

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF
RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

SPRING 2019

GRAND SLAM WINNER ON BALANCING THE BOOKS

DYLAN TIERNEY-MARTIN



**PEP IN
HIS STEP**
ED BYRNE

**THE KEO
SHOW**
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RUGBY PLAYERS
IRELAND

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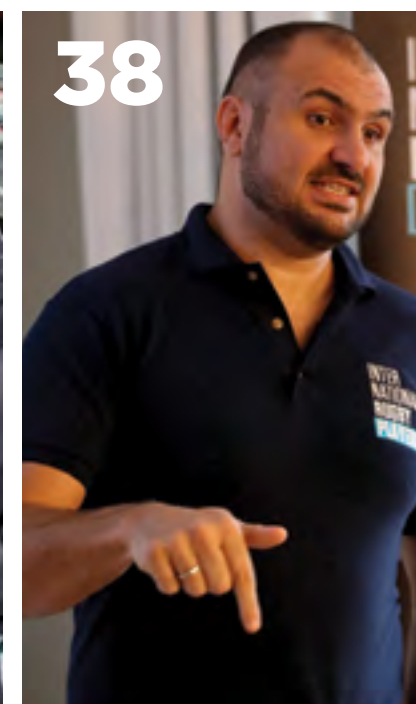
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CEO ADDRESS

SIMON KEOGH



Players Front and Centre

The recent proposal by World Rugby to establish a Nations Championship probably has its merits. In providing more meaningful games to the international calendar with an uplift in revenue, conceptually it would seem to be a no-brainer. Afterall, who doesn't want to see more games with more money allowing for growth in the game?

But like most things, it's not that simple. I'm sure World Rugby anticipated some resistance to their proposal, most probably from a national union or representatives of the club game. However, it is doubtful whether they might have expected the impact the player, as a key stakeholder in the game, would have on its proposal.

Without players there is no game. Therefore, any decisions taken that may affect the game needs to consider the players' views. Ultimately, it is the players whom the public want to hear from. As was evidenced recently, when the players speak, the world listens. This highlights two important things: 1) players need to be part of decisions which affect the game and 2) when players come together and voice a singular message, they will be heard loud and clear.

The Irish Voice

At Rugby Players Ireland we are proud of the relationship that we have managed to foster with the IRFU. Over time we have developed an understanding whereby the players' views are both respected and valued. Like any healthy relationship, we will have our disagreements. However, both Rugby Players Ireland and the IRFU maintain the same objective which is to create an environment that allows our players to thrive both on and off the pitch.

Thankfully, through open lines of communication and regular meetings between the association and the national union, there has rarely been a need to take matters into the public eye. Indeed, it has been the policy of both parties to keep any disputes behind closed doors. We hope that this environment of mutual respect remains as the game continues to evolve. It is no coincidence that the top ranked teams in the world have strong player associations and open dialogue with their respective unions.

In line with such growth in this country, Rugby Players Ireland has recently assumed the representation of the Irish men's 7s, women's 7s and women's XVs teams. This development has come about through the players' own recognition that a medium is necessary for them to channel and resolve any issues that might arise.

In the absence of representation, smaller issues can sometimes become inflamed and create disharmony amongst the playing group. This inevitably impacts upon their on-field



performance. We are delighted to be able to work with these groups of players and provide them with a collective voice. Hopefully, this will also facilitate their progression in their respective codes.

Meeting Expectation

Unfortunately, the Six Nations did not go the way many would have expected. In the weeks prior to the Championship, it was hard to ignore the strong public opinion that we would retain the title and carry the resulting momentum into the Rugby World Cup in Japan.

While the success of recent years has subjected our national team to a higher standard, the criticism that the players and coaching staff have received has been unwarranted. The best teams in any sport will go through high and lows – it is what makes it unpredictable and exciting.

The rugby environment that has been created in Ireland, both on and off the field, means that success will be repeated. For instance, the stunning Grand Slam achieved by the Irish U20s highlights the pedigree of talent that is continuously being developed whilst it also indicates a bright future for the senior side. Furthermore, while memories may have been dimmed by the 2019 Six Nations campaign, we must not underestimate the impact that the successes of 2018 will have in the longer term.

Meanwhile, the women's Six Nations championship was hugely disappointing for the players, but this frustration is borne out of their eagerness to progress and meet the level of expectation the public now adopts for our national rugby teams. We must not forget that as recently as 2013 we were Grand Slam Champions and about to embark on a remarkable World Cup adventure. These achievements undoubtedly laid the foundations for the young and exciting talent that we saw introduced to the international fold this term. As the team transitions and grows I have no doubt that success will return.

It is a busy time for our players. With barely a moment to pause for breath, the rugby season kicks on while Japan 2019 looms large on the horizon. As on-field performance comes more and more into focus, we will endeavour to provide them with all the necessary off-field support and guidance, whilst ensuring that we add to an environment that breeds success. Furthermore, we will work to ensure that our players are afforded the opportunity to be involved in key decisions in their game.

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



SIX NATIONS

Our congratulations to the Irish U20s team that won the Grand Slam at Colwyn Bay. Despite missing captain David Hawkshaw, Harry Byrne and Craig Casey going into the final game against Wales, the youngsters showed tremendous character on the night by coming from behind to seal a famous victory and Ireland's first Grand Slam at this level (previously U21) since 2007.



Remarkably, an injury to Casey in the warm-up presented an opportunity to Connacht's Colm Reilly and the Buccaneers man took full advantage. The replacement scrum-half came on as Ireland trailed 17-14, but it was his sniping try that put the Slam dream back on track with just ten minutes to go. Leinster's Thomas Clarkson, who was part of a formidable front-row alongside Dylan Tierney-Martin (interview page 32) and Josh Wycherley, made sure of matters in the final moments.

The Welsh encounter followed several impressive performances from the tenacious group. A brilliant bonus point was secured by Noel McNamara's team on the opening night of their campaign as they battled back from 11-nil down (twice) to claim the spoils against a very good English side. A week later, a brilliant defensive effort underpinned their victory over Scotland, while they enjoyed a bonus point win over the Italians in Rieti. However, it was their performance against the French U20 World Champions at a raucous Irish Independent Park that endeared them to the Irish faithful as they claimed the Six Nations title with a game to spare.



Although Rory Best's team went into the final weekend with a chance of retaining the Six Nations trophy, it proved to be a difficult afternoon in Cardiff on the final day of the Championship. Warren Gatland's Wales, who have now gone 14 Test games unbeaten, were deserving Grand Slam victors and replace Ireland as the leading European side in the world.

Retaining the title was always going to be a tall order for Ireland following defeat to England in the opening round. However, bonus point victories over Italy and France in addition to a hard-fought win over Scotland in Murrayfield put the destination of the Six Nations trophy in the balance coming into the final weekend.

Meanwhile, the Irish Women's XV's will look to put a disappointing Six Nations campaign behind them. Though full of character throughout the Six Nations, they succumbed to four defeats, registering only one win in Scotland. The side continues to be in transition. Several new faces made their Test debuts while Alison Miller, who first arrived on the scene almost a decade ago, retired from international duty upon the conclusion of the tournament.





PAST PLAYER CLUBHOUSE

Our past player network continues to grow at pace! With every passing week, more and more players are engaging our services. This has been facilitated through a number of networking opportunities which have included past player breakfasts, business meetings and pre-match functions.

SAY HELLO, WAVE GOODBYE!

Rugby Players Ireland extends a big welcome to Dr Hannah McCormack who joined the team in January! Hannah, a sports psychologist from Co. Louth, will lead Tackle Your Feelings into Phase 2 of the campaign. Check out our interview with her on page 24!

Meanwhile, we must say our farewells to Nancy Chillingworth! Since joining Rugby Players Ireland in January 2017, Nancy played an instrumental role in establishing a strong relationship with our members from the women's programme. Nancy will be sorely missed by all and we wish her well on her next chapter!



AGENTS SEMINAR

In early March, the annual Agents Seminar took place at Rugby Players Ireland HQ. There were a number of interesting contributors covering a variety of topics on the day, including:

- Kieran File (Reactive Sports Media) – Social Media: Tips & Dangers
- Senator Neale Richmond (Seanad Spokesperson on European Affairs) – Brexit & Rugby
- Ciarán Medlar (Partner & Head of Tax, BDO Ireland) – Double Taxation
- Lynsey Mulvihill (Senior Legal Counsel, World Rugby) – Restrictions on Commercial Activity for RWC 2019
- Ross McCarron (Glennon Insurance) – Insuring Concussion

Many thanks to all for participating.



KEEPING BUSY!

With the Six Nations coming to an end, the domestic rugby season has begun to hot up as we face into the final months of the season. With so much going on, it is important that our members take the time to switch off and enjoy other pursuits.

Since January, we have run a number of workshops and initiatives throughout the provinces including:

- Addiction Awareness
- Changing Career
- Cooking
- Financial Planning and Trading
- Leadership Skills
- Media Training
- Property Development
- Public Speaking
- Sleep Workshop
- Supermarket Sweep – The Nutritional Way!
- Transition Workshop

Our players have also been actively involved in their communities. Check out page 16 for more!



INTERNATIONAL RUGBY PLAYERS COUNCIL

A number of senior Irish players have been to the fore of recent discussions for a new global tournament. Former Irish captain Brian O'Driscoll called on World Rugby and its member unions to enter meaningful negotiations on how to best work together in future, citing that decisions are too often reached without any opportunity for players to positively influence the outcome.

"This is a pivotal moment for everyone in our sport. The players have made their views clear on the proposed global competition but at the same time, they want to work with World Rugby, unions, provinces and clubs to genuinely explore what may be possible."

For more, check out the International Rugby Players update on page 38.



PRE-MATCH ACTIVITIES

A sincere thank you to all of our members (and friends) who joined us for pre-match events throughout the Six Nations! By supporting your association, we can continue to develop and grow as an organisation, providing the best of services for our players, past and present!

DÁIL & SEANAD ÉIREANN XV



Our congratulations to the Dáil and Seanad Éireann rugby team who claimed the Parliamentary Four Nations title following a deserved victory over L'Equipe de France de Rugby Parliementaire. The win was preceded by further successes over the Scottish Parliament and the Houses of Commons & Lords RUFC.

The team, led by Senator Neale Richmond, have been generous contributors to the Rugby Players Ireland Foundation throughout the season.

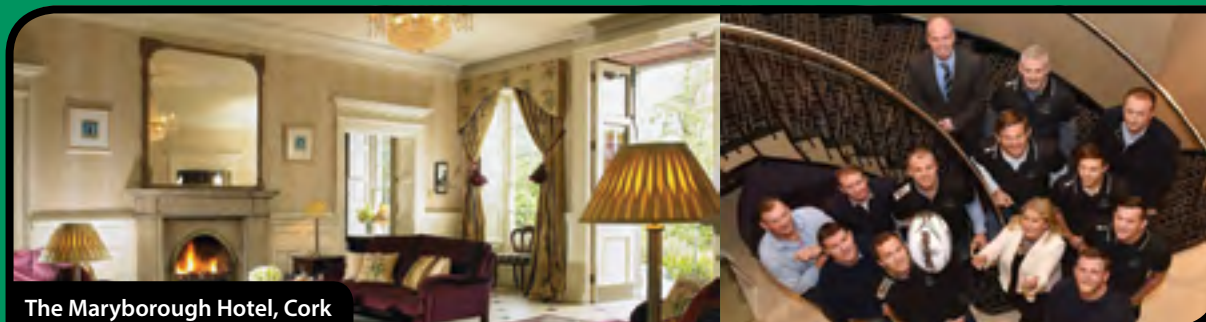
AFFILIATES SCHEME

We are always working hard to extend the range of offerings to our membership. In the past few months we have been delighted to welcome The Maryborough Hotel, Cork and the Limerick Strand Hotel to our affiliates scheme as wellbeing providers in their respective areas.

Furthermore, videoDoc has become the official digital healthcare partners for Rugby Players Ireland. Through this

partnership with Ireland's leading online healthcare service we aim to better member welfare while providing accessible healthcare for past players to improve their physical and general health.

Additionally, we are delighted to welcome Tony Kealys on board! As the country's largest independent baby retailer, we hope to provide for our members and their growing families!



The Maryborough Hotel, Cork



Limerick Strand Hotel

BRAIN HEALTH

Throughout the early part of 2019, we have been continuing our investigation into the effects of a lifetime of sport on general health and wellness and specifically brain health in the aging athlete. Dr Fiona Wilson, Associate Professor in the Discipline of Physiotherapy at Trinity College, and PhD candidate Joice Cunningham have been conducting their research by meeting with former players across the country and performing a battery of tests. The testing period will continue until May this year.



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A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Last summer, Peadar Timmins packed his bags and headed for America. There's no sign of him coming back anytime soon...

PEADAR TIMMINS



Peadar Timmins nonchalantly sips on his tea as he chats on the phone before going about another day at one of the best universities in the world.

Notre Dame admits individuals whose intellect is matched by their capacity to make a meaningful contribution to the world. A litany of political figures including Condoleezza Rice, the US Secretary of State during the Bush administration, have roamed its corridors. You get the impression that Timmins could become a world leader too if he put his mind to it.

The Biomedical Engineering graduate has certainly packed a lot into his 25 years. A high-achiever both on and off the field, the Baltinglass native was offered both a rugby and Academic scholarship by UCD upon leaving Clongowes Wood with maximum points in 2012.

The former Leinster backrower now finds himself on Notre Dame's Esteem Graduate Programme – an initiative to enrich people from a scientific background with an entrepreneur's sensibilities.

But sometimes, for people of Timmins' ilk, having a lot just isn't enough.

"Looking back, I don't think I put myself under enough pressure if I'm honest," he muses.

"Balancing my training with Leinster and the academics wasn't easy, even though the time was there. It all came down to motivating myself to go to the library after a tough day on the field and there were days when that just didn't happen.

“Rugby can be all consuming if you allow it to be, I tried not to. Even throughout school I was always aware of broadening my horizons and not getting too bogged down in things

"When you're giving so much to rugby both mentally and physically it has to be your number one priority, this can be to the detriment of other things. Sometimes I think it would have been nice to come away from UCD with a higher GPA, but then you look at it from another point of view and you realise there are other benefits to my time in Dublin that you can't really quantify."

Throughout his time with Leinster, Timmins would often be seen cycling through Clonskeagh pedalling from team-meetings and weight sessions to lectures on electromagnetics and kinesiology. Yet despite a jam-packed schedule, he never seemed vexed.

"It was my choice to approach it the way I did. Who wouldn't enjoy the opportunity to be a professional rugby player? Rugby can be all consuming if you allow it to be, I tried not to. Even throughout school I was always aware of broadening my horizons and not getting too bogged down in things. Given the way it has all turned out, I'm glad I did!"

In March of 2018, Timmins was summoned to Leo Cullen's office. He knew what was coming. Despite being a well-respected voice within the squad, Leinster's embarrassment of riches in the backrow department meant that his involvement in the senior side throughout the season was limited. Injury to Sean O'Brien and Josh van der Flier may have opened doors, but an injury of his own came at the wrong time and others on the conveyor belt took advantage.



"It was obviously difficult to move on, but I had been mulling things over with Ella [McCabe – Player Development Manager for Leinster Rugby]. Initially, I was just looking at courses to take up once I got through my finals at UCD. But as the season went on I kind of had a feeling that my time at Leinster was up owing to my positioning in the squad. Ella flagged the ESTEEM programme with me, and it seemed to have everything I was after, so we explored it a little more.

"There's an argument for saying you should 100% focus on rugby and I get that, but you must be realistic and keep an eye on options. If I had waited for Leinster's decision, it would have been very late to line things up either within rugby or outside. It helped having an idea of what the landscape would be whatever the outcome of that meeting was going to be. Ultimately, I had opportunities to remain in rugby both within Ireland and abroad, but once the chance to take the position at Notre Dame materialised it made the decision a little easier."

Within weeks of his final training session at Belfield, Timmins' bags were packed, and he was headed for Indiana. Now, just nine months later, he is working with manufacturers of industrial chillers, investigating pharmaceutical and laboratory markets, devising strategies and getting a feel for entrepreneurship and the working world. He's also involved with an Irish Sports Wearable start-up, Output Sports, which allows him to combine both his passion for sport with the learnings gained through his master's degree.

"From my experience, I think the busy nature of the course helped with my transition from the game. I was immediately thrown into an environment where I had to push myself. It was actually quite refreshing to be able to attend all of my classes, stay on top of my work and embrace the whole college side of things.

"With so much going on I didn't really have the time to think about what the lads might be doing at home and because I was so far away it didn't pop up in conversations inadvertently. Naturally enough, my mind did begin to wander back home when you know the season is kicking in.

"You miss the competitiveness and the buzz around games and that came home to me watching a few football games. But if there was a choice between pre-season or being here, I know what I'd pick every day of the week!"

Given his professional rugby background and his status as a foreign student, USA Rugby denied Timmins' application to play rugby for the university. Frustrating though it might have been, it wasn't a big issue. Rugby was not the priority when Timmins decided to leave Ireland. In any event, Notre Dame have made use of his natural aptitude for coaching while he has become a frequent visitor to the gym.



"I have a 3-year visa post-studies. I've made a commitment to myself to see that out and I already have some wheels in motion for some business plans. I want to get as much experience as I can from that time and then I'll reassess. If rugby falls into that, then so be it. I'm staying in shape.

"I had the option of playing for a team in Chicago this year, but I didn't want to spend 10 hours in my car every week. For the sake of a few months I decided to put rugby to one side and focus on my studies. There have been some major strides in rugby terms over here and I have been watching that closely. It has always been at the back of my mind that Major League Rugby could be an ideal avenue for me to pivot back into the game if I want to."

For now, Timmins seems happy to soak up the experience of life well beyond the Irish rugby bubble. He has fond memories of the game in his home country. Lining out at the RDS for Leinster, a Junior World Championship semi-final for the Irish U20s, living out a few people's boyhood dreams. But sometimes, having a lot just isn't enough...

"Notre Dame were playing Michigan in their first football game of the season. There were a couple of hundred thousand people milling about with 80,000 packed into the stadium to watch 18/19/20-year olds. The scale of things in America is crazy. Everything is so big, and it put things into perspective for me.

"With the greatest respect, the second you go beyond Ireland you realise that professional rugby is just a tiny little fish in a massive pond, there's a whole other world out there. But on the other hand, rugby also equips you with the skills to do well in this world. It taught me the importance of work ethic, attention to detail, teamwork, humility and discipline – I'll take these values with me wherever I go."

“The busy nature of the course helped with my transition from the game. I was immediately thrown into an environment where I had to push myself. It was actually quite refreshing to be able to attend all of my classes, stay on top of my work and embrace the whole college side of things.

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HERRING HOOKS UP WITH SELF HELP AFRICA

The South African born hooker is the charity's first Northern Ireland ambassador

ROB HERRING

Few parts of this world have been so favoured by nature as the African continent. Should an extra-terrestrial ever touch down there, it is likely that he will ask to be taken to the world's leaders - he will merely beg that he be allowed stay for the rest of his days in that paradise.

Rob Herring was an exceedingly lucky man. Not only was he born in that blessed corner of the earth, but he was born into a community that could withstand the often-harsh realities of life in Africa.

Born in Cape Town, the fact that his grandfather hailed from Belfast never prompted Herring to look to Ireland as a means of getting out. Indeed, following a brief post-school stint with London Irish, Herring returned home to study and to play with a Western Province development side.

"I have no regrets even though my time at London Irish ultimately didn't work out," Herring notes. "I wanted to make a career out of rugby, and it was the best opportunity for me at the time. The coaching I got was incredible.

"In that respect, I didn't come home with my tail between my legs. It was a case of there being only a handful of lads in the London Irish Academy, whereas back home you'd be vying with up to 100 players in the Western Province Academy. I gave it a shot and then decided to reassess back home.

"Something obviously registered up here because, out of the blue, David Humphreys was on the phone and invited me over to Ulster for a trial. I've never left!"

With over 160 Ulster caps to his name since he arrived in 2012, Herring is well established in Belfast despite being Rory Best's understudy for large periods. However, his performances and leadership qualities have shown him to be a more than capable deputy in the Irish captain's absence.

Several fine showings for Ireland last summer had also suggested that Herring's inclusion in future Irish squads would become a mere formality regardless of Best's availability. It hasn't quite panned out that way, but the 7-times capped hooker worked his way back into Joe Schmidt's plans for the final rounds of the Six Nations.

As Ireland stuttered in Italy, Herring gave the Irish Head Coach a timely reminder of his abilities with a ruthless performance against Zebre. Three tries in fifteen first-half minutes at the Kingspan Stadium no doubt played their part in Herring's recall.

"I try not to let things get the better of me. It was disappointing not to be more involved in the Six Nations, but there was only one way I could put that right. There's no such thing as a foregone conclusion in rugby, so if I want to be on that plane to Japan, I have to make sure that I keep the head down and make the most of any opportunity that comes my way."

It seems any opportunity also extends beyond the training paddock. Owing to his deep connection to the African continent and its people, in recent weeks Herring has aligned with Self Help Africa, a charity that aims to help improve the lives of vulnerable and marginalised communities in rural Africa.

Herring is backing the recently launched Give2Grow campaign which is supporting 1,000 farming families in Teso, Uganda where many families continue to rebuild their lives after years of conflict. The initiative will see every donation made in Northern Ireland matched by the UK government until May 15th.

"I've seen at first hand the raw, natural beauty of the African continent, but there are still millions of people who struggle to feed themselves on a daily basis. As someone who grew up there, I have a warm affection to the African continent. I am inspired by the work of Self Help Africa, which provides practical support to millions of small farmers in Africa.



"Most small farms in Africa have the potential to grow more than they do. By supporting the farmers and the farming communities to grow more food and earn more from their land through training and the provision of good quality seeds and livestock, these farms have a much greater chance of reaching their full potential and becoming self-sufficient.

"It's not about a hand out, it's a hand up."

It is not Irish rugby's first experience of the work of Self Help Africa. Sean O'Brien is a supporter who has endorsed the charity's work, while former Irish winger Denis Hickie has visited the Self Help Africa projects work in Ethiopia.

Last year, James Downey travelled with former GAA dual-star Alan Kerins to Zambia. Kerins, an All-Ireland winner with the Galway footballers in 2001, is yet another Irish sportsman who has aligned himself to Self Help Africa, after first running his own charity and raising millions to support communities in rural Western Zambia.

Downey, alongside several businesspeople and retired elite athletes, spent two weeks visiting parts of Zambia that have benefitted from the efforts of Kerins, work that is today being supported through Self Help Africa.

With a hectic rugby schedule in addition to his business management studies to contend with, understandably Herring can't down tools. For now, he is happy to play his part in raising awareness of the work that Self Help Africa carry out in sub-Saharan territories. However, plans are afoot to visit one of the areas in which Self Help work later this year.

"I greatly admire the work of Self Help Africa. From a personal perspective it can sometimes be a little frustrating to have to admire their efforts from afar. The demands of the day job means that I can't get out there very often to put my hand to the plough. But I'm delighted to play whatever role I can."

"I've seen at first hand the raw, natural beauty of the African continent, but there are still millions of people who struggle to feed themselves on a daily basis."

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A key role models in the community, our members are encouraged to get involved But why?

- Gain perspective
- Give back to your local community
- Create a Social Responsibility Culture in your squad
- Boost profile of charity and self
- Personal development

Different roles members can get involved with

- Ad-hoc group activities
- Volunteering
- Ambassadorial Roles
- Charity Board Member

If you want to learn more information, please contact Christina Mahon:
christina@rugbyplayersireland.ie



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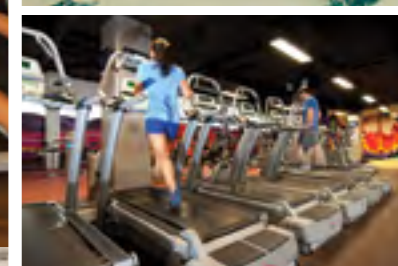
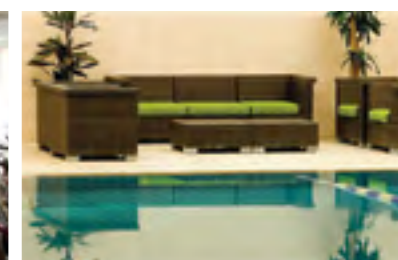
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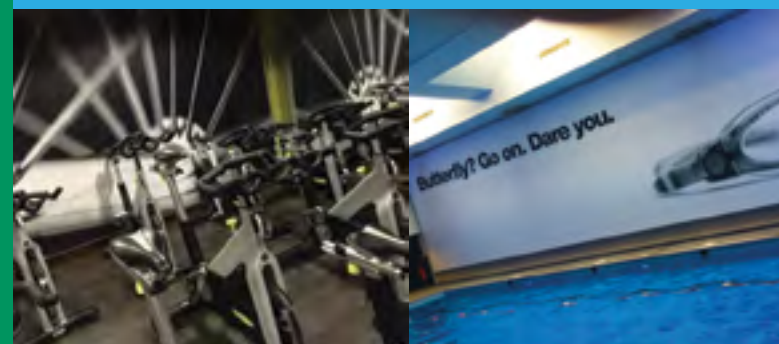
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THE KEO SHOW

Goodbody Bursary Recipient Claire Keohane on balancing medicine studies with several rugby sides

CLAIRE KEOHANE

Trying to meet Claire Keohane for a coffee gives a little insight into how the Cork woman fares on the rugby field. Following some initial contact, the Irish out-half kicks us to touch and continues to go about her business, craftily tackling her hectic schedule... until she suddenly spots a gap in her diary.

"Do you still need to meet for a coffee?" she texts rhetorically one Tuesday morning.

Keohane is a busy woman and it soon becomes clear that this fact-finding mission could easily be serialised. Fresh from receiving an award to acknowledge her academic and sporting achievements at the Royal College of Surgeons, the medical student is back in Irish rugby gear as she prepares for a 7s training tournament in France.

"It's more manageable than you think," she says as she catches her breath before taking a sip of her boiling beverage. "I operate better when I'm busy

anyway. It's just a case of keeping on top of it. I break it down into manageable blocks and try to ensure that I balance them both."

Well established on the women's rugby scene, Keohane has been involved at an elite sporting level for over 10 years. An All-Ireland Ladies Senior Championship winner with both Cork GAA and her club Inch Rovers, rugby barely registered on her radar until the lure of the game took a stronger hold whilst she was studying physiotherapy at the University of Limerick.

"I was very lucky that my parents exposed us to every sport. My older brother played with Youghal RFC, so my Dad used to bring me along and I'd play with the boys. I guess that's where my love for rugby came from. Unfortunately, there was no pathway for women's rugby at the time so once I was 11 or 12, rugby didn't feature anymore and football and camogie took over.

"It was an incredible time growing up playing football with Cork. We were winning championships and I was playing with these amazing footballers. It was an extraordinary time to be involved, so while I wanted to go back to rugby, that was where my heart was for a long time. I suppose rugby was always at the back of my mind somewhere, but I knew that I could never fully commit at the time. Unless I'm all in and can give 100% to something, I don't really want to do it."

When her studies brought Keohane's movements to Limerick, she began to dabble in the sport once again. After a few outings for UL Bohemians, Munster Rugby began to tap into her potential and she shone in regional 7s competitions. It wasn't long before the higher powers came calling from Lansdowne Road.

"I didn't know where it would lead to be honest," she makes of her initial involvement with the Irish Women's 7s. "Ashleigh Baxter and I were called up at the same time and we were just delighted to be heading off to tournaments, seeing the world and trying to qualify for the World Cup in Moscow in 2013. We were living the dream!"

The centralisation of the Irish Women's 7s programme timed nicely with the culmination of Keohane's time at UL. The game was growing rapidly and necessitated a move to the capital. She practiced as a physio intermittently but quickly found that balancing a full-time job with her 7s commitments was a big ask. Inevitably, she found something to fill the void.

"When I was studying physiotherapy at UL, I actually realised that I was more interested in people's medical management. I was already exploring the idea of medicine before moving to Dublin but was unsure of how it would sit with the IRFU. I can still remember sitting down with Anthony Eddy, but he could see that it was something I really wanted, and he told me to go for it."

With the World Series increasing to eight legs in addition to Keohane's recent involvement with the Six Nations squad, her commitment to the game becomes ever greater. Stepping up her involvement with the Women's XV's has also meant more club rugby, while recent weekends have been sacrificed to link in with the 15s camp. As she nears the end of her medicine degree, one might have assumed that rugby would pay the price, instead it has gone in the opposite direction.

"Medicine is like any job or any other college degree. There are times when you have exams and have a busy period, or there are times when you can take the foot off the gas. I'm not worried or under any more pressure than everyone else. As long as I enjoy it, I'll keep doing it, but if I begin to resent one over the other then it will be time to reassess.

"It sounds funny because both are huge in their own right, but I find that both disciplines actually compliment each other. They're quite intense and force you to be in the moment. If you're playing 7s, you can't be thinking about a poor result in an exam. If you're in the hospital you can't be thinking about a dropped ball in a game. I suppose it all depends on your personality. What works for me, might not work for you."

The Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary has also proven to be hugely beneficial as she goes about her day like a veritable pinball.

"I still locum as a physio to keep myself going. There's a lot of running costs involved between going to college, heading to the hospital, getting into training. So I see the bursary as something



for me, its something you can't really measure the value of.

"For instance, instead of getting out to the clinic for 8am on a Saturday and working through until the evening, I can just get up, have my breakfast and put in a few hours of study. Reclaiming those hours are invaluable especially when you move into the tougher end of the schedule - it might be that I don't have to worry about working on the weekend before a week of training and exams."

The IRFU have been supportive of her endeavours, while RCSI see her wide-ranging commitments as being beneficial to the holistic development of a doctor. However, through working with Rugby Players Ireland she has managed to ensure that there is always clear line of communication with the various stakeholders.

"Every player has their individual needs for the players' association. Personally, I have a lot of people to liaise with which can be daunting if you're trying to go it alone. In that sense it has been great to have the support of Rugby Players Ireland. From the outset they were very professional in their dealings and identifying the various ways they can help me.

"At the beginning of each academic year I sit down with my Player Development Manager and look at the overall picture ahead. We look at both schedules together and try to identify any potential pitfalls and raise these with the university as early as possible. Crucially, we are always solution focused rather than problem focused.

"I'm often pulled in several directions and I don't get home as much as I'd like to, but I don't see anything I do as a sacrifice. It's a choice. I appreciate that I'm in a very fortunate and privileged position to have both these opportunities and by working with Rugby Players Ireland, I have been able to make the most of them while I can."

"If you're playing 7s, you can't be thinking about a poor result in an exam. If you're in the hospital you can't be thinking about a dropped ball in a game. I suppose it all depends on your personality."

PEP IN HIS STEP

Ed Byrne on the long, long road back from injury

ED BYRNE



Ed Byrne was approaching his fourth year at Leinster Rugby but only had 127 minutes to his name. In fact, over the preceding 28 months he had only played seven minutes of rugby.

Having made his debut away to Zebre in February 2014, Byrne was enjoying greater involvement with the senior squad as he moved into the 2014/15 campaign. With Jack McGrath and Cian Healy at the top of the queue, not many would have predicted much game time for the Carlow man who was barely two years out of school. However, the international duo were very much aware of his burgeoning reputation.

As the season pushed into November, Byrne was featuring regularly off the bench. In propping terms, he was still a juvenile. At just 20 years of age, his progress was heralded and many felt international recognition would not be long in coming. But as Leinster closed on a routine Pro12 win, disaster struck.

"It's typical, isn't it?" Byrne suggests. "Just as I was building up a head of steam and that happens! I can still remember it well. Edinburgh at home. I even remember the date... October 31st. I guess you could say it was the start of my nightmare!"

A cruciate ligament injury meant that Byrne would fail to feature again until pre-season of the following campaign. However, just five minutes into his comeback outing against Ulster, his patella tendon snapped. It would be a further 18 months on the sidelines.

“Injuries are the worst part of being a professional rugby player, but you learn a lot about yourself from the experience.”

"I was feeling ok after the knee, but when you're coming back from a long-term injury, I don't think anybody knows where they should be at in terms of pain. It was sore the odd time, but I thought that was normal. For it to pan out the way it did, that was a tough one to take."

Having taken a graft from his patella for the ACL, now a graft from his hamstring was needed for the patella. At times Byrne felt as though he was going in circles, but as he had already learned there can be no short-cuts with injuries.

"It was supposed to be six months but the more we got into it I realised that I was actually working to a different timeframe. I always tried to be optimistic but at six months I couldn't switch on my quad and my leg had wasted away. There was a lot of pain management. I wasn't even close to a comeback."

"From a selfish perspective, I was lucky that Jack Conan and Mick Kearney had long-term injuries at the same time as me. The pair of them work unbelievably hard so they were good to have around. The only thing was that they returned for the same game and I was still nowhere near. I still had a bit to go."

Conan and Kearney returned to the fold at a time when Leinster's fortunes were finding their feet once again following a disappointing season by Leinster's lofty standards in 2015/16. But despite the best efforts of his teammates, it was only natural that with every passing week, Byrne felt further and further astray.





"It was difficult and isolating. There was a bit of a buzz about the place again but you're not really part of it. Everyone is out on the pitch sessions and you're working to a completely different schedule. But I have to say that literally everyone at Leinster – the players, the coaches, the S&C guys, the physios, they all checked in with me.

"I have tried to do the same for guys like Josh [van der Flier] and Will Connors, because other lads did it for me. Seanie [O'Brien] had been through the mill with injuries, but he kept me going. As did my brother Bryan who went above and beyond. For instance, Will would often ask me about things he's struggling with. I'd share some tips and we'd bounce ideas off each other. Once you've been there, talking from experience can mean so much to a player rather than reading about it in a book. I suppose injuries are the worst part of being a professional rugby player, but you learn a lot about yourself from the experience."

Remarkably, despite being a Leinster player for nigh on five years, to many fans Byrne remained an unknown quantity until he finally returned in 2017. It was a case of drip-feeding him back into action, helped by his reintegration into team-meetings that helped him get on top of the rugby detail which was an ever-evolving matter at the province.

"I was nervous about my return more than anything else. You spend the first few weeks and months worrying about what might happen if something goes wrong again. Even during those last few weeks of rehab, I tore my calf and ligaments in my ankle. Thankfully something stuck with the Leinster Rugby staff and they hung in there with me.

"I'm indebted to the Leinster staff," Byrne says. "I hadn't played in 28 months, yet they kept the faith. On a personal level, that was massive. It had been a nightmare for me, but without their support it could have been a completely different story if they hadn't trusted and believed in me."

Byrne has been repaying that trust in spades of late. This season he has been a familiar presence in the matchday squad, including appearances from the bench in some crucial Champions Cup outings. His performances have been such that Joe Schmidt namechecked Byrne when referencing players in his thoughts prior to the Six Nations.

"I'm really loving it this year," Byrne gushes. "Over the past few seasons, big occasions like the Champions Cup were big driving factors in my recovery. They're the games you'd target and focus the mind on – the light at the end of the tunnel. It keeps the motivations ticking over, so to play my part recently was huge on a personal level.

"Throughout my recovery it was about setting goals and that's something I've shared with Josh and Will. It might only be something small, but when you hit them it gives you a little lift. I was getting too caught up in things beyond my control. What good was it doing me worrying about other lads getting into my position?

"I had to learn to prioritise myself and work on the things that I needed to, to get back playing. I broke it down into 3 months stints. Alongside my rehab I'd work on other areas, upper body size, flexibility, things like that. I developed good habits that I've maintained to ensure I'm in the best nick possible going forward.

"When I look back on the process there are things I could have done better. There were times when I should have adopted a more positive mindset. It was unbelievably tough at times and there were days when I thought I'd never play again. It's easier said than done. It got me down and those closest to me would worry.

"But I got through the work and still do, just with a bit more of a pep in my step – I now have games at the weekend to look forward to!"

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SLIDING DOORS

Dr Hannah McCormack intends to put her learnings into practice as she assumes the role of Tackle Your Feelings Campaign Manager

You can picture it.

You’ve been released into space down the right wing and the try-line beckons. Suddenly, the full-back comes into view. Tiring now, you consider your options.

OPTION 1

Veer left, evade the tackle and head for the corner flag. You’ll just about make it, but you’ll be spent.

“I was just back after an ankle injury,” Hannah McCormack says. “I was picked to start a match for St. Mary’s and I remember thinking that the pitch was huge - I was really unfit! I was a strong runner, so the coach wanted them to get the ball to me out wide. I will never forget it. I went off down the wing and even my own teammates thought it was a done deal.

“Then I saw the full-back. I wasn’t sure I’d have the gas to go around her or whether I should go through her. I should have backed myself... She got me in that brief moment of hesitation. I planted my foot and held on tight. Pop! My ACL was gone.”

In some ways, it was Hannah’s sliding doors moment.

Alongside former Irish international Paula Fitzpatrick, Hannah had been given

OPTION 2

Stick the head down, brace yourself for contact. Hopefully you come out the other side unscathed.

the keys to a rusting DCU locker full of tatty gear and set about revitalising women’s rugby at the University. A dab hand at several sports, Hannah felt that rugby was a game that suited her skillset best. She was proved correct and was soon donning the Leinster jersey at U21 level.

A succession of niggly ankle injuries failed to subdue her interest and having finally overcome them she had resolved to continue her development. The women’s game was growing in popularity throughout the country and she was very much in the vanguard. Doors began to open.

“It happened before Christmas of my final year. Our exams were held in January, so my studies took over and it was only when term started back in February that I sought out the physio on campus - it was a free service and I was a poor student! Ultimately, the extent of the injury was pretty devastating.

“Once I’d done my finals, I moved to Bangor in Wales for my master’s in Applied Sport and Exercise Psychology and did some rowing. Then I travelled around New Zealand for a couple of years. I

suppose life took over and rugby quickly became a distant memory.”

Until now, that is. In January, having finished her PhD at the University of Limerick, Hannah has taken on the role of Campaign Manager for Tackle Your Feelings. Just a few weeks into her new position, Hannah already seems part of the furniture.

“It was a serendipitous moment,” Hannah admits. “A lot of my peers’ PhD research looked at athlete performance, but I had a different approach. I focused on the workplace wellbeing of Sports Psychologists. It was quite introspective and if you had asked me six months ago where it all might lead, I wouldn’t have been able to tell you. So, when the opportunity to work on the campaign arose, I had to pinch myself!

“I was aware of Tackle Your Feelings from a distance. I had seen some of the videos and shared them across my social media. Then the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) had an event in UCD at which Deirdre [Lyons], Nancy [Chllingworth], Ella [McCabe] and Créde [Sheehy-Kelly] spoke. I was hugely impressed by the body of work at Rugby Players Ireland that they spoke of and wondered how I might get in there one day.

“To be honest, when Créde introduced the TYF App I thought it was so good that I began to question what the point was in anybody doing anything! I hadn’t yet finished my PhD and I was trying to figure out next steps. My awareness of the campaign really took off at that stage and I became more interested in the wellbeing of an athlete rather than their performance.”

This interest was reflected in Hannah’s thesis which considered how working with elite athletes affected the mental wellbeing of a practicing sports psychologist. Despite the high-intensity of their environment, there is no onus on sports



psychologists to have support structures in place around them. Working with athletes who are at crucial junctures in their career, there are no boundaries.

Despite there being greater awareness of the importance of wellbeing in the workplace, Hannah felt that nobody was willing to look at how the sports psychologists were faring in the midst of it all. She believes that same applies across many sectors. Hannah therefore intends to put her learnings into practice as Tackle Your Feelings delves further into the working world.

“Absenteeism is a big issue, but presenteeism is also challenging. In some offices, employees perceive that in order to progress they have to be in the office 50-60 hours per week. However, the quality of their output won’t reflect that time, while burnout is a massive thing.

“Across both the sporting and corporate worlds, there is an expectation that you should be obsessed with what you do. For instance, a kicker might take 100 kicks and won’t leave the training ground until 100 are successful. In some spheres, this dedication is heralded, and this view trickles down to coaches and other athletes. What they might not be aware of though is the price that is being paid on a personal level.

“You can be a workaholic or simply highly engaged in your job. Those who are highly engaged can switch off as they leave their desk. They go on holidays, enjoy their hobbies and relationships. Those who can’t detach don’t have the same quality output even though they might be at their desk for the same amount of time.

“Throughout Phase One, Tackle Your Feelings developed a number of resources that are beneficial and easily obtainable. Just as people go to the gym to look after their physical health, I want them to turn to Tackle Your Feelings for their mental wellbeing. We are a little way down that road and now planning our next turn. It is an exciting time to be working in this space.”

Another sliding doors moment awaits...



“Just as people go to the gym to look after their physical health, I want them to turn to Tackle Your Feelings for their mental wellbeing. We are a little way down that road and now planning our next turn.”



“SEEING THE PERSON BEYOND THE PLAYER ALLOWS SPORT TO MEET ITS DUTY OF CARE”

In his paper entitled ‘Engagement in Sport Career Transition Planning Enhances Performance,’ Prof. David Lavallee examines whether planning for retirement from sport can enhance sporting performance. In one of the first studies of its kind, Lavallee, a Professor of Duty of Care in Sport in the School of Social and Health Sciences at Abertay University in Dundee, used anonymised data sourced from the National Rugby League (NRL) in Australia.

Comprising 28,516 performance selection observations for 623 players over three seasons, Lavallee’s comprehensive investigation is set to have implications in the delivery of career transition programmes for professional players and athletes.

Interestingly, from Lavallee’s study it emerged that players who had higher levels of engagement in career transition planning were (a) contracted to their team for longer periods, (b) featured more

regularly in team selections and (c) enjoyed longer playing careers overall. This was also compounded by the experience of their career coach and the number of sessions they attended.

Dr Deirdre Lyons, as Head of the Player Development Programme (PDP) at Rugby Players Ireland, welcomed the findings. In her commentary published in the Journal of Loss and Trauma, Lyons notes that the evidence presented by Lavallee, compliments the growing number of European sports policies which state that all athletes should be able to participate in environments that promote long-term personal growth and well-being, in addition to sporting excellence.

Rugby Players Ireland’s PDP, which is jointly funded by the IRFU, ensures that all professional rugby players in the country currently have access to a Player Development Manager (PDM).

The role of the PDM is to promote the personal development and wellbeing of players through empowering them to take ownership of their own development both on and off the sporting field

This service also extends to Academy players, 7s players, retired professionals and the women’s programme. With a PDM catering for each grouping, the support is individualised, having grown from just one PDM fulfilling this role prior to 2012, to five by 2015. Some of the supports provided to players include help with education, career planning, financial education and mental wellbeing.

Lyons accepts that some athletes are reluctant to engage in career transition planning programmes prior to their retirement. In her view, there remains a perception that engagement in such activity, while still competing, could be a distraction from their main role as professional players. Furthermore, clubