. However, Conroy is not the only one drawing admiring glances. Harry McNulty's tears of joy upon qualification for the World Series endeared the side to the rugby faithful, while Greg O'Shea's Love Island exploits spoke to an entirely new audience.

"It can be a little bit difficult to manage because it's all very new to us," Conroy says of the heightened exposure. "There have been a huge number of requests coming in, or at least more than we've ever been used to. I suppose, the more people recognise you, the more they will want something from you."

"We're under no illusions that we've made it, though," Conroy cautions. "We face another massive step-up this season, but at the same time I'm one injury away from losing these opportunities. I have a responsibility to the team both on and off the field. The more we get out there, the better it can be for us as a collective."

"Then again, the result of a better profile means we're not an unknown quantity anymore. It'll be a different kind of gravy!"

From time to time, the inaugural Guinness Rugby Writers' Men's Sevens Player of the Year probably comes across clips of his jet-setting ways online. These no doubt serve to boost the ego. However, in becoming a big name in the sport, Conroy has

undoubtedly become a marked man. Staying ahead of the chasing pack becomes the challenge.

"I'm finely tuned, but I reckon I can be more finely tuned!" Conroy surmises. "There is always room for improvement and small percentages can make a massive difference at this level."

"I'm not the type of 'workhorse' player who goes from tackle to tackle, making the hard yards. Those guys are invaluable, but it's not my role. It's my job to run and score tries. So, I need to run faster, run for longer, recover quicker and repeat them all as often as I can. That's my point of difference."

"Guys like Carlin Isles, Dan Norton and Perry Baker are always looking for the extra yard. Before coming up against them I was in a little doubt as to whether I could do it at this level, but now I know I have what it takes. They know it too though, so it gives them extra reason to work that bit harder."

"Now that I'm here I'm not going to get left behind. Slowly but surely, I've been pushing myself more and more. I know I can shave time off my personal best. It won't happen overnight. It's all step by step, one day at a time. It's a challenge that keeps me fresh."

It's a fresh outlook that he takes back with him to the Dublin pathways. As puts on his shades and makes for home, somebody else recognises him. Conroy gives a knowing nod and wave to the car. It seems to be the only way anyone can keep up at this stage.

“

I'm not the type of 'workhorse' player who goes from tackle to tackle, making the hard yards. Those guys are invaluable, but it's not my role. It's my job to run and score tries.

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WELCOME ABOARD!

DR VINCENT O'FLAHERTY BRINGS PLENTY OF LIFE EXPERIENCE INTO HIS ROLE AS A PLAYER DEVELOPMENT MANAGER

DR VINCENT O'FLAHERTY

As the saying goes, the grass is always greener whether it's warmer climates, different cultures, the sights, the lifestyle...

"It was the best education I ever had," Dr Vincent O'Flaherty says of his time spent travelling the world. "From the history of Vietnam to hurling in Sydney and bungee jumping in New Zealand, I saw some incredible things and made some lifelong friends."

"But it also made me realise that no matter where you are in the world, at some stage you have to pay the bills, do the shopping and the normal day to day things!"

In some ways, O'Flaherty could be referencing a career in professional sport. A highlights reel full of special moments and dreams fulfilled... and then when it's over, you wake up one Monday morning and remember that you have a new career.

"Before I went travelling, I had spent years studying as well as working in a number of different roles and industries. Yet whether I was working as a personal trainer, in business banking or a secondary school teacher, nothing seemed to challenge or satisfy me. I often needed to get away from it all and press reset."

"Some people are too proud to say something isn't for them and continue on the same path throughout their life. The social pressures can be overbearing. My family and friends would have regularly told me that I needed to settle into a career and stick to it."



"I'm all for trying things out and if something interests me, I'm willing to see where that journey takes me. If it's not the right journey, well then fine. I simply reevaluate and seek a new challenge."

"Your working life will span over 50 years so why be unhappy for that time?"

Brimming with professional and life experience, O'Flaherty joins the Rugby Players Ireland team as Player Development Manager for the Women's XVs and the Irish Sevens programme.

"I always aspired to have a career in sport," O'Flaherty admits. "But as a GAA player from Wicklow, it didn't take much to realise that this career would be off the pitch rather than on it."

"But try tell that to a young lad! At 17 I was playing for 9 different teams, between inter-county and club sides in both hurling and football. As a result, my Leaving Certificate didn't exactly go to plan."

"I had the academic ability to do well, but sport always came first. I've carried that regret with me throughout my adult life and I've always questioned why anyone should have to give up sport to study or why should anyone give up study for sport! Both should be manageable and mutually beneficial, but this requires support from family, friends and critically from both the sporting and academic institutions."

Through persistence and a bit of luck, O'Flaherty landed a role at the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) a few months after returning to Ireland following a period of work and travel. Initially he worked in the legal department, but his work ethic opened doors in other areas of the organisation. Most recently, O'Flaherty was Child Welfare and Safeguarding Manager.

It was whilst in the FAI that the Wicklow native began to examine the career decision making process in Irish underage international footballers. Upon completing his PhD on this subject, O'Flaherty sought to find a position in which his learnings could be applied to the world of sport helping athletes. This opportunity arose in a different playing field.



