

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

VOLUME 04 - SPRING 2018

WHISTLE WHILE YOU WORK

JOY NEVILLE AND
FRANK MURPHY



TACKLE YOUR
FEELINGS
APP LAUNCH

SIGNING ON
TADHG FURLONG
AND CJ STANDER



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IRELAND

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CEO ADDRESS

SIMON KEOGH

A year is a long time in rugby and in business. In anybody's eyes, the 2016/17 season was a huge success for Irish rugby. It encompassed defeats of Australia, New Zealand and England, a 2nd place finish in the Six Nations, an unbeaten tour to Japan and USA and 11 Irish representatives touring with the Lions. Our Women's XVs team were also unbeaten until the final game of their Six Nations campaign, while the Women's 7s qualified for the World Series and the Men's 7s continued to build towards the same goal. Meanwhile, at provincial level we had two Irish teams in the Champions Cup semi-final, two in the latter stages of the PRO12 and one in the final. Never a dull moment!

One year on, we are without question in a better position. As current Grand Slam winners our members have recognised

that in order to be the best they need to constantly evolve and improve their game. By challenging themselves they have managed to build upon their success and create an environment whereby they are always looking to be better.

If the vision of the players' association is "to make Ireland the best place in the world to play rugby" we must take our lead from our members and challenge what is perceived to be the norm in player representation. The issues we have faced off the field have presented Rugby Players Ireland with an opportunity to reassess how we represent and educate our members.

The Player Development Programme (PDP), a jointly funded initiative between Rugby Players Ireland and the IRFU focuses on the players' off-field development. With five Player Development Managers based across the country, Rugby Players Ireland



has the capacity to provide a comprehensive curriculum for each province and for the Women's Rugby programme.

The content of the PDP is reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that it continues to evolve in line with current trends. We have invested more resources in this area, including broadening the curriculum delivered to players through individual consultations, group workshops and the provision of educational material so that all players receive the support they need in their daily lives, while also preparing them for their transition from the game.

A new feature of the programme for 2018 will see Rugby Players Ireland and the IRFU host an Induction Camp for all new Academy players, which will bring our services into focus and emphasise the importance of a players' holistic development as they enter the system.

By their standards the 2017 Rugby World Cup was disappointing for the Women's XV's group. Following the tournament, the squad recognised that the level of performance was not to the standard they expected and sought change.

**“
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Accordingly a review of the women's game was established late in 2017 with Rugby Players Ireland facilitating the women's players' views for the first time. With the difficulties the players face in balancing their working lives with high performance sport, in recent weeks Rugby Players Ireland arranged to host members of the Irish Women's XV squad for a weekend of learning and team-building. This provided us with a wonderful opportunity for Rugby Players Ireland to strengthen its relationship and provide a wider range of services to the group.

Rugby Players Ireland want to help shape an atmosphere that is second to none in the world of rugby. The proof of whether the association is achieving its vision is if we manage to retain players in the Irish system despite the financial muscle of other environments. Whilst a few players have chosen to ply their trade elsewhere, most of our members have remained in Ireland. We hope that this is not just for how they are managed on the field but also for the off-field opportunities that are being presented by remaining in a culture that is constantly looking to better itself.



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



GRAND SLAM 2018

FRANCE 13 - 15 IRELAND

STADE DE FRANCE
3/2/2018

It was almost over before we began. As Teddy Thomas streaked clear to put France in the ascendancy with just minutes to go, the travelling Irish contingent suddenly began to feel the cold Parisian air. However, when Anthony Belleau missed a subsequent penalty that would have sealed a near-certain victory, new life was breathed into the Irish cause. An astonishing 41 phases played out before Jonathon Sexton sat into the pocket to land a monster drop-goal that surely convinced Joe Schmidt's team that destiny was on their side.

IRELAND 56 - 19 ITALY

AVIVA STADIUM
10/2/2018

A comprehensive victory over Italy in Dublin was tempered by worrying injuries to Lions' tourists Tadhg Furlong and Robbie Henshaw in addition to the withdrawal of Jack Conan at half-time. Yet, the respective introductions of Andrew Porter and Jordan Larmour, allied to a two-try salvo from Jacob Stockdale and an impressive showing from Bundee Aki, suggested that a new era for Irish rugby was dawning.



IRELAND 37 - 27 WALES

AVIVA STADIUM
24/2/2018

Arguably the most exciting of Ireland's encounters in the 2018 championship, a bonus-point victory over Warren Gatland's troublesome Welsh outfit kept Ireland's Grand Slam dream on track. It was not without some worrying moments, none moreso than when a Steff Evans try and Leigh Halfpenny conversion brought Wales to within three points with just minutes to go. However, as the Welsh pressed one final time, Jacob Stockdale pounced with a intercept to seal the victory. Who dares wins.



IRELAND 28 - 8 SCOTLAND

AVIVA STADIUM
10/3/2018

Having dispatched of England at Murrayfield, Scotland came to Dublin with renewed hopes for their own title aspirations. Certainly, a number of searing breaks served as a reminder of the threat they offered. A crucial turnover from Dan Leavy stemmed the Scottish tide before a trademark Stockdale intervention gave Ireland the lead. A further Stockdale try before half-time was indicative of the growing confidence in the Irish camp. While the Scottish continued to threaten, Ireland were clinical in the final third with Conor Murray and Sean Cronin helping to seal the bonus point. With England falling to France in Paris, the Six Nations title was assured!

ENGLAND 15 - 24 IRELAND

TWICKENHAM
17/3/2018

St. Patrick's Day 2018. A day that will live long in the memory. Tries from Garry Ringrose, CJ Stander and Stockdale put Ireland into an unassailable lead by half-time. In truth, the result thereafter never looked in doubt as an impressive defensive effort kept England out. It was a showing of immense leadership from the elder statesmen, while the younger vintage held their own in a renowned cauldron of international rugby.



ZURICH IRISH RUGBY AWARDS 2018

ZURICH IRISH PLAYERS' PLAYER OF THE YEAR



KEITH EARLS

That catch to retain possession against the French, that lung-busting chase of Mattia Bellini, that crucial tap tackle on Elliott Daly – moments that stick out from a memorable campaign. “Everything good about Munster Rugby and Irish Rugby is reflected in Keith Earls,” said Ronan O’Gara during the Championship, while many other plaudits followed. Although he will have been disappointed that injury impacted upon his Munster contribution in the latter stages of the season, Earls was outstanding throughout and this has been recognised by his peers.



TADHG FURLONG

The Supporters’ Player of the Year in 2017, Furlong continued to win over the rugby world this season beginning with a series of impressive displays on the British & Irish Lions tour of New Zealand last summer. Immense throughout Ireland and Leinster’s respective campaigns, Furlong has come to be recognised as one of the best tighthead operators in the game, while his role in CJ Stander’s try against England on St. Patrick’s Day also showed the world what some of the finer touches in his armoury can do!



CONOR MURRAY

Following a season of unprecedented highs in 2017, Murray was named the Zurich Players’ Player of the Year and few believed that the scrum-half could ever have a better campaign. Fast forward to 2018 and Murray will be reflecting on yet another season that has underlined his importance to both club and country. In light of how he has performed over the past number of years, an outstanding performance is something of a given for Murray, something that is not lost on his teammates.



JOHNNY SEXTON

For almost 10 years, Sexton has been at the heart of the Irish cause. While there have been many good days in green, one triumph eluded him. Now that the Grand Slam has been added to his honours list, Sexton will undoubtedly go down as one of the greatest players to have graced the rugby field for his country. Whether it was steering Ireland to victory in the dying moments in Paris or keeping the points ticking over against the Italians in Dublin, Sexton’s chase never relented.

Nevin Spence Young Player of the Year

Jordan Larmour
James Ryan
Jacob Stockdale

BNY Mellon Women’s XV Player of the Year

Katie Fitzhenry
Ciara Griffin
Claire Molloy

Mason Alexander Supporters Player of the Year

Bundee Aki
Keith Earls
Tadhg Furlong
Iain Henderson
Dan Leavy
Conor Murray
Johnny Sexton
Jacob Stockdale

Vodafone Medal for Excellence

Duncan Casey
Jake Heenan
Rhys Ruddock

Women’s 7s Player of the Year

Ashleigh Baxter
Stacey Flood
Lucy Mulhall

Volkswagen Try of the Year

Andrew Conway
(Munster v Toulon)
Jacob Stockdale
(Ireland v Wales)
CJ Stander
(England v Ireland)



WATERSPORTS

Sink or swim... you could say that captures life in the professional game. Or you could kayak?! At Nevsail Sports, a premium Adventure Centre for watersports in Ireland, members of the Munster Academy put some different skills to the test! With adaptable programmes appropriate to age and fitness, Nevsail Sports created some bespoke activities to help

improve self-confidence, communication, develop camaraderie and team-building. Marcus Horan also took part and provided a shining example of what not to do...



IRFU COACHING

No matter where your future might lie in the game, many will hope to have some level of involvement beyond their playing career. In recent years, several players have made the step into the coaching world on a professional level. However, many others have also taken up roles in the amateur game, sharing their knowledge and helping their communities to progress. Yet, it is important that all players undertake the necessary training to ensure that they can provide the best that they can offer. Members of the Connacht squad recently moved to the next level of their coaching journey and will hope to progress further in the months ahead.

AGENTS SEMINAR

As per their obligation to the Agent Accreditation Scheme, rugby agents operating in the country attended the annual Agents Seminar at the offices of Rugby Players Ireland earlier this year. Speakers on the day included Guy Easterby, Louise Reilly BL, Ciarán Medlar of BDO, Rob Hennelly of LoveMedia, Adam Redmond and Amy Monaghan of the Pro14, Mark Egan of World Rugby and Dr. Deirdre Lyons. As the season comes to an end, members of the Rugby Players Ireland team have also visited the respective provinces to advise players should they wish to engage an agent.

INSTAGRAM WORKSHOP

Every year, the means in which players can communicate with their fans changes. In recent months, Instagram has become an increasingly influential tool in the personal branding world. With over 800 million monthly active users, many experts believe it could reach a billion later in the year - more than double the monthly active users of Twitter and over three times as many users on WhatsApp. Now owned by Facebook, players and members of the wider Leinster Rugby community attended their European HQ to pick up some tips and techniques to make the most of their unique voice online.



TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS PROVINCIAL VISITS

Since the launch of the Tackle Your Feelings App in February, we have taken 'The Beast' (made famous on BT Sport) to several games to raise awareness. Most recently we were in Belfast as Ulster took on the Ospreys! In the coming weeks, Tackle Your Feelings will be going out into the community with workshops taking place across the country. To find out when there will be one close to you, check out: tackleyourfeelings.com.

WELCOME BACK PAM! THANKS RYAN!

This month we welcome back Pamela Gilpin to the Rugby Players Ireland team. Pamela first joined IRUPA in February 2013 and has worked closely with Ulster Rugby whilst also providing career and personal coaching support for members of the GPA and PFAI. Following the birth of Pamela's son Jude, Ryan Mellon came on board and offered an excellent support service to our players. Ryan, a former footballer with Tyrone GAA, provided the team and our players with a unique insight deriving from his research and his personal experiences in sport. We wish him well!

WOMEN'S XV CAMP

On page 32, Nancy Chillingworth alludes to the practical difficulties in getting to the Women's XV players as they are based around the country, working and studying. This month, the players were hosted at the Glenroyal Hotel in Maynooth by Rugby Players Ireland at the Women's XV Personal Development Camp which was supported by Keeling's. While there, Simon Keogh provided them with some information as to the work that goes on at Rugby Players Ireland, a number of workshops were delivered and there was also an opportunity for some team-building! A great weekend was had by all!



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WHISTLE WHILE YOU WORK

PROFESSIONAL REFEREES, JOY NEVILLE AND FRANK MURPHY DISCUSS LIFE IN THE MIDDLE



Despite our reputation for sportsmanship, as a people we can be slow to banish our feelings of angst towards a referee in the immediate aftermath of a narrow defeat. A missed pass or soft tackle will often be disregarded in favour of making an official the real scapegoat. But referees are made of sterner stuff, with a capacity to block out vilification for the sake of the game.

"As with any career, it's a learning!" Frank Murphy poses. "When you're starting out you have to have a tough skin," the former Munster and Connacht scrum-half admits. "It's the stupid stuff. Some people just say ignorant things, but you harden as you progress. It's not part of the game per se, but it is expected."

"The more you move beyond an amateur environment, the less it happens" Joy Neville adds. "I don't have any issues at all anymore," says the first woman to referee a men's international, "but a few years ago I couldn't say that was the case. I have loads of stories, from players laughing as I'm giving my pre-match talk to another time when I was doing the line and I heard someone say: 'what do you expect when you throw a woman in to do a man's job?' Well, it took all of my energy not to turn around and shove my flag where the sun don't shine!"

In October of last year, seven referees, including Murphy and Neville, were offered professional contracts by the IRFU – the first of their kind in the country. As part of the agreement, both receive dedicated coaching, analysis and support for their strength & conditioning and nutritional needs. Not a far remove from the demands of a playing career at the top level.

Upon retiring from playing, Murphy and Neville were quickly identified by David McHugh (the former IRFU Referee Performance Manager) as potential refereeing candidates. Owing to their

extensive knowledge of the game and perceived sense of empathy with the players, both were given brief introductions before being launched with a whistle in a matter of days.

"I think Frank and I were in the mix because of how we conducted ourselves as players," says Neville, a Grand Slam winner with Ireland in 2013. "We're both extremely committed to the game. Our refereeing is an extension of that." However, it took some time before Neville committed herself to the venture. Even then, she wasn't fully convinced.

"It can be a lonely occupation and that is something I struggled with at first. For 11 years I had been spoilt rotten by coaches and management and you become very dependent. You're handed a boarding pass and told where to go. All of a sudden, I was being sent out to Russia and fending for myself! There's also an element whereby you have been part of a team for so long, you know that if you make a mistake on the field your teammates will pick you up and cover your back to a certain degree. One mistake as a referee though and all eyes will be on you."

Murphy believes that a hardened edge helps to set former professional players apart in the middle. "Players have a real advantage [as referees] because they are used to being critiqued," he believes. "The reviews can be hard to take, but they are honest and open. It's the culture of rugby. You're held accountable. Players will come in and say 'yes, I got that right or that wrong.' However, if you go in as a referee and say you were great, others will be looking at you."

While the euphoria of scoring a try might never be matched, Murphy feels that simply being on the field offsets much of what he anticipated in his life after rugby. As an illustrator and qualified teacher, Murphy had several options at his disposal but his love for the game remained undimmed.

"People will question whether you can get the same buzz out of refereeing. It's hard to explain, but in many ways it reminds me of starting out as a youngster and progressing through the ranks. When you are being evaluated and assessed, a competitiveness comes into it. You have to put



the work in and there is great satisfaction when you come off the field knowing you've done your job well. I dipped my toe in other worlds, but refereeing gave me a focus to take my mind off them when it might not have been going so well. It just happened that the distraction became the attraction!"

“People will question whether you can get the same buzz out of refereeing. It's hard to explain, but in many ways it reminds me of starting out as a youngster and progressing through the ranks.”

"It is quite different," Neville muses. "For instance, we travel twice the amount that a player will during a season because we don't have home games! But when you come off the pitch, the rewards can be similar. I've played a lot of rugby from beginning at club level through to playing for my province and country, so I'm aware of what my duty is. It's not about me in the middle, it's about making the right calls and allowing for the best game for the players. I get massive enjoyment out of that."

Despite Murphy and Neville progressing at a rate of knots, their lead has not always been followed, with many former players believing that they are not cut out to be a referee. So, what marks a player out as being a potential whistle-blower?

"Many professional players have the attributes," believes Neville, the World Rugby Referee of the



Year in 2017. "I never thought for a second that I'd be one to follow this path, not to mention be any good. I think you need to be approachable, have a good relationship with your fellow players and the officials and also have the capacity to be self-critical. Not many players will have pushed on to the level they're at without those qualities.

"Unfortunately, there is a bit of a stigma attached. It's not often that a referee is clapped off the field. People fear being the villain and I was once in that camp too. I hated it for the first few months and was close to packing it in but for my wife who convinced me to hang in there. Looking back, I know why I hated it. Having played at such a high level, I knew the standard that was required to be a top referee and I wanted to be that from the get-go. I wasn't prepared to make mistakes and so I went looking for the perfect game. But the penny soon dropped and I realised that in any walk of life, you make mistakes. It's how you improve. I started to learn more and began to really enjoy it!

"There's no doubt that it's strange going into your old dressing rooms," Murphy adds. "You know lots of players involved. But it's important to get straight into it. You're still on top of the game and in good shape. Many aspiring referees will also have a few years on you, unless you have retired from the game early through injury of course, but there is no optimum time to start.

"Once you get onto the pitch, you'll be hooked."



A WEEK IN THE LIFE OF A PROFESSIONAL REFEREE

MONDAY

Frank Murphy: Joy, Johnny, Andy and George are all based in Limerick and train together. As I'm in Cork, I'm scheduled to work with my own trainer. I'll do some conditioning and weights, with injury prevention being the predominant focus.

In the afternoon I watch my game from the weekend and prepare it for review. I'll clip it and upload it onto the system. The assessor will upload his own analysis and my performance will be rated. It's quite an intensive process and may take until Tuesday morning to finish up. Sometimes longer!

Joy Neville: After training we'll all sit down and discuss our games from the weekend which can be invaluable. We learn an awful lot from each other.

TUESDAY

FM: Once every two weeks we will also meet in Dublin to go through clips that are relevant to new laws and developing trends. We also discuss any matters arising whether that be in the PRO14 or the European competitions.

WEDNESDAY

FM: I'll get back to some training on Wednesday before starting to prepare for the game I might have in the coming days. I'll go through other games involving the teams and I'll identify some patterns to their play that might concern me. If needs be, I'll contact one of the other referees to get a better sense of what to expect. Once that is done I will contact my Assistant Referees and Television Match Official to let them know exactly what we're looking for, some specific team trends and the inputs that I'll be needing.

THURSDAY

FM: The whole week is quite full on and long, especially if you have a Sunday game. So, if I can, I will take Thursday off.

JN: We do a lot of travelling for games. Thankfully we can dictate our own flight path. Generally, if it's an afternoon game in England or Wales I'll be on the 7.30pm flight back to Shannon! For me, for my wife, my family, it's important that we have our downtime and do all that we can to protect it. When you're at home, you're at home.

FRIDAY – SUNDAY

FM: We're away most weekends and will have been able to plan our own personal lives around that about a month in advance. However, as the season progresses, and the fixtures become more significant, refereeing appointments will be based on form.

JN: While we're very professional, there is a competitiveness when it comes to being selected for games. When you're an Assistant Referee and doing the line, you have the same responsibility to the players. There is a good group of us, a good team ethic. We back each other up.

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TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS APP LAUNCH

As Ireland prepared to take on Wales in the NatWest Six Nations in February, Rugby Players Ireland in partnership with Zurich launched the Tackle Your Feelings App which has been designed to promote a proactive approach to mental wellbeing. Irish and Welsh international rugby players Rhys Ruddock and Rhys Priestland were on hand to lend their support to launch the App, which is available free to download through the Apple and Play App stores.

The Tackle Your Feelings App aims to encourage users to be proactive about their mental wellbeing using sport psychology and positive psychology principles. Instead of waiting for a problem to manifest, it encourages the prioritisation of their mental wellbeing in the same way as one would look after their nutrition and exercise routines. Users are guided through an engaging 'Training Camp' programme, which helps to develop self-awareness while offering a chance to try out different strategies to improve mental and emotional wellbeing.

A key feature of the Tackle Your Feelings App is the presence of a number of leading Irish international and provincial rugby players including Iain Henderson, Jack McGrath, and Bundee Aki. All have shared videos of their own tips and techniques, providing a unique insight into how they maintain their mental wellbeing and mentally prepare for rugby matches. Indeed, over 25 rugby players use their profiles to support the new App and encourage people to take steps to prioritise their mental wellbeing.

The tools and techniques featured specifically help users to improve their Optimism, Resilience, Confidence, Satisfaction, Relaxation, Happiness and Relationships. Users can then go on to explore some of the techniques that work best for them, taking positive steps towards safeguarding their mental wellbeing into the future. Through setting goals and reflecting on their progress, they can expect to learn how to maximise their mental wellbeing and gain confidence in using practical strategies to help them do so.

Speaking at the launch, Ireland and Leinster's Rhys Ruddock said: "So many of my team mates and friends have come together to share their tips and



techniques and help to raise awareness of how important it is to maintain your mental wellbeing, and I wanted to lend my support. As a professional rugby player, mental wellbeing is critical both on and off the pitch. It's not just important for athletes though, it's important for everyone – being in a good place mentally and emotionally allows me to excel at all aspects of life!"

Welsh rugby international Rhys Priestland also added that he was inspired to see so many Irish rugby players supporting this campaign. "Earlier this season I probably would have hoped to be meeting Rhys Ruddock on the pitch in Dublin, and as a professional athlete it's hard to be out with an injury. We are fortunate though that taking a proactive approach to our mental wellbeing is a key part of our training and having the skills and strategies that work for you when things are going well makes dealing with challenges like injuries much easier."

Of course, the realisation of the App would not have been possible without the help of Zurich over the duration of the campaign. Anthony Brennan, CEO Zurich Ireland said: "The team at Zurich is delighted to support the launch of the Tackle Your Feelings app. We wholeheartedly support the message that people don't need to be facing a challenge or crisis to work on their mental wellbeing. By being honest with themselves about how they are feeling and proactively taking steps every day to look after their mental wellbeing, people can experience greater enjoyment and satisfaction in life. It's great to see so many influential Irish rugby players sharing their own personal tips and insights to inspire and help others."

Finally, Simon Keogh, CEO, Rugby Players Ireland spoke of his pride in supporting a very important health message: "The App is the latest instalment in our campaign which has seen many of Ireland's most well-known rugby players talk openly about their own mental wellbeing to inspire a more open dialogue and break down stigma. Professional athletes don't wait until their performance drops to work on their mental game and by incorporating a combination of mental wellbeing and sports psychology strategies we believe the App will enable people of all ages to be more proactive about their mental wellbeing."

The all-island campaign has previously seen provincial and international rugby stars including Leinster, Ireland and Lions front-row, Jack McGrath; Irish women's player, Hannah Tyrrell; Ulster quartet Darren Cave, Craig Gilroy, Stuart McCloskey and Andrew Trimble; Connacht's Jake Heenan, former Irish international flanker Shane Jennings and former Connacht & current Bristol Rugby coach Pat Lam come forward to talk about their own personal mental wellbeing.



PUBLIC LAUNCH EVENT

On February 24th, a host of tag rugby teams descended on Wanderers FC for a morning of competition before the screening of Ireland v Wales in the Six Nations. Despite the low temperatures, a dry morning allowed for plenty of trickery and sleight of foot.

The final was a particularly tight affair, with the Loose Pumas being narrowly defeated by the Superfreaks in extra-time. Simon Keogh happened to be tog out for the ultimate victors...

Following their morning exertions, guests were treated to food provided by Darragh Fanning's Zaytoon before panning out on a multitude of beanbags to listen to Sophie Spence, James Tracy, Adam Byrne and Will Matthews share their thoughts on the upcoming game. A packed floor saw Ireland claim victory and remain on course for the Grand Slam.

Many thanks to EventFuel for all their work in bringing it together!



TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS APP FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHAT IS TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS?

Tackle Your Feelings is a three-year, all-island mental wellbeing campaign run by Rugby Players Ireland in partnership with Zurich. The campaign features Ireland's rugby players leading from the front, breaking down stigma and encouraging people to become more proactive about looking after their mental wellbeing on a daily basis. Ambassadors include the likes of Jack McGrath, Andrew Trimble, Hannah Tyrrell, Ian Keatley and many more.

WHAT IS THE TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS APP?

The Tackle Your Feelings App is a mental wellbeing app, based on sport psychology and positive psychology principles, that aims to help people develop their self-awareness while trying out lots of different practical strategies to improve mental wellbeing. Users are guided through a 'Training Camp' programme to help them work on aspects of mental wellbeing like Confidence, Satisfaction and Resilience. The app also features videos of over 25 of Ireland's rugby players sharing tips on what works for them when they are mentally preparing for a performance or working on their own wellbeing. Users can also avail of the 'Wellbeing Indicator' to track their mental wellbeing and a 'Need Help' section to access more specialised support.

WHO IS THE TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS APP FOR?

The App is applicable to everyone and is aimed at both rugby fans and non-rugby fans alike. While adults and teenagers will all benefit from the content, we recommend that users are aged 14 years or older and that anyone under 16 uses the app with their Parent or Guardian's consent.

WHERE CAN I DOWNLOAD THE APP AND HOW MUCH WILL IT COST?

The App is available on iTunes and on Google Play and is FREE to download.

WHAT WILL THE APP DO FOR ME?

The App will help you to proactively work on your mental wellbeing to experience more enjoyment and effectiveness in your daily life. Specifically, the app will guide you through a programme to help you reflect and improve your self-awareness, while introducing you to a whole host of practical strategies to boost your wellbeing and prompting you to set goals to ensure you experience maximum benefits.

WHY IS IT LINKED WITH IRISH RUGBY PLAYERS?

The Tackle Your Feelings campaign is run by Rugby Players Ireland in partnership with Zurich. Ireland's rugby players took on this project in order to use their unique platform in society to break down stigma around mental wellbeing and dispel the myth of 'macho' being equated with never acknowledging or addressing emotions.

WILL IT TAKE LONG TO COMPLETE?

The whole app would ideally take about 3 weeks to complete. The self-awareness exercises are quite short and we recommend you only complete one module per day. The completion of the whole programme just depends on the deadlines you set for completing your personally-tailored goals.

WILL MY ANSWERS BE MADE PUBLIC?

No. Users' privacy and confidentiality is of paramount importance in this App. You will not use your email for login. You can choose to create a Username or Log in as a Guest. Your information will be securely stored with the highest level of internet security and in such a way that no one person's answers are linked to their user name or device identifier.

We will be collecting data for impact measurement purposes around how users engage with the app and the difference in wellbeing scores on start and completion of the app but all this data is completely ANONYMOUS and we cannot link a person's answers with any identifying information about that person.

IS THE CONTENT BASED UPON SCIENCE?

Yes. All the techniques employed in the app are evidence-based and grounded in sport psychology and positive psychology theory and empirical research.

WILL THE APP TREAT OR DIAGNOSE A MENTAL ILLNESS?

Absolutely not. The App is intended as an informational resource to help you to proactively work on your mental wellbeing but it does not have the capacity to treat or diagnose mental illness. If you are concerned about your own or another person's mental wellbeing seek professional advice without delay.

CAN I USE THE APP AS A LONG-TERM RESOURCE TO SUPPORT MY MENTAL WELLBEING?

No. The App is intended to help people become more proactive about taking care of their mental wellbeing. It aims to act as a bridge to engage people who may have never considered this topic as relevant before and to support people who are already proactive but may want a little extra help in this area. The intention is to inspire people to find out the strategies that work for them and then for people to apply these strategies in their day to day life. We also recommend that on completing the Training Camp, users reflect on which techniques worked particularly well for them and seek out other mental wellbeing apps and resources in this area for more long term maintenance of mental wellbeing.

The sections of the app that could be helpful on a longer-term basis are the Wellbeing Indicator, Locker, Resources and Need Help sections.

PREMIUM HEALTH CLUBS IN DUBLINS
PREMIUM LOCATIONS

ICONIC
HEALTH CLUBS

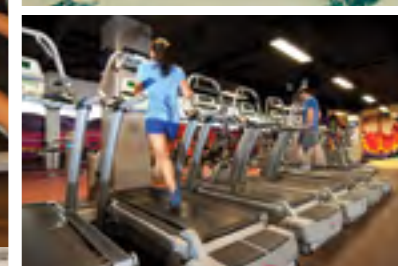
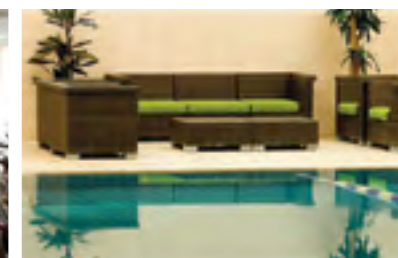
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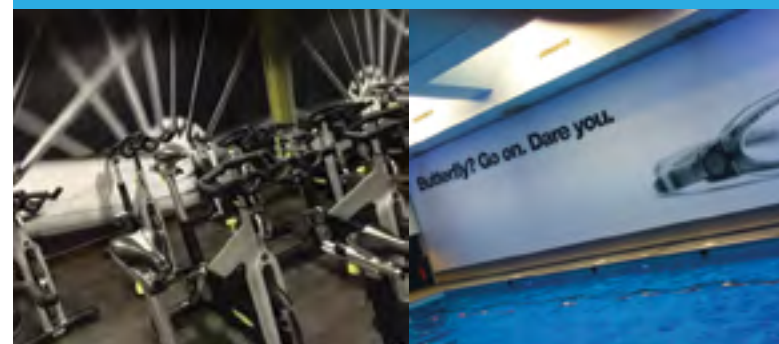
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SIGNING ON

Upon committing their future to Irish rugby, Tadhg Furlong and CJ Stander spoke with David Kelly of the Irish Independent about the value of Rugby Players Ireland.

As 2017 drew to a close, some of Ireland's form players put pen to paper on new deals with the IRFU. It was to the great relief of the rugby community and the general public at large that Tadhg Furlong, Peter O'Mahony and CJ Stander all agreed to remain in Ireland for the foreseeable future.

All three played central roles as Joe Schmidt's Irish side claimed the Grand Slam for only the third time in Irish rugby history, while they were swiftly followed in the immediate aftermath of the tournament by Iain Henderson, Irish captain Rory Best and Rugby Players Ireland chairman, Rob Kearney.

Having moved to Ireland from South Africa in 2013, there was much speculation that Stander would opt for a big-money move abroad rather than remaining in his new home. However, Stander urges that this was never the case.

"Speculation is always going to happen," Stander cautioned. "When stuff like that comes on, you feel people judge you because they make assumptions that you are going to leave. Everybody in the world will have an opinion. Social media and all the stuff gives people a platform. Sometimes it hurts when they question your loyalty, but they don't know what is going on."

The general consensus was that there was less of a fear that Tadhg Furlong

would be packing his bags. The New Ross man was on the back of a stellar 2016/17 campaign, which concluded in his involvement in the drawn British & Irish Lions Test series in New Zealand.

"I can't say I seriously looked away, but you poke your head out to look at your value, and then within this country, you're looking like a fair deal," Furlong surmised. "I know I still have a lot of development to undertake as a player in Leinster and Ireland. The opportunity to be successful here drives me, especially with a group of players that I have come to admire, particularly the older ones.

"You look at the likes of Jonathon Sexton, Sean Cronin, Sean O'Brien, Rob Kearney, Fergus McFadden, Devin Toner. They are all over 30 and I knew that if I was to go somewhere else for a few years, and maybe even if I did come back, I might never get the chance to play with that special group ever again and try to win something.

"If I was away and saw Ireland winning championship titles or Grand Slams, doing well at a World Cup, or Leinster winning the Champions Cup, that would have been very difficult to take."

Thankfully, both players' representatives engaged in relatively seamless negotiations at the top table. Although Furlong is well aware of the lucrative potential of a move abroad, he made his plans clear early and throughout, while Stander suggests that although there were some stumbling blocks, conversations remained open over the course of their discussions.

"The talks weren't that stressful," continued Stander. "Getting it done was difficult at times and it would have been better if done quickly. The conversations were all open and we knew what was on the table and glad it worked out in the end."

Having emerged through a foreign environment, Stander is well placed to assess where Ireland stands in the rugby world. He points to the support offered by Rugby Players Ireland as being a significant part of his thinking when weighing up his options.

"From a Rugby Players Ireland perspective, they put a lot of things behind the scenes and make sure we are looked after and through the provinces they can make sure we have a voice if something goes wrong."

Furlong agrees. "It's their job to put support structures in place for us outside the game," he explains. "On the education side, they are vital in trying to develop us as people with a variety of mentoring programmes and it is also important to know you know you have a voice and if there is a problem we can stake a stance on issue in the game. You know what your rights are."

Interestingly, both players alluded to happiness off the field contributing to their form while on it.

"I struggled with my form last year," Stander admits. "I was tired and they [Rugby Players Ireland] told me to take a few weeks off to get my mind and body right. A lot of people have put a lot of work



into me here.

"They know what our specific needs are, and I wake up every Monday morning with a smile because I know everyone wants to be the best for each other. You feel valued as a person and honesty is at the forefront of it all. And you can feel that amongst the supporters.

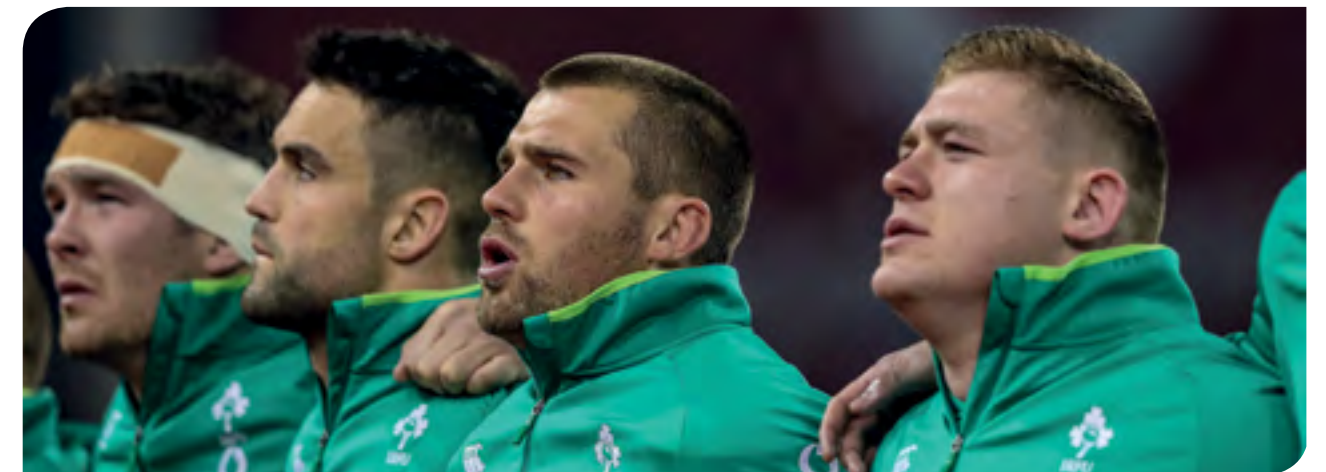
"The set-up here is the best in the world, I really feel that. I am playing the best rugby I can, my family and my professional life is looked after so I can perform my best without any worries on the field."

Furlong agrees and states that the welfare system, from the strength and conditioning aspect through to medical and training facilities are world class. Such facilities and services help him to produce his best on the field while the help of organisations such as Rugby Players Ireland have helped to bring about the best of Tadhg Furlong away from the game.

"They help us off the pitch so we can give our best on it," Furlong concludes.

“

You feel valued as a person and honesty is at the forefront of it all. And you can feel that amongst the supporters



THIS IS ME

As his time in Ireland comes to an end, Jake Heenan tells Sean McMahon of Pundit Arena about his life away from the game.

A busy restaurant just a few minutes walk from Eyre Square in Galway City probably wasn't the best location to agree to meet Jake Heenan. Festive work lunches were in full swing and the clinking of glasses and cutlery were beginning to become increasingly more prevalent.

Just as I began to consider a change of table or even a more suitable venue, the 6'2" affable Kiwi entered the room and introductions and small-talk ensued. We immediately apologised for a mix-up in the dates but Heenan shrugs with a wry smile, "I'm not that busy, I wouldn't worry too much about it!" Of course, the 25-year-old from Whangarei who has been sidelined with an injury to his left shoulder, a very careful removal of his jacket a testament to that.

The coffees arrive and a slight nod to the cafe staff is delivered by Heenan – the Connacht Rugby squad are familiar visitors to this particular establishment, just a stone's throw away from the Sportsground on the Old College Road. "How's the shoulder?" – Probably not the greatest opening question to ask when it is known that the back-row forward may not play for Connacht again, with his departure from the province at the end of the season already confirmed.

However, my discussion that day with Jake wasn't to discuss Connacht's season or his comeback from injury but it was aimed at achieving an insight into the life of a professional rugby player, not just the 80 minutes we see of them on the pitch or the snippets of their thoughts on next week's game in the media, but what truly defines them as an individual.

Heenan arrived in Galway from New Zealand in 2013 when he was just 21-years-old, having been asked by Pat Lam to join him on a remarkable journey which would see the western province win the PRO12 in 2015/2016 playing one of the most exciting brands of rugby seen at the time.

"So [Pat Lam] asked me to come over [to Connacht] as an uncertain 21-year-old and it ended up being one of the best decisions of my life and I would encourage any of my friends back home to do it."

The encouragement that Heenan speaks of isn't related to pursuing a life as a professional rugby player but rather that of living abroad and experiencing a new culture. It's almost immediate from our hour-long conversation that Heenan could be described as something of an explorer, someone who is open to new, exciting but often daunting opportunities – moving to the other side of the world, away from family and friends was his first step on this journey.

It's safe to say that travelling is one of the 25-year-old's true passions in life and it's not difficult to see

why. It's easy to forget how privileged many of us are by living in Western Europe, the opportunity to experience a completely different culture could just be a short two-hour flight away, but growing up in New Zealand, you couldn't be more separated from the rest of the world as Heenan explains.

"I suppose that's why I appreciate it, you know? You appreciate travelling because it's so hard to do in New Zealand, it's very expensive and you're a long way from anywhere."

You would find it difficult to find someone who doesn't enjoy exploring new countries and experiencing new cultures. Of course, this applies to Heenan, but it's the opportunity to be more of his true self, rather than what we may perceive a professional rugby player to be, which really appeals to him as he takes full advantage of living at the gateway of Europe and the USA.

"I'm a lot happier, I'm a lot more content when I'm travelling. You learn a lot about yourself and other people, you become better at interacting with people and dealing with situations and that sort of thing, I suppose that's one of the reasons why I enjoy it..."

It seems that any opportunity Heenan gets in the structured and heavy schedule in life as a professional athlete he will use to explore new territories and cultures. Once a year he likes to travel with some of his friends in the Connacht rugby squad or as much as he can with his partner, who he met in Galway, but it's travelling on his own which really allows him to come out of his shell.

"I actually enjoy [travelling on my own]! That's where I find I'm more talkative and normal. I enjoy doing things and I do things I normally wouldn't do, I talk to people I normally wouldn't which I really enjoy and again you soak a lot of things in, you know? A basic thing like being on the subway or just walking down the street, you notice more... cultural subtleties. So yeah, I do like travelling on my own."

Heenan has a deep connection with water. So much so that in addition to spear-fishing being



a hobby of his back in New Zealand, the flanker, alongside one his best friends, bought an old van in Galway before retrofitting it and road-tripping it down the west coast of Europe for a surfing trip with his partner, along with his faithful canine companion, Brody.

They ferried over to Roscoff in France before undertaking a journey which brought them down the west coast and into the Basque region of Spain to San Sebastian. From there they drove through the beautiful landscape of the Pyrenees before making their way back through France. "There were a few hard lessons when we went surfing," Heenan laughed. "The surf gets pretty serious over there! You're there, so you give it a shot but I found myself in a washing machine far too many times, more often than not!"

Of course, living on the west coast of Ireland isn't a bad place to be to nurture a love of surfing. However, what is interesting is that Heenan also uses this hobby for medicinal purposes, as an escape from the rigours and pressures that are associated with life as a rugby player.

"This season, I was sort of injured in the pre-season, I came back, didn't get selected and then got selected, played and then got dropped straight away the following week. I took that pretty hard and I was pretty upset, wanting to get better.

"So it was a bit of a tough week and I said that weekend, 'fuck it, Friday, training done, I'm going down for a bit of a surf.' So I went down, paddled around, same again on Saturday... came in then on Monday and felt as good as I've ever had, you know that kind of way? A lot of what I was holding onto or what was getting to me was gone."

For many people, the sea has a cleansing effect, the ability to provide a moment of clarity or wash away the worries associated with 21st-century living. The promotion of mental health has increasingly been

“I’m a lot happier, I’m a lot more content when I’m travelling. You learn a lot about yourself and other people, you become better at interacting with people and dealing with situations and that sort of thing, I suppose that’s one of the reasons why I enjoy it...”



at the forefront in Irish sport, highlighted by the ‘Tackle Your Feelings’ campaign conducted by Rugby Players Ireland, the representative body for professional rugby players in Ireland, of which Heenan is an ambassador.

“Yeah that was interesting, that was a good experience [Tackle Your Feelings Campaign]. I’ve always been interested in the mental side of sport you know? So doing a bit with the mental side of life was quite an interesting thing and probably things I’ve maybe been doing or not doing I might have taken for granted...”

The 25-year-old is acutely aware of the risks associated with banking your whole life on rugby, both from a professional and personal perspective, as Heenan recalls an invaluable lesson he received in his youth which has stuck with him throughout his career.

“I remember a teacher said to me in school, he said: ‘You need to do something other than rugby...when rugby is finished, you can’t bank your whole self-esteem on rugby.’ You hear about a lot of post-career depression so that’s important.

“I’m a rugby player, I’m a person who plays rugby but when rugby stops and it will, I’m happy with what I’ve achieved but I’m happy with what I’m still doing and I’m happy with what I’m going to do. Working on the person as well as working on the professional is important I guess.”

Being happy – when you’re playing rugby, when you’re training, when you’re walking your dog, whatever it may be – it’s something which consistently crops up in our conversation. Heenan makes sure that whatever he’s doing, he reminds himself to enjoy the little things in life. This applies to playing professional rugby, too, as he explains his number one priority when he makes

his comeback from injury is to enjoy himself. “My number one aim that day is to enjoy the game. That links back to playing well. I find, personally, that if I’m having fun I play a lot better, I even find myself more aggressive if I’m having fun in a weird kind of a way, when I try to be aggressive, I’m not and I don’t enjoy it, it’s a funny little paradox!”

“I write my words before a game and the last one is to always have fun so that’s really important to me. In that way when I look back on my career I can say I really enjoyed it, I enjoyed playing rugby, I enjoyed the game itself.”

It’s hard not to feel sympathy for the Connacht man, he has had a torrid run of injuries which has seriously hampered his time with the western province, so much that when he underwent surgery on his other shoulder, the surgeon told him he would sign off on his retirement if he so wished.

“When I had my last surgery on that shoulder, there was a 30% chance going in that that would be me done. Before the surgery, the surgeon said that if I want to take my retirement, he would sign me off. You’re going to sleep and you could wake up having to find a job, so you do appreciate things.”

So it’s no surprise that Heenan makes sure he enjoys his rugby as much as possible as he admits himself, it can be taken away so quickly from you. So as our conversation draws to a close, Heenan concludes that with the volatile and uncertain nature that is associated with a career as a professional rugby player, it’s the experiences and relationships which matter to him most.

“I try to work on relationships with people, that’s a lot more important to me. I mean, you say that but it’s hard not to focus on possessions. Wanting things is very natural but I do try to work on people and it’s about living my life as much as I can and being as happy as I can first.”

With Heenan’s journey to date taking him to the other side of the world and winning one of club rugby’s top competitions, you can certainly say that he is living life to the full and whatever path he chooses to travel on in the future, one can expect that relationships, experiences and most importantly, being happy, will guide his way.

Jake Heenan was interviewed as part of ‘This Is Me’, a nationwide collaboration between Rugby Players Ireland and Pundit Arena where we provide an insight into players’ lives off the pitch.



WHAT IS THE PDP?

In recent months, Rugby Players Ireland has been busier than ever. Throughout the season there have been a number of offerings available to our members, ranging from classroom based activities to networking opportunities. By providing choice and a wide range of opportunities, the Player Development Programme (PDP) has sought to ensure that our players are continuously upskilling in both the everyday sense and in preparation for their future.

So, what do we offer?

Firstly, with a regular presence in each of the provinces over the last four years, our Player Development team understand the needs and wants of our players. With over 300 individual consultations taking place every month, the general requirements of the players have tended to come to the fore very quickly. Naturally, these can vary across the player groups (Academy players will have different requirements to those facing into retirement), however every effort is made to accommodate every player within the system.

Externally, many perceive rugby players to be a privileged entity and therefore don't require the assistance that they receive in abundance. However, while some might lead an enviable lifestyle as they navigate their way through a successful career on the field, many others have been left in their wake with nowhere to turn. Yet, even those who have found glory and headlines have often left the necessities of the 'real world' to chance while they pursue their dreams.

For instance, it can be very easy to assume that a rugby player will have a good knowledge of their contract and all of the financial concerns that accompany their career in the game. The reality is that many players have people around them to advise on all monetary matters. Consequently, with the help of Smith & Williamson (Dublin) and Cunningham Coates (Belfast), a number of financial planning workshops have taken place throughout the provinces dealing with the basics of a payslip to the intricacies of investment management. Additionally, our partners at Ulster Bank are also at hand to provide our members with a personalised financial health check.

Some practical workshops have also been embraced by our members. Last year players were given the opportunity to learn how to cut and style their hair with the help of The Grafton Barber. Meanwhile, far away from the grooming chambers, others turned out in force to get a few DIY tips in plumbing, joinery and bricklaying. More recently, several members of the Women's 7s squad headed out to Druids Glen Hotel & Golf Resort to pick up a golf club for the first time. They will return to assess their progression (or lack thereof) soon!

With their significant public profile, our members can have an influential role to play within their communities. Rugby Players Ireland has been keen to ensure that our members are seen as valued neighbours. To this end numerous social outreach engagements took place in 2017. In recent weeks Galway Hospice have contacted us to thank us for the contribution made by several members of the Connacht squad who have become regular visitors to the facility. Furthermore, in advance of the Christmas period an army of Munster players piled into a Limerick warehouse to pack two weeks' worth of supplies for the homeless of the mid-west. Prompted by the goodwill generated by such activities, other players have instigated visits to hospitals and the provision of soup kitchens for the people on the streets during the recent cold weather.

While the profile of rugby players in Ireland can have such a positive effect upon society, the prevalence of cameras and social media can simultaneously damage that potential. Mere quirks of character can be interpreted in a manner of ways. To this end, Gillian Horan of The Pudding and Derval O'Rourke



(a former Player Development Manager) have been at hand to give very useful advice to the players as to how to manage their 'brand' whether through the realms of Facebook or in associating their name with a product. Extensive work on media and communication skills have also taken place.

With constant pressures abounding, many players struggle to absorb them as easily as their teammates. However, such is the nature of rugby that few are willing to express what may be deemed to be a 'weakness'. Through the Tackle Your Feelings campaign, a number of players have come forward to highlight this issue on a public level. However, closer to home a range of workshops have taken place in an effort to assist players through any such difficulties. Through our wellbeing programme, players are advised on numerous techniques from sleeping better at night to coping with injury and how to avoid the temptations presented by gambling and alcohol.

In short, there is very little that Rugby Players Ireland fails to provide for its members. 2017/2018 has been a busy campaign... but plenty more awaits!

- ACADEMY INTRODUCTION
- AGENT ADVICES
- BARBERING WORKSHOP
- BARISTA TRAINING
- BOAT TRIP
- BRAND MANAGEMENT
- BUTCHERY WORKSHOP
- CAO OPTIONS WORKSHOP
- CAREER WORKSHOP
- CHILDREN'S SUMMER CAMP
- COACHING EDUCATION
- COMMUNICATION WORKSHOP
- COOKING WORKSHOP
- DIY
- EMPLOYER RECOGNITION EVENT
- ENTERPRISE IRELAND VISIT
- EXCEL WORKSHOP
- FAMILY EVENTS
- FIRST-AID COURSES
- FRENCH LANGUAGE LESSONS
- GAMBLING AWARENESS PROGRAMME
- GOLF CLINICS
- GOLF OUTINGS
- HOMELESS ENGAGEMENTS
- HOSPITAL VISITS
- INDIVIDUAL CONSULTATIONS
- INSURANCE TALKS
- INVESTMENT WORKSHOPS
- LINKEDIN ASSISTANCE
- MAKE-UP DEMONSTRATION
- MEDIA TRAINING
- MONEY MANAGEMENT
- NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES
- PAST-PLAYER EVENTS
- PARTNERS SOCIAL EVENTS
- PENSION ADVICE
- PRESENTATION SKILLS
- FINANCIAL ADVICE
- PROPERTY WORKSHOP
- ROAD SAFETY AWARENESS
- SOCIAL MEDIA AWARENESS SESSIONS
- SOUP KITCHEN
- START-UP BUSINESS ADVISORY CLINICS
- TRADE OPPORTUNITIES
- WELLBEING WORKSHOPS
- TIME MANAGEMENT CLINICS

HITTING THE HIGH NOTES

JACK CULLEN



As Jack Cullen watched Garry Ringrose dance through defences in recent weeks from a London pub, he sat back, sipped on his pint and revelled in Ireland's triumph. Those sat nearby barely acknowledged the screen, but Cullen's focus was undeterred. As a musician, Cullen is an avid storyteller yet when conversation veers towards his own rugby past, those in his company these days generally take a large dabble of salt.

Having emerged through the Saracens youth programme before being integrated into the Irish Exiles system, London-born Cullen moved to Limerick in 2013 to join up with the Munster Academy. A series of impressive performances under Peter Malone duly caught the attention of national selectors and soon the zippy scrum-half was lining out alongside Ringrose and captain Dan Leavy with Ireland's U20 side.

"I wasn't a rugby head," a slightly-built Cullen admits. "As soon as training finished, I was out the gap. I had lots of interests outside of the game. I think that was a good thing in terms of my own personal development, but I probably wasn't as good as I could have been as a player. I could have afforded a bit more time to my skillset, but I had a connection with music that I couldn't ignore. It is an emotional world, I'm an emotional person – something which isn't seen as a core macho attribute. Music allowed me to get outside the hustle and bustle of the rugby environment."

Marked out as a major talent from his early days with Bishop's Stortford RFC, Cullen saw his brother George use the Exiles to further his own career. At just 17, Cullen left the Saracens set-up to become the youngest member of Munster's Academy. Casting an eye back over the names of his intake, many were lucky enough to forge a career in the game. Rory Scannell and Alex Wooton have shone for the senior side this season, while Gearoid Lyons and John Madigan ply their trade further afield in the lower leagues of England and France.

"It's funny seeing all of those lads doing so well in the game," Cullen adds. "Garry, Dan, Joey Carbery and Andrew Porter were fantastic in the Six Nations and a few more lads aren't far behind them. I'm always asked whether I get jealous when I see them on the screen... Hand on heart, I feel privileged to have played with them and to have played a part in their rugby journey. I'm genuinely happy for them but I'm also very happy and satisfied with what I accomplished in my own rugby career. I'll cherish that forever which is pretty cool."

Following an injury-plagued final season at Munster, it was agreed by both parties that in order to progress his rugby career, Cullen's path lay elsewhere. London Scottish were quick off the mark and in June 2016 Jack joined George at the Championship club. However, having finally



overcome significant shoulder and knee injuries, Cullen opted to walk away from the game only a few months after arriving at his new base.

"I wasn't forced to stop playing rugby, but I do believe that the injuries played their part in nudging me in a certain direction. When I was out with injury, my guitar helped me from going a little bit crazy. I started to write more, I took on a few gigs. Halfway through the season with London Scottish I just realised that my heart wasn't in the game anymore. That wasn't fair on anyone. That's when I decided to give music a full whack."

Last month, Cullen pushed out a new track 'Taken Time' while a connection through Ireland 7s Greg O'Shea saw Cullen support Keywest at the Olympia Theatre over the Easter weekend. It was a proud moment for Cullen's family who have backed him throughout his endeavours.

"I wasn't very confident in the beginning. Obviously, it was a big change of direction and a completely new world. It was daunting. It's mad to think that we're only here today because last year we were sitting in the kitchen and I showed my sister a song that I had recorded. She took the phone off me and posted it from my YouTube account. It picked up some traction and I suppose that gave me some confidence. I went away, learned more about the industry to a point that I know now that this is what I want to do. 110%."

Several other rugby players have notable musical talents. Damien Varley was the entertainer-in-chief on Ireland's 2011 World Cup adventure, Robbie Henshaw is a dab hand on the accordion while Barry Murphy's quiet Monday night trad sessions evolved into one of Ireland's biggest bands.

"I would say that my music benefitted my game. I used to get very worked up before games in that it could either prove to be the end of the world, or the best day in my life. Music allowed me to relax and enjoy it a bit more which was what I needed to do having been out of the game for such long periods. I loved running out in front of big rugby crowds. Playing the guitar and singing in front of one still takes a bit of getting used to though!

"I love what I'm doing now and I'm really excited about the future. But that's not to say that I haven't taken my rugby experiences with me. It has been invaluable in terms of how I work with other people within a team, whether that's in the studio or in the wider industry. It has also taught me to maintain a structure in my life. As soon as I was out it would have been easy for me to lose focus, but I'm an active person and I've kept up a level of training. It's funny that in getting out of the music bubble, I work on my fitness! The shoe is firmly on the other foot!"

"I might not be playing rugby anymore, but I still love the game. It opened so many doors for me. My heart will always be with it."

GUILT TRIP

TEAMMATES CALLUM BLACK & DARREN CAVE ON TAKING ON A NEW VENTURE

Donuts and rugby players don't necessarily mix, where did the idea for Guilt Trip come from?

Calum Black: I wanted to open a coffee shop and I took advice from several people who said that coffee on its own would be a hard sell. From seeing how popular coffee and donuts can be, especially in Dublin, I saw this as an area to focus on. We aim to offer both coffee and donuts of the highest quality.

Darren Cave: When Callum first approached me about the idea, I wasn't sure about it. But when we sat down and went through it and I saw his passion for it along with the amount of research he had also done, I decided to get on board!

Did either of you work in a coffee shop before?

DC: I had pretty much no experience in the area, but it's like anything in life... if you're keen to learn and you have the right passion and attitude it's not too hard to pick it up.

CB: I taught myself at home with home brew equipment. It became a bit of an addiction and I started an Instagram account about it! My coffee station has taken over our kitchen!

Can you describe your respective roles in Guilt Trip?

CB: We first opened in May 2017 when we were coming into our off-season. At the start we only had a couple of staff so myself and Darren were very hands on. As you'd expect, once the rugby season started up again we took a step back from the day-to-day work at the shop and now take more of an administrative role. Alongside Ben, our General Manager, we are across all aspects of the business. I pay the bills and Darren looks after the wages and legal end!

DC: My dad has recently retired from running his own business for the past 30 years so he is very helpful when it comes to stuff like auto-enrolment for employer/employee pension contributions. We also had to draft up our own staff contracts at the start. Our staff are paid by the hour as opposed to an annual retainer so at the end of each month we have to collate all the worked hours for every staff member, get the pension contributions sorted, get the tax sorted and get the pay-slips ready with the accountant by the last working day of the month!



Would you recommend starting a business to your teammates?

CB: 100%. For the past number of years I had been thinking of starting a business. Don't get me wrong, it can be hard and stressful at times, but I have found the whole process to be very rewarding and I have learnt so much along the way!

What have you enjoyed most about running the business?

DC: I think seeing the place packed out on the first day was really cool. Now I like to go in on my day off and enjoy a coffee and do a bit of my work.

CB: The most enjoyable bit for me was all the work that led from the initial idea. It has been a bonus how successful it has been as it really was just a passion of mine, but I'm so happy that people enjoy what we have created.

What are the plans for the business, especially as Callum moves to Worcester Warriors?

DC: Most of the legwork is done by our staff. There are a few wee areas that will need a bit of work, but the way the world is now, we will be in regular contact.

CB: In time I would like to open more shops. We have already expanded Guilt Trip into two units so that we have more preparation space for the donuts. If the right location became available in Belfast, we would be able to supply it from there. Overall, I believe that we have created a really strong brand and we have a great team of staff who are more than capable of running the place without us!

Who are your biggest fans?

CB: It has to be Stu McCloskey or Rob Herring.

DC: Sean Reidy too!

CB: When we have brought donuts up from the shop after a win at the Kingspan, they don't last long!

GUILT TRIP



CIARA COONEY

There are few who have given more to the Irish cause in recent seasons than Ciara Cooney. Despite suffering ankle ligament damage in the opening game of the Six Nations in Toulouse, Cooney fought her way back into contention and was introduced from the bench against the English in Coventry.

Despite taking an obvious knock within moments of entering the fray, Cooney had put too much work to give in to what ultimately proved to be an injury to her other ankle. Once again, she limped away at the final whistle.

"I'm not the kind of player who can sail through a match," Cooney states. "It's all or nothing with me and unfortunately it has resulted in an injury or two during my career. It's just the way I play my game and I'm not going to change that. It's like anything that I do. It has to be fully committed, or else, why bother?"

Now one of the senior members of a refreshed squad following a disappointing World Cup last year, Cooney has also established herself as a leader within the group. Alongside Paula Fitzpatrick, Cooney is the players' representative to Rugby Players Ireland and given her weekly schedule it is hardly surprising that she has made the most of her association's support.

A recipient of the Miele Player Development Bursary, Cooney has been able to sustain a hectic playing schedule alongside the demands of her studies. Though now based in Galway, Cooney has upheld her commitments to Railway Union of Sandymount, Leinster Rugby and to Ireland. Evidently, this requires spending plenty of time on the road.

Having studied Sports Science at Carlow IT, Cooney returned to her home county at the turn of the year. Receiving a GMIT Rise Scholarship to study a research Masters, Cooney spends her time examining an evidence based metabolic health platform for the clinical management of obesity and associated metabolic disorders.

"The Miele award was a significant boost to be honest. Playing rugby can be an expensive pursuit – especially when your teams are based on the other side of the country! Before I moved back to Galway, the commute from Carlow was a little easier. In fact, that has only recently come to an end. I was due to start in Galway in September but because I broke my hand (twice) during my last semester, I had to sit the module in Carlow again."

Lengthy journeys and the complications of injury might have an ordinary person reconsider their sporting pursuits, especially with the demands of an extensive study programme. But Cooney is not to be deterred. "Would I give it up? Playing rugby at the top level? No!"

"The opportunity to do the Masters actually came about with the help of Deirdre Lyons [Player Development Manager for Connacht]," Cooney tells us. "Before the World Cup last year, she was trying to help me to arrange a placement. It was proving very difficult to approach an organisation and then turn around to ask for a block of time off to play in the tournament. It so happened that she used to work with Lisa Ryan who is the head of the Natural Science Department in GMIT."

"Over the summer I completed a placement in GMIT Sport Science laboratory, where I had the

opportunity to work with Dr Lisa Ryan on a project using indirect calorimetry to monitor energy metabolism of athletes throughout a pre-season. It was all very interesting and Lisa encouraged me to consider research. She is now my supervisor!"

"It's all still very new to me, but I am really enjoying it. An awful lot has to be said for getting exposure to different people too. I am learning a lot from those around me. They are all so knowledgeable and enthusiastic and have such a diverse range of skills. It's great being in their company and getting insights into disciplines like sports psychology, biomechanics and nutrition. You're learning all the time."

The manner in which Cooney has fallen into her current academic path is in some ways reminiscent of her own conversion to rugby. A talented camogie player, it was on the suggestion of a new friend at Carlow IT that led Cooney to the rugby pitch.

"It was quite random actually. I hadn't a clue what was going on and just went for the fun of it!" Cooney admits. "I seemed to develop fairly quickly and about six weeks after my first training session I was sent to a trial with Leinster. I was playing the game a wet week, I didn't know the rules! But timing was on my side in that a number of the Leinster girls were at the 2014 World Cup, so there was a big push to recruit players. I managed to get my foot in the door."

Within months, Cooney was also on the cusp of the Irish squad. Having been appointed as the Head Coach in advance of the 2015 Six Nations, Tom Tierney welcomed several new faces into the set-up. However, Cooney just missed out on selection for a triumphant Irish side. It wasn't long before her chance came by.

"To be honest, while I was disappointed not to make the panel there were a number of things in my game that I needed to work on. I suppose it gave me an idea of the standard and an appetite to push on. I remember chatting to Declan Browne who was one of my lecturers at CIT and feeling a little disheartened. Declan sat me down and we discussed the feedback I had received and what I needed to work on. It was fantastic because he was really supportive, he programmed and coached me in the morning before college and encouraged me to continue to pursue my goals. I'll never forget that."

"I have been very fortunate to have had some excellent coaches and mentors since I started playing the game, people who continue to support and develop players on the field while inspiring them to become better people off it. I think that my overall growth as a person was key in putting me in the frame for Ireland's first ever Autumn International against England in November 2015. Lindsay Peat and Cliodhna Moloney, two Railway



clubmates also got their first caps which made it even more special. It was the start of a new adventure!"

Now with a budding Irish career, something had to give.

Despite being advised to join an AIL club to further her development at a higher level, Cooney was somewhat reluctant to leave her Tullow teammates. Yet when John Cronin pitched the idea of dual status, Cooney jumped at the chance.

"Railway have become a bit of a family to me, but it was very hard at the beginning. There were some weeks when I was playing for Tullow, I was playing for Railway, I was playing for my college and I was still making it to my camogie games. Four competitive matches in a few days and training thrown in where you could manage it. You can't keep going like that."

"I didn't want to let anyone down, but I began to see a bit of a future for myself in rugby. I think at any level of elite sport, a certain selfishness is required. Once you let people know where they stand, they respect that. Even now, people understand that I have my commitments outside of the game which are important to me. But they also know that if they ask me to do something, whether that is in the classroom or on the rugby pitch, I will do it to the best of my ability."

“I have been very fortunate to have had some excellent coaches and mentors since I started playing the game, people who continue to support and develop players on the field while inspiring them to become better people off it



NANCY CHILLINGWORTH

What does your role at Rugby Players Ireland entail?

I am the Player Development Manager for the Women's Rugby Programme in Ireland. It encompasses a range of supports. On that basis, my role is based upon trust. In order to build relationships with players to a point where you can offer proper and concrete support – they have to trust you.

Are the players comfortable in seeking out your help?

It can vary how the players come and seek out a meeting. I might be sitting in the 7s team room on Lansdowne Road and one of them will just shout across: "Nancy, I need a word!" whereas others will be much more discreet. That example in itself proves how individual the programme needs to be. If we were to take a one-size-fits-all approach, we would lose the essence of what we're about. A lot of my work is getting to know the players and seeing what works for each of them.

Generally speaking, what kind of supports do the players need?

The age profile of the 7s players is a bit younger than that of the XV's, so the nature of my work with them may concern their CAO applications and finding the right fit for them. We will also work them on the fundamental challenges that come with operating within a professional rugby programme while taking a college course. For instance, the IRFU are very supportive of their studying, but if a core module conflicts with a pitch session, a 21-year-old may lack the confidence to address the issue with management.

From the XV's perspective, I've found that some players may have chosen their job or career solely on the basis of how it suits their rugby. So, while you would think that the transition out of the game should be a little easier for them, they might not necessarily be doing what they want to do in the first place! For others however, they might be thriving in the work environment and are keen to maintain that. During the World Cup last year we hosted an Employer Recognition event in conjunction with the IRFU which was very successful. We were able to acknowledge the support of their employers and explain how beneficial it can be to have an international athlete in an organisation.

What challenges do you face?

From a practical point of view, establishing relationships and providing workshops with and for the XV's has been a challenge as they are amateur players and are scattered throughout the country. Simply trying to find a time that is suitable to meet is tough! Obviously, it is a little easier with the 7s as they are centralised and I can keep a regular presence at their base. Thankfully though, with a Player Development Manager now based in each province, if anything specific arises with a player and at short notice, we have someone who can give the issue the urgent attention it requires. Recently, we also hosted the XV's players for a weekend which allowed us to run a number of workshops they had requested while it also provided for a bit of team-building.

What are your plans going forward?

It is a very busy time for the players. Over the past few months, their attention has very much on their rugby and achieving the best possible outcome in the Six Nations and World Series. For my part, I've let them know that I am here whenever they need me, but I'm not chasing them up. I'd like to think that we're at the point where all of the players are happy to pick up the phone to me.

“

It is a very busy time for the players. Over the past few months, their attention has very much on their rugby and achieving the best possible outcome in the Six Nations and World Series

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NIALL RONAN

For a time, Meath footballers were the greatest sporting act in the country. So much so that if you had the misfortune of landing the Royal County on a championship Sunday your car was usually clear of Drumcondra well before the final whistle. Many figured that it must be something in the Boyne river, but Meath people are fierce competitors – they would turn the Eucharist into an eating competition.

Throughout his youth, Niall Ronan looked up to the likes of Trevor Giles, Graham Geraghty and Ollie Murphy, physical representations of that competitive spirit. More often than not, he was amongst the Meath faithful in the Hogan Stand dreaming that he might one day grace the hallowed turf in the famous gold strip.

That Croke Park was the scene of his final sporting outing might suggest that he charged someone with writing his script. At full-forward for St. Colmcille's GAA, Ronan and the intermediate club journeyed all the way to an All-Ireland final where they met with Lee Keegan's Westport. Although a happy ending was omitted from the final draft, that Ronan was able to play at all was a little victory in itself.

"When I retired from rugby, it took me over a year to get my knee sorted," Ronan says before describing how a routine line-out in a 2013 training session put an end to his career. "I was pulling my hair out. Like, I couldn't even go for a run! I was desperate to get back playing again. You see all the lads playing in these big games and I couldn't walk up the stairs without getting a shooting pain through my knee as though I'd been taken out by a sniper. You have that physical pain and then you have to deal with the psychological impact of it all. It wasn't easy.

"I knew by the surgeon's reaction that my time was up. I was determined to get back running, but my recovery time was all too vague. I was left with no option than to call it a day. When I finally managed to get some movement back I returned to the GAA but I was very limited in what I could do. I trained Paul McGrath style – once a week! I'd need four days of recovery after a session; I did yoga, I swam and I used to have regular sessions in the cryotherapy baths. It took a lot of work, but I'm glad I had that time with the lads and achieved our goal of winning a County title for the first time in 29 years."

Having been spotted playing for Boyne RFC by Declan Fassbender, Ronan had been forced to leave his love for GAA to one side when he joined Lansdowne as an 18-year-old. Ronan quickly made his presence felt and following success in the JP Fanagan Cup in his first year, his trajectory continued to climb. A four-year stint at Leinster duly followed, before Ronan packed his bags and headed for Munster.

"Unfortunately, I was behind Shane Jennings and Keith Gleeson at Leinster so I knew that I had to go and get game time. Thankfully, with the 2007 World



Cup taking a bulk of their side, Munster came in for me. It was the best decision I made in my life and I'm glad to see that Jordi Murphy will be heading to Ulster in the summer for the sake of his career. He's an excellent player and if he's playing every week he'll have a better chance of featuring regularly in the Irish team.

"When I joined Munster they were at the peak of their powers. It was an incredible environment. There were leaders everywhere you looked and I learned a lot by being in that dressing room. You had people like Paul O'Connell, Donncha O'Callaghan, Peter Stringer, Ronan O'Gara and Dougie Howlett. It was a bit daunting but the World Cup was a good opportunity to get a good few games under my belt early on... toggling out in a back-row with Anthony Foley and Alan Quinlan! Now, they were unique life experiences! I learned a lot from how they dealt with things. Guys like Axel and Quinny were coming to the end of their careers and weren't featuring as much as they might have liked. I suppose it's those kinds of learnings and experiences that I'm hoping to bring into the workplace."

In January, Ronan launched Titan Wellness, a Wellness Solutions company which offers expert guidance for building a culture of health and well-being in organisations. Alongside former professionals Cathal Sheridan, Jonny Holland and Chris Keane, Ronan advises businesses on how to get the best out of their employees based on their demographic and available facilities. Titan Wellness design progressive wellness bespoke packages that include mental wellbeing presentations, couch to 5k, yoga, nutrition demonstrations, fitness classes and even comedy gigs provided by Joe Rooney!

"In professional sport, you are very driven as an individual and a team, but we also knew how to have a laugh. It's extremely important to be

there for your teammates in sport. It's the same in business where stress and anxiety can get on top of you very quickly and people find it hard to understand their emotions. Throughout my career, both on and off the field, I've learned a lot about people. I've done a lot of coaching, I've my own Performance and Rehab Centre and I've also done a course in psychotherapy. Through those avenues, I've developed an awareness of how to get the best out of people and an important part of that was learning about myself along the way."

By the age of 25, Ronan had done little of the sort.

"My mother always used to say that the rugby wasn't going to last forever and Declan Kidney was the same. Kidney would ring me up and ask 'so, what do you do when you're not training?' All I'd be able to tell him was that I'd played a bit of FIFA. 'That's not the answer I was looking for,' he'd say. So through Rugby Players Ireland (formerly IRUPA) I found some courses that suited me and Liam Hennessy was launching Setanta College around the same time, where I completed a Bachelors of Arts degree in Strength and Conditioning.

"I was never a great student when I was younger but studying at that point really opened my mind. If you're going to college and passing modules it is rewarding and it takes your mind off the game. When I was injured I kept myself occupied. I did my rehab and didn't allow myself to overthink it. I studied, I coached, I got married! Then, whenever you walk into training or a game, you switch on – the best players in the world have that switch. I learnt that from some great players I played with.

"Many of them have become great friends of mine. You might not see someone for months or years, but you hit it off like you always did. All the Munster lads met at the Rugby Players Ireland Clubhouse event before the Racing 92 game earlier in the season which was really enjoyable. Marcus Horan was still wearing horrendous clothes, Donnacha Ryan popped his head in the door, they were all there. It was great to share some of the old stories again, but we have all had to close that chapter of our lives. I'm extremely grateful for the experiences of my time in the game, but coming out at the other end you realise that rugby is not the be all and end all."



“When I joined Munster they were at the peak of their powers. It was an incredible environment. There were leaders everywhere you looked and I learned a lot by being in that dressing room.

ENG V IRE LEGENDS

Celebrations went long into St Patrick's weekend as the Irish Legends retained the Stuart Mangan Memorial Cup following a 22-22 draw with their English counterparts on the eve of the Grand Slam showdown in London.

Many familiar (albeit weathered) faces dusted down their boots and played out an enjoyable spectacle before over 6,000 faces at the Twickenham Stoop. Led by Shane Byrne, Ireland took the cup home having won the 2017 fixture at the RDS.

A scrappy start – attributed to warming limbs – did not take away from what ultimately proved to be an exhibition of the skills of old with Paddy Wallace's cheeky dummy en route to the tryline setting the tone for the evening.

England's Iain Balshaw was a notable contributor throughout the evening and it was his early break that got the competitive juices flowing. However,

while the legs were moving the hands were yet to catch up. Ireland sought to capitalise with Gordon D'Arcy to the fore. In releasing his widemen, Ireland looked very potent in attack with many of the English in attendance sitting up to take notice. Suddenly we had a livelier contest than they had anticipated!

For much of the evening, Ireland displayed plenty of quality with Gavin Duffy and John Kelly forming



a very capable midfield partnership. Meanwhile, a little further afield, recent retiree Fionn Carr was a constant thorn in an England side who simply couldn't keep up with the former Ireland 7s player. That being said, the Irish defence was not up to the same standard and the two-times capped Spencer Brown spotted a welcome sign in the middle of the Irish defence. A converted try put England into a narrow lead, before James Downey made his presence felt, crashing through from close range to restore proper order.

While many old friendships were reignited, the game also provided plenty of opportunities to renew old rivalries. When former Ireland and Munster legend Mick Galwey entered the fray, it wasn't long before he was on the receiving end of a tasty hand-off to the face. Despite the former Irish captain's intent to settle a few scores, it was England who had the last laugh with Chris Sheasby, the former 7s World Cup winner, levelling the scores at the break.

There were a few eyebrows raised after half-time as England flew out of the blocks while Ireland appeared sluggish. Nobody bothered to check

their dressing room fridge, but when Ollie Phillips and Dan Scarbrough put further distance between the sides, it became clear that the proper fuel may have been forsaken. Phillips showed electric pace up the left wing to evade the Irish defence, while Scarbrough danced over from close range.

Thankfully, for Ireland to get back into the game, they could rely on the hard work put in at Dartry Health Club in the lead-up to the tie. However, the added edge came from some brilliant individual contributions. Former Leinster second-row Des Dillon was one to take ownership, taking four English men with him as he touched down in the corner. Then, a few moments later, his former Clongowes Wood classmate D'Arcy sublimely gathered a loose ball before sprinting home with the equaliser.

Another terrific instalment in this series raised some much needed funds for several rugby charities, including the IRFU Charitable Trust and Rugby Players Ireland's Injured Players Fund. Many thanks, as ever, to the dynamic duo of Shane Byrne and Len Dineen who once again brought the spirit of rugby to life.

“While many friendships were reignited, the game also provided plenty of opportunities to renew old rivalries. When former Ireland and Munster legend Mick Galwey entered the fray, it wasn't long before he was on the receiving end of a tasty hand-off to the face!”

INTER NATIONAL RUGBY PLAYERS



OFFICIAL LAUNCH

Having moved to Dublin last year, some of the world's top players were on hand on March 21 to officially announce International Rugby Players' move to the Irish capital.

Ireland's Johnny Sexton, Jamie Heaslip, England's Rachael Burford and two-time RWC winner with New Zealand, Conrad Smith, joined CEO Omar Hassanein to talk about the big issues that the player's organisation (formerly IRPA) will be working on in the near future.

They include, among others, player load, agent accreditation, global player surveys, the women's game and improving the conditions for Tier Two teams.

"As the demands of the professional game continue to increase, it's critical that the players are properly represented at the top table and I was delighted to be joined by Jamie, Conrad and Rachael as International Rugby Players opened its doors in Dublin," said the organisation's Northern Hemisphere President, Johnny Sexton.

"Having worked closely with Omar in his time as CEO of Rugby Players Ireland, I'm confident his team will work hard to make sure the players' voices are heard on issues of importance to the game."

Omar is currently joined in Dublin by former Leinster and Ireland scrum-half Isaac Boss as Player Welfare Manager and Head of Communications Eoin McHugh, who joined from World Rugby, with more appointments to be made in due course as the remit of the organisation grows.

SPAIN / RUGBY EUROPE

Already the International Rugby Players have made the players' voice heard on various global issues.

After the recent Rugby Europe Championship Belgium v Spain match, for which five players have since been sanctioned for their post-match conduct, International Rugby Players called on World Rugby to take more control over global tournaments and in particular, regional associations.

Chief Executive Omar Hassanein said: "We support World Rugby's efforts to eradicate any perceived manipulation of fair play.

"This investigation highlights the need to closely monitor the activity of regional associations, particularly around Rugby World Cup qualification matches.

"Players, especially at Tier Two level, sacrifice a lot to follow their Rugby World Cup dream and, if integrity is undermined, it will erode the trust which exists between players, administrators and fans of our sport. The players in this situation deserve better than this."

GLOBAL PLAYER SURVEYS

International Rugby Players has undertaken to carry out three major surveys in 2018 – a 15s later in the year, a women's survey mid-year and a Sevens Survey which will be release in the coming weeks.

With a number of important decisions to be made in 2018, it's important to get the views of the players on all manner of important areas around the 15s, Sevens and Women's game.



We're asking players to fully partake in the anonymous surveys, which will be send around to squads in due course.

RUGBYPLAYERS.ORG

Along with their new name, logo and look and feel, International Rugby Players also launched their brand-new website in March, rugbyplayers.org.

As well as information about how they Represent, Support and Unify players, the website also carries first-person accounts from some of the world's top players including Jean de Villiers, Conrad Smith, Greig Laidlaw and many others to come.

AWARDS 2018

And finally, a panel chaired by our very own Isaac Boss, has been put together to decide the International Rugby Players Try of the Year 2018.

Former Munster out-half Ronan O'Gara, World Player of the Year 2009 Shane Williams, Italy's Marco Bortolami and Former New Zealand Black Fern Melodie Robinson have already made their decisions on a very exciting February/March

period, which covered the 6 Nations, Womens 6 Nations, Rugby Europe Championship and the America's Rugby Championship 2018, and we'll have another two blocks of voting before the eventual winner is announced at the World Rugby Awards in November.

Elsewhere, a new deal with World Rugby has seen International Rugby Players gain greater influence on the annual "Player of the Year" Award voting. Players around the world will get to vote twice this year on a player that has impressed them. More details will be circulated closer to voting times in June and November, with the winner announced at the World Rugby awards in Monaco towards the end of the year.

“As the demands of the professional game continue to increase, it's critical that the players are properly represented at the top table



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THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT

It wasn't long ago that the likes of Jordan Larmour, Jacob Stockdale and James Ryan were in their school uniforms dreaming of one day becoming professional rugby players. Yet, before they are 22 all three have played significant roles for both Leinster and Ulster, while they also find themselves nominated for the prestigious Nevin Spence Young Player of the Year Award.

Jordan Larmour

A prodigious sporting talent at St. Andrew's College, Jordan Larmour first started making waves in the hockey circuit. An international in that sport at both U16 and U18 level, the Dubliner focused his attentions on rugby in his sixth year. At that point, Larmour had already been marked out as a talent. While in Transition Year, he featured prominently in 2014 as an unheralded St. Andrew's team trailblazed their way to a Leinster Schools' Senior Cup semi-final for the first time since 1922.

Fast forward to 2017 and Larmour set tongues wagging after a promising Leinster debut in September, while he came to national prominence as he sliced through the Munster defence at Thomond Park, just weeks after doing likewise in Belfast. The clamour for Joe Schmidt to select the youngster in his Six Nations squad grew louder. In February, the Sports Psychology student at IADT then made his international bow against Italy before being handed the responsibility of keeping the English midfield at bay for the final 20 minutes of Ireland's Grand Slam tie at Twickenham in only his third cap.

As he celebrated a triumphant Six Nations, Larmour, who turns 21 in June, admitted that he



"was just hoping to play with Leinster A and maybe get a few caps with the senior team." He has far exceeded those ambitions and can climb further still.

James Ryan

There were times in the past few years when James Ryan might have considered whether he might ever see light at the end of his rugby tunnel. You'd also have thought that several injuries might scupper the 6ft 7in lock's progression. However, in June 2017, Ryan became one of the very few players who can say that they represented their country before their province. It is a sign of the St. Michael's man's resilience, that even at such a young age, he can rise up against the challenges he has faced.

Indeed, the past season has seen his encounter many more. However, time after time he has shone in environments where others have wished that they could be swallowed up. In Paris, Ryan was immense. In Leinster's Champions Cup quarter final against Saracens, Ryan was immense. A student of History and Politics in UCD, Ryan has certainly learned the tricks of the trade from past masters and is in no way prone to diplomacy.

Jacob Stockdale

To date, Jacob Stockdale has gone through just one international Test without getting his name on the scoresheet. Since his first Test appearance last summer, he has notched against the United States, South Africa, Argentina, Italy, Wales, Scotland and England – only France have kept him scoreless. His record breaking turn in the 2018 Six Nations saw him named as the Player of the Tournament from a position that most deemed to be suspect owing to several injuries and omissions before the tournament began. How the tide has turned!

The criminology student at UUJ is used to similar exploits. In 2016, at the World Rugby U20 Championship, Stockdale was also Ireland's top scorer as they progressed to the final, having overcome New Zealand along the way. Breaking new ground has become something of a pastime for the Newtownstewart native and we look forward to seeing what lies in store...



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