"I've never had a direct relationship with rugby and simply watched it as a fan. My first rugby match was seeing Ireland play the All Blacks in Auckland - so not a bad introduction as they come. I don't think it's a bad thing that I've never played the game. I come with an open mind and a different outlook."

"Culturally, it's different to anything I've experienced but I always try to find commonalities based on my previous experiences in work, education and sport. Through my studies and personal experience, I've a good understanding of the demands in playing sport and juggling an education, and the pitfalls along the way."

"For instance, I also see a lot of similarities between inter-county players and the rugby players I work with because they both give an unbelievable commitment to their jersey, but there is a realisation that sport is not going to be there forever and an alternative career has to be on the horizon."

Working across three international rugby teams, with many based across the country during the year, O'Flaherty acknowledges that the demands of the position will be vast. All players come with contrasting requirements. For now though, it's about building relationships so that he can do his best for each individual.

"I've experience of various sporting organisations. Without disrespecting them, it's clear to me that Rugby Players Ireland are ahead of the pack. The expertise, proactivity and professionalism of the team around me is world class. Rugby players have an enviable range of supports and opportunities to tap into."

"I recognise building a career is challenging and it has taken me 20 years to get here but this is my dream job," O'Flaherty points out. "Unfortunately, many people don't reach this point and it is my job to ensure that the players I work with avail of the supports that are available to them."

"Ultimately, for me, it's about the person and if supported correctly this will help them become better players on the pitch. Everyone embarks on a career journey, but by asking for help, rugby players can work towards having a dual career they can be proud of."

"I had the academic ability to do well, but sport always came first. I've carried that regret with me throughout my adult life and I've always questioned why anyone should have to give up sport to study or why should anyone give up study for sport!"

TACKLING SMARTER IN THE STATES

ROGER WILSON IS ON A MISSION TO CREATE A SAFER
EMPHASIS ON TACKLING ON THE AMERICAN FOOTBALL FIELD

ROGER WILSON

In a number of sports documentaries doing the rounds on Netflix, American Football holds the key to a better life. The self-worth of their subjects is tied to their sporting form and how they perform has a direct impact on how the rest of their lives go.

"It's on a different level," former Ulster back-rower Roger Wilson exclaims. "You see a bit of the NFL back home, but college football is where it's at. Some of the high school stadiums are bigger than our provincial grounds!"

Naturally, the allure of the spectacle proved hard to ignore when Wilson moved 7,000km from his Belfast home to Dallas last year. Indeed, with a master's in performance science from Setanta College and a 15-year professional rugby career in the back pocket, it seemed that once Wilson and his family landed Stateside, American Football was always going to feature.

"There's a lot of crossover between rugby and American Football," Wilson asserts, with a nod to Christian Wade's recent heroics for the Buffalo Bills. "But the issue of concussion has drawn the sports closer in recent years. In my opinion, rugby has been more proactive on that front but that's not to say it is being ignored in America."

Owing to a relationship formed between the Waisele Serevi, the Fijian 7s legend and Pete Carroll, the Head Coach at the Seattle Seahawks, a new defensive system based on rugby tackling techniques was introduced by the NFL side in 2014. Leveraging the shoulder and taking the head out of the game ultimately underpinned the Seahawk's route to the Super Bowl that season.

"I was aware of that story and followed developments closely," Wilson says. "I could see that it picked up a lot of traction, especially in the schools and colleges and I began to identify an opportunity where my skillset could be used. Only, I was in a new city, a new country and I didn't know anybody."

Despite landing in unfamiliar surroundings, Wilson managed to secure an externship at a High-Performance facility run by Michael Johnson, the four-time Olympic gold medallist. There, he encountered many elite athletes, including unattached NFL players who were awaiting calls from their agents.

"They were fascinated by rugby," Wilson begins "but they also think anyone who plays it is crazy!"

"We'd get into the specifics of tackling and from a rugby perspective they had zero technique. As soon as they put their helmets on, they suddenly think they're invincible and they run headfirst into their target. That was an eye opener."

"It was also clear that the parents I got to know were being distracted from the benefits of their kids playing sport because of the increased spotlight on the tackle area. They were keen for me to do something and so TackleSmart was born – created by a parent, for parents!"

Wilson's awakening was nicely timed. In a study carried out by the National Federation of State High School Associations last year, it emerged that since 2010, participation numbers in High School Football had fallen by 7%. This decline was keenly felt even in the state where the Friday night lights burn brightest – Texas.

In an effort to address flagging numbers nationwide, Serevi's company 'Atavus,' which was initially set-up to promote the game of rugby in North America, was tasked with rolling out safe tackling programmes across the country. Texas was the first state to stipulate that every coach must be certified.

"It's not that simple," Wilson cautions. "There are a number of old-school coaches still on the circuit. Once they complete their training and get their piece of paper, they throw it in the bin and revert to what they know."

"I've found the same issues on a personal level," he adds. "Obviously, I've never played American Football and so when I go to meet these people, with my accent in tow, it's hard to establish much credibility. It's quite a closed and cliquey community. It's a bit of an obstacle."

"No matter how much I work with individual players, the reality is that they'll only benefit if their school follows through on the teachings."



The nature of the education system here means that many people are often priced out of going to University, but if you can get a scholarship it can change your life.

"American Football then becomes more than a pastime. The stakes are high and players need instant results. They only have a finite time to make it. Therefore, I need to be working with organisations that are bought into it and willing to change the culture on a wider level."

"It's happening, but it's a slow process."

Building a business from scratch in a foreign land undoubtedly presents Wilson with many challenges. Having set up her own business over eight years ago, Wilson's wife Nathalia has been able to provide some practical entrepreneurial advice, but the Ulsterman quickly realised that getting his name out there would be a crucial component.

"I've been flat out networking, trying to meet as many people as possible. Through those connections I began to run individual sessions for kids and that quickly developed into group workshops."

"Recently I've been working with high school coaches, while I'm also going to be working with another team, reviewing their game footage and analysing their tackling. I'm on the cusp of breaking into the high school game but I've to make the most of every opportunity, so it's very busy at the moment!"

With two years of the 'afterlife' behind him and in the throes of an adventure with his young family on the other side of the world, you'd think Wilson would spare little thought for rugby in Belfast. Quite the opposite.

"I watch as many Ulster games as I possibly can on Mobdro. It's nice to look in from afar and support the lads. Personally, the timing [of retirement] was right. I was happy to finish on my terms and I needed a new challenge."

"I really enjoyed my career, but it was my job for 15 years and that's a long time. Towards the end it was becoming more of a chore in terms of keeping my body right. I was feeling beat up a lot and the enjoyment went out of it a little."

"So, I don't really miss the game although I'll always miss the camaraderie. That will never be replaced. I'll be back at Christmas and I'll throw something into the What's App group and see if anyone is around. They might go quiet!"



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UP THE WALL

IRISH SEVENS INTERNATIONAL DOROTHY WALL ON THE GOODBODY RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT BURSARY

DOROTHY WALL

This time last year, Dorothy Wall made her way to the offices of Goodbody, leading services firm, for the launch of the Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary. She cut a quiet figure as she landed into the company of fellow recipients Tom Daly and Eoin McKeon as well as Rugby Players Ireland representatives Rob Kearney and James Ryan.

It came as quite a shock to the system, particularly when just a few months previously her path seemed destined to lie on the basketball court. But after being “fouled off a few times too many,” it was suggested that she might give rugby a go. Many doors duly opened.

A photo shoot on the steps of the Ballsbridge office to announce the launch of the partnership between Rugby Players Ireland and Goodbody was the culmination of a whirlwind few weeks for the Fethard girl.

Earlier in the summer, Wall was invited to join up with the senior set-up at Lansdowne Road having made her way through the Irish U18s Sevens Development Programme. She had also secured her place in radiography at UCD following



a nervous wait. As she began to weigh up her various commitments, the Bursary announcement came as a timely boost.

“I was fresh into the Sevens programme and I wasn’t entirely sure if I’d be overstepping the mark by applying for the Bursary in the first place,” Wall remarks as she recalls the application process. “I think anybody new in anywhere tends to tread carefully for a while. I know some of my teammates did. We were just out of school and we were surrounded by a number of more established players on the programme.

“I gave the application my best shot anyway and didn’t think much more of it. At the time the CAO offers hadn’t come out yet, so my mind was preoccupied with whether I was going to get into radiography in UCD or not. All I knew was that I needed to be in Dublin for rugby – everything else was up in the air!”

Not for long. Soon the Munster player was in the throes of radiography lectures, Irish training and getting around a new city. Her sixth year at the Presentation Secondary School in Thurles quickly became a distant memory. With barely a moment to herself, her commitments undoubtedly threw up plenty of challenges.

“It was a tough year,” she concedes. “Everyone told me it was going to happen. I had plenty of warning. I just don’t think you can possibly appreciate how tough it will be until you’re in the thick of it.

“I’ll be the first to put my hands up. I wasn’t anywhere near as diligent as I should have been in my first few weeks. I paid for that mistake leading up to our exams. The work piled on and it was difficult to balance everything without letting it affect one or the other too much. It was a big learning curve.”

With her placements increasing in her second year in Belfield, there will be added pressure to Wall’s

workload. In addition, she has been involved in Munster’s interprovincial campaign while she will also be linking up with Railway Union this season when her Sevens schedule allows.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m hugely appreciative of the position I’m in. There are players all around the country who would kill for it. You certainly feel that when you come up against them in the odd game!”

“There’s just a lot to contend with, which is why the Bursary was such a huge support. I have three younger brothers at home and with me uprooting to Dublin, obviously it can be a bit of a pull on any family. I was happy to do what I could to help.

“With all I had going on, I didn’t think I had the time or energy to get a job. I was able to put the financial support I received towards my college fees and to get around, to and from my placements and home to Tipperary from time to time!

“The Bursary certainly gave me more financial independence – to a degree! The savings account I set up for it was monitored by my parents!”

With a new cast of recipients announced ahead of the 2019/20 season, Wall will be well placed to offer her two cents of advice on how best to use the support. Goodbody are also at hand to provide guidance where it’s needed.

“Since the launch of the programme 12 months ago, the Goodbody team has had the privilege of getting to know many exceptional players, both past and present,” Roy Barrett, Managing Director at Goodbody says. “What has really stood out and earned our admiration is the dedication and effort that the players give to rugby while also finding time to pursue further education, work experience and career advice.”

“The Personal Development Bursary is designed to support and champion players to help them on their eventual journey to post-rugby careers and Goodbody is proud to make this contribution to Irish rugby.”

“I’ll be the first to put my hands up. I wasn’t anywhere near as diligent as I should have been in my first few weeks. I paid for that mistake leading up to our exams.”



'TIS MY FIELD

CONNACHT HOOKER SHANE DELAHUNT ON GIVING HIS TEAMMATES A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE DURING PRE-SEASON

SHANE DELAHUNT



Since the draw for the Champions Cup was published several months ago, the Connacht Rugby squad have been looking forward to glamour ties in Toulouse, Montpellier and, well, Gloucester.

So, when Andy Friend informed them that they would be heading away after their first block of pre-season training, many assumed a trip to the south of France was in the offing. Apparently, Birr didn't register on their radar.

With a number of familiar faces departing the province this summer, Friend has placed emphasis on maintaining a tight group amidst the new arrivals in their stead. Paddy McAllister, Rory Burke and John Porch have come on board, while the likes of Tom Daly, Conor Fitzgerald and Angus Lloyd remain in Galway having swooped in halfway through last season.

"The idea was raised last year," says Shane Delahunt, of a recent expedition to his farm in Co. Offaly. "Bonding sessions are a very important part of pre-season and Friendly used to tell us about taking the Australian Sevens to his farm. It gathered a bit of steam and I just thought 'feck it, nothing to lose, be a bit of craic'."

"I don't think some of the lads were as optimistic but there wasn't a bother on them once they got into it. We had a barbecue, a singsong, a few beers and all without any outlying distractions. It was like a mini-Electric Picnic I suppose!

"Everyone camped out – except me! I went home and played a bit of golf! I spend enough time on that land... I'm not going to camp on it!"

Before settling into the evening, Delahunt took the squad on a tour of the farm. They watched as he got to work in the milking parlour before getting some strength training in as they gathered firewood for a bonfire. Overall, the trip presented the him with a nice opportunity to give a little insight into what it is he does when he heads for home every evening.



“I don't think some of the lads were as optimistic but there wasn't a bother on them once they got into it. We had a barbecue, a singsong, a few beers and all without any outlying distractions.”

"I don't think many of the lads knew what I'd be getting up to out here. They all had their nice trainers on for a start! I do think it was an eye-opener in terms of the milk and beef processes and the way things are done. People have their perceptions of farming and I wanted to give my teammates a different view.

"It's healthy to have other things to think about. It's a bit of a release. I like to get out of that rugby bubble, get out on the road, herd cattle or do a bit of milking. Sometimes I'm just not able, but I try to do as much as I can without it affecting my training.





"All in all, it was good for them! Sure, half of them have only seen animals in the zoo!"

Last year, Delahunt completed his Green Certificate training at Gurteen College. The former Kilkenny College man was linked into the course by Dr Deirdre Lyons who has kept a watchful eye over his progress. However, as his own path has become more defined, he appreciates that sometimes she has to push harder with those less certain.

"I'm lucky that if I finish tomorrow, I'm good to go. I'm in partnership with my father on the farm, so everything is in place. Knowing what comes next means it's not something I've to think about and that benefits my game as a result. Unfortunately, I've seen others lack a bit of awareness."

It wasn't always so clear for Delahunt. Whilst studying Dairy Business at UCD, he entered into the Leinster Rugby sub-academy as a dynamic young prop but very quickly found his pathway shored up. With stocks on both sides of the scrum well-resourced with bigger men, he was advised to shift across the front-row into hooker. Despite an obvious appetite for hard work, the move took him longer to grasp than he had anticipated. Leinster then opted to let him go.

"They [Leinster] didn't want me. Simple as. After that, I didn't really know what to do or where to turn for a while. I managed to contact Nigel Carolan who I knew from the Ireland U19s and he agreed to take a chance on me. I got a trial with Connacht and when I got a game with the seniors three months later it began to take off.

"I think people need a bit of a setback sometimes. Conor McKeon and I were in the same boat. We both got to Connacht and realised how lucky we were to be there. I think once you have gone through that process, once you have experienced life without knowing what the future will hold, you're better placed to deal with the things that might happen down the line."

Looking into that future, an exciting campaign lies ahead. A return to the Champions Cup is an obvious carrot, while Andy Friend will hope to build on a positive first year at the Sportsground.

"We have some fierce hard fixtures in there, but you'd rather have them than not," Delahunt claims. "It excites me, but I know a lot of hard work comes with it. We have four hookers that are as good as what is out there in the country. Dave Heffernan is playing out of his skin. Tom McCartney has been around the block; he knows the story. Nobody works as hard as Jonny Murphy.

"Last year we were rotated every week. It was the fairest way given that we're all fairly durable, but you always want to play more. That's what drives us on – the competition.

"It's not the end of the world if it's not me," Delahunt adds. "There's more to life than rugby. That's why I like getting out of the bubble and onto the farm so much. I enjoy having a different perspective.

"Absolutely none of the lads are cut out for the farming life at all though. I doubt they'll even be back to visit!"



“ I think people need a bit of a setback sometimes. Conor McKeon and I were in the same boat. We both got to Connacht and realised how lucky we were to be there. ”

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LEADING THE TROOPS

LUKE MARSHALL IS HEADING UP OUR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES IN ULSTER

LUKE MARSHALL

While the younger generation at Ulster Rugby helped to spark something of a turnaround in the province's fortunes last season, it is worth remembering that their inexperience was bookended by the presence of senior internationals within their ranks.

As Rory Best and Darren Cave called time on their careers in May, a leadership void was inevitably created at Kingspan Stadium. With almost 450 caps and 28 years of experience between them, it represented a considerable vacuum. The time had come for others to step forward.

Last month, having just been appointed to the Rugby Players Ireland Executive Board, Iain Henderson was also named captain at the

province. Yet with the likes of Henderson, John Cooney, Rob Herring trying to prise their way into Joe Schmidt's plans this summer, there was further opportunity for others to establish themselves as leaders within the group during pre-season.

"I'm obviously getting on a bit," says a 28-year old Luke Marshall. "Well, I mean, I know that I'm one of the older lads knocking about the place!"

The 11-times capped Irish international isn't lying. Remarkably, only Louis Ludik, Sean Reidy and Clive Ross have moved out of their twenties. Marshall, with 124 appearances for the province since 2010, has suddenly become a senior figure. Only Craig Gilroy (168) and Rob Herring (166) have pulled on the jersey more.

While some might shy away from responsibility, Marshall has been happy to cast more of an influence over a fresh and energetic squad. Following in the footsteps of Darren Cave, Marshall will lead Rugby Players Ireland's Community Engagement initiatives for its Ulster members. Nominated by Cave, Marshall has clearly been identified by his elders as an ideal candidate.

"It's a bit of a compliment, I guess," Marshall admits, "but then again, maybe I was just the first name Cavey drew out of the hat!"

"In all seriousness, Cavey knows that I'm a proud Ulsterman. He knows how extremely proud I am of where I come from. That's one of the best things about playing for Ulster – being able to represent the people of my province.

"Equally, we have the opportunity to give back to those people and to those who might not have the opportunities to come and support us. They're all part of our community."

A series of initiatives, facilitated by Christina Mahon, Community Engagement Manager at Rugby Players Ireland, have been taking place over the past twelve months. During that time, the Ulster players have taken time on their day-off to participate in a range of activities from packing Christmas gifts for underprivileged children in the region, to carrying out DIY tasks at a nearby nursing home.

"Generally, I just pop a text into the players' WhatsApp group and get the conversation started," Marshall says. "The lads are only too happy to get involved even if it is their free time. For instance, recently we were out helping the Simon Community NI with the Belfast Foyer Project. We only had twelve slots available, yet fourteen lads got back to me within minutes.

"There's a genuine appetite to help and reach out. For us, we have the chance to give something back, but it's also a bit of an education piece. Even on the worst of days for a professional rugby player there is relatively little for to moan about.

"On the other hand, some of the people we have encountered have justifiable gripes. Imagine not knowing where you'll be sleeping tonight? It's a bit of reality check. We can't compare really."

Of course, rugby players have their off days too. Marshall had plenty as he sought to recuperate from a ruptured ACL in 2018. However, a try scoring return at the Aviva Stadium against Leinster in the Champions Cup began put them all back into context.



"One of the big things Rugby Players Ireland always stress is that you can't put all your eggs in one basket. I worked on a few things during my time off. The injury makes you realise that your career can be gone at any time. You have to be realistic in this game.

"The same applies to on-field stuff. There was a broader scope to my recovery. Usually, when you get injured, you're just doing your weights and rehab, but I did a lot of work on my skillset too and I feel that I came back a better player. You're also encouraged to get involved in meetings and reviews; you just feel more part of it."

While the younger generation of players have also motivated Marshall to get back into the picture, the centre recognises that they need him too. A positive culture has been instilled, including the charitable aspect, but ultimately, they have to hope it is reflected on the field.

"It's been very enjoyable, if a little different," he makes of pre-season. "Dan [McFarland] came in halfway through pre-season last year, so this year he has really been putting his stamp on things. We've seen the fruits of some of his good work and that needs to continue.

"Missing the guts of last year was tough for me, but I've been able to take my time with the rebuild. I had been out for so long that even though we were faced by a long lead into the season, I've found it's gone by pretty quickly. The energy around the place carries you a bit. On the calendar the PRO14 kick-off seemed ages away, now it's here! I'm looking forward to a successful season!"

TAKING A SABBATICAL FROM HER BELOVED GREEN SHIRT

AFTER 11 YEARS, CLAIRE MOLLOY IS PARKING
INTERNATIONAL RUGBY. **FOR THE MOMENT.**

CLAIRE MOLLOY

If hearts could really break, the Irish Heart Foundation might have deployed a plane of cardiac surgeons to Parma last February. Ireland had fallen to their second defeat in the 2019 Women's Six Nations and their first ever at the hands of the Italians.

There's a photograph of a dejected Claire Molloy leaving the field after the game. The emergency medicine trainee experiences heartache, trauma and loss more often than most, but sometimes even the most hardened of individuals can struggle with the peculiar nature of sport.

"Yes, rugby is a game, but it is also a huge focus in our lives as players. It's something we pour ourselves into. My work grounds me immensely but the disappointments can at times be as serious and as emotionally draining as things that might happen in work.

"It all depends on your perspective at a particular time, while that perspective is all very relative to the individual experiencing it."

Medical practitioners have an enviable capacity to detach themselves from their working lives. The nature of their profession undoubtedly requires it, but such objectivity is not a natural inheritance. Molloy believes that this learned technique allows her to work to the best of her abilities in both disciplines.

"Work and rugby have at times offered relief to each other," she reveals. "When I turn up to a pitch session after a grizzly day at work, you can let off a bit of steam and put a challenging day behind you. Similarly, I might turn up to work after the weekend and nobody will have a clue that there was a game!

"In both instances you work within a team. You're there to do a job, so you must move on. One refreshes the other. Unfortunately, I felt that I didn't get it quite right last year."



After a decade in her beloved green jersey, Molloy has opted to step aside for the forthcoming November internationals and Six Nations. It's not the end of an era, merely a pause as she returns to the All Wales School of Emergency Medicine following a year in a London hospital to facilitate a move to Wasps Ladies.

"Enjoying my work also means I can enjoy what I do on the pitch and vice-versa, but last season the balance was off," Molloy admits. "I wasn't enjoying my work which made it more difficult to deal with the challenges we're facing as an Irish team. I missed the balance. In terms of my drive and ambition, I need to hit refresh.

"I have no complaints about the working environment in London, but ultimately I was having to work at a more junior level. There wasn't enough going on to retain my interest and I lacked the fulfilment I had the year before, when I was working in an A&E department and specialising in acute medicine. It became more of a job.

"It was also the case that my peers with whom I started with are at the point of becoming consultants whereas I'm still a few years behind. I didn't want to keep stretching that process out. I've been in a lucky position that I've always been able to keep sport at the top of my priorities, but it got to the point where I had to think about the bigger picture."

Although now based back in Cardiff again, the all action back-rower will continue to play in London where her time allows. She enjoys the atmosphere and ethos of Wasps Ladies under Gisele Mather, a Rugby World Cup winner with England in 1994, while flights have simply become part and parcel of her weekly routine. Indeed, she already has one booked for the opening weekend of the 2020 Six Nations, even though she will be on the other side of the fence.

"It'd be naïve to say that it won't be difficult," Molloy confesses. "I've been involved for 11 years at this

stage and played in almost every campaign between Rugby World Cups and the Six Nations. I know the schedule inside out, so it'll be strange when I think I should be somewhere else!

"My plan is to play well this season with Wasps and maintain the standards Adam [Griggs] expects in the hope that I can get back in next summer. Obviously, I've no right to the jersey and with so many young players coming through it's at the back of my head that I might not be good enough.

"If that's the case, so be it. If I'm not up to scratch, it's for me to accept that I've chosen this path. It has to be the best person in the shirt."

While she is clearly committed to the Irish cause, Molloy believes her professional future lies across the Irish Sea. Having moved abroad over ten years ago, she has established a life and network in the UK, while she retains a keen sense of loyalty to the All Wales School of Emergency Medicine.

"I've been in the AWSEM long enough now that they all know me for my rugby. They're massively proud of having me there and have been extremely receptive to all that I have asked of them. We have a fabulous relationship.

"It has been about being up front, honest and organised from day one. There are staff shortages as there are in Ireland, so they need you. Ultimately, you are the one taking the risk by stepping out of your training programme to play rugby. I've found that as long as you go in with your eyes open, there's room for compromise

"The support I've received, particularly from the consultants in the Paediatric Emergency Unit, has helped to cushion the blow of stepping back from rugby. Of course, now when they come to me and say: 'oh, you're the Irish rugby one!', I'll have to correct them. Hopefully one day I can reclaim it again!"





#NOWYOU CAN



DAVID MCCANN

AGE: 19

YEAR 2 ULSTER
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MATHEMATICS,
QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY



David, welcome back! What did you get up to for the summer?

I actually had quite a busy few weeks off after the U20 World Rugby Championship (JWC). I went on holiday with my friends to Portugal and Gran Canaria, which was great after a long and tough season.

Other than that, I've just been getting my head down during pre-season and playing golf whenever I can!

Did you go away with your Ulster Rugby teammates or link back in with old friends?

I went away with friends from school, most of them go to Uni away from Belfast so it was a good chance to catch up with them and have a bit of craic.

Do you feel you miss out on any opportunities your friends might have by being a rugby player?

Sometimes it can be tough going with a busy schedule, but over the past year rugby has given me so many opportunities to see different places and meet new people. I was lucky enough to go to Corsica with Ireland U19s, Argentina with Ireland U20s for the JWC and Boston with Ulster A.

You set the bar high with the U20s Grand Slam win in 2018/19. What are your hopes for the coming season?

The Grand Slam last year was great and definitely the highlight of my rugby career to date. I want to be successful again with the 20s this year, but I also hope to be involved with the Ulster seniors as much as possible, learning from the more experienced players and being in the senior environment.

Back to work and back to college. Are you better prepared for both this year?

I took a year off from my studies last year but I'm back at it this year. Taking the year out has given me a clear view on what my rugby commitments require how I can balance them with my studies.

I knew I was going to be based outside of Belfast a lot last year with Ireland U19s and U20s and so I felt it would be difficult to juggle everything. Hopefully I'll still be involved with the 20s this season, but with one less team to worry about I think it will be a more manageable workload.

Will you be working closely with Pamela (Player Development Manager)?

Having Pamela around makes dealing with the various issues that might come up a lot easier and clearer to deal with, especially in relation to Uni. She is always able to offer advice and solutions on issues outside of rugby and gives you a process to follow.

With a year's experience behind you, what advice would you share with Year One members of the Academy?

Transitioning into the professional environment was tough at the start, especially coming straight in from school. In my own case, I was on the road a lot between Dublin, Cork and Belfast so I found it was a challenge dealing with my busy schedule.

Overall, I think you have to adapt quite quickly to a new environment when joining the Academy. It certainly requires a level of maturity and responsibility that most people your age don't have to worry about. In the first year of Academy I would suggest just trying to learn as much from the people around you with regards to both rugby and the level of professionalism required by the environment.



MAKING THE BEST RUGBY PEOPLE

AS THE PROVINCES RETURNED FOR PRE-SEASON TRAINING, GORDON D'ARCY AND JERRY FLANNERY SHARED SOME ADVICE WITH THE LATEST RECRUITS TO PROFESSIONAL RUGBY IN IRELAND

GORDON D'ARCY AND JERRY FLANNERY



When Gordon D'Arcy made his international debut in 1999, many of the attendees at the Rugby Players Ireland/IRFU Rookie Camp hadn't even been born.

By the time he added another cap to his name, five long (albeit fun) years in the international wilderness had passed by. Ultimately, the centre departed the game as Ireland's longest-serving player, but had he taken better options in the first years of his career, he might have significantly more caps to his name than the 82 in his locker.

"The great thing for these guys is that they are benefiting from the mistakes that we made," D'Arcy says before meeting with the Academy players alongside former teammate Jerry Flannery at The Heritage Hotel in Killenard, Co. Laois. "There's a tried and tested path now for guys moving through the game."

"It took me a long time to understand that there's a lot more to being a professional rugby player than being paid to do a job. It's about all the decisions you make in a holistic sense.

"There'll be many obligations and expectations of them in the next few years so it's essential that they are prepared with the tools to thrive in that environment."

Led by Marcus Horan, the induction programme introduced players from each of the four provinces to various aspects of a career in the game – from the threats posed to optimising their wellbeing. Over the course of two days, all 52 players participated in a series of interactive sessions designed to equip them with the skills to cope with life as a professional sportsperson.

"These days, you want the lads to be challenging straightaway," adds Jerry Flannery, who came through the National Academy before embarking on a senior career with Connacht and Munster. "The nature of the game now is that they are almost ready as soon as they leave school.



"It happens much quicker for some than for others, but they all need to be aware of what it's going to be like. Even when they've arrived at that point, they need to look for windows where they can improve themselves in all aspects so that they can push on from there.

"Rugby Players Ireland are doing a great job in getting them up to speed. There's a lot expected of the modern player. The more clarity these guys have on those expectations, there's a greater chance that they will deliver."

Both Flannery and D'Arcy navigated circuitous routes on their way to becoming Grand Slam winners in 2009. However, they weren't the only Grand Slam winners in the room with several of the triumphant Ireland U20s squad in attendance.

Acclaimed for their togetherness as a group, D'Arcy was aware of the bonds that had inevitably formed during that campaign earlier this year. He found himself reflecting on his own experiences of a trusting dressing room.

"In a game, you are faced by hundreds of split-second decisions. Many of them boil down to whether you are able to rely on the guys either side of you. Will he make that tackle? Will he make that pass? If you are in any way indecisive at that level, you're done for.

"Throughout my career I found that the guys in the team environment who had earned my trust were the ones who had gained my respect away from the game, as much as on the field. They were the type of guys who did everything right when they pulled on the jersey.

"Ultimately, the best rugby players are the best rugby people."

“The great thing for these guys is that they are benefiting from the mistakes that we made. **There's a tried and tested path now for guys moving through the game.**

INTER NATIONAL RUGBY PLAYERS



An expert group has unveiled new guidelines to help tackle the risk of player burnout.

The group, made up of sports scientists, medical experts and some of the world's top players and coaches, compiled the document aimed at changing the culture of over-burdening players at all levels of the game.

With evidence indicating that poor load management is a major risk factor for injury, the group assembled by International Rugby Players and World Rugby has put together 10 key points aimed at elite adult coaches and young players.

With training making up over 85% of a player's workload, the guidelines focus on reducing training spikes, avoiding chronic loads as well as incorporating all aspects of player load, such as travel, life load and other team commitments.

Irish coach Joe Schmidt, who sat on the expert group, said: "Players who are well managed tend to perform more consistently and get injured less often, though it's a collision sport and you can't completely mitigate against injury."



"Planning and preparation are key. Any spike, whether it's in training load or on match-day, is a red flag for risk. Players should progress gradually to build robustness because if they don't, they are more likely to injure themselves.

"This is as applicable to the amateur game as it is to the professional game. If you can manage load, so players are physically and mentally able to cope, then they're going to enjoy the game and perform better."

"If you're mentally fresh and physically prepared, then you're more likely to enjoy what you're doing"

World Rugby CMO Dr. Martin Raftery said: "A successful injury-prevention strategy is not simply about reducing match time, as training accounts for up to 85 per cent of all player load. This holistic programme is about reducing injuries through management of training load and as a consequence improving player performance and long-term well being. Ultimately, it is about changing culture, just as we have been doing with regards to concussion."

The document also focuses on identifying high-risk athletes, such as players involved in multiple-teams, young elite players, those returning from injury, veteran players and those who have recently moved to a higher level of competition.

Wales centre Jamie Roberts says young players and coaches should adopt a "train hard and smart" policy: "It's important that players are not under-cooked, as that's also a time when they are open to injury. As the game continues to evolve, it's important coaches and players educate themselves on what constitutes too much or too little so they can plan, prepare and perform at their best."

Player load working group:
Agustin Pichot, Dr Martin Raftery, Mark Harrington, Ross Tucker (World Rugby), Ken Quarrie (NZR), Matt Cross (PRL), Simon Kemp (RFU), Glenn Stewart (West Coast Eagles AFL), Omar Hassanein, Isaac Boss, Stephen Moore, Jamie Roberts (International Rugby Players), Joe Schmidt (IRFU)

For more information, please visit rugbyplayers.org

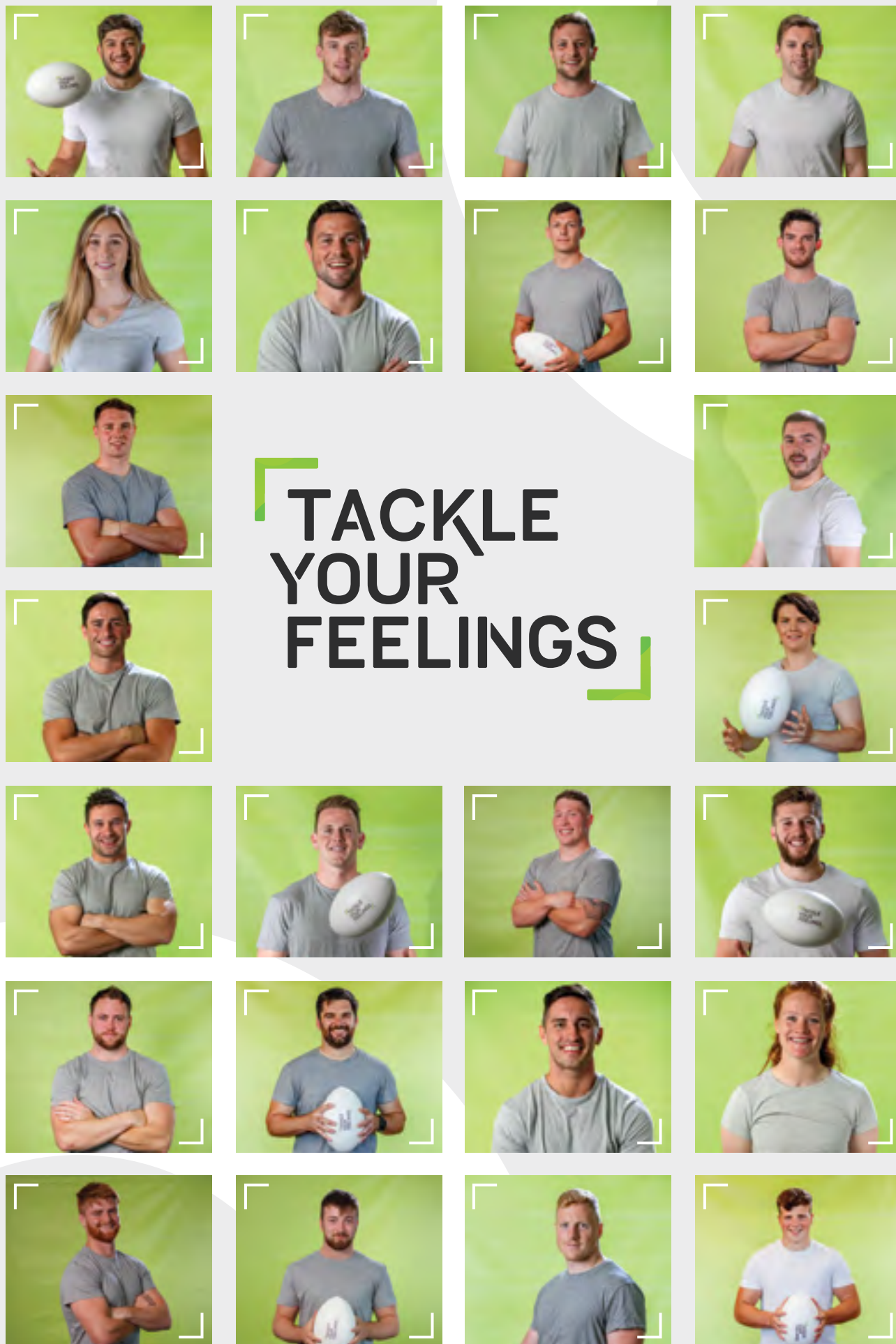
“**Players who are well managed tend to perform more consistently and get injured less often, though it's a collision sport and you can't completely mitigate against injury.**”



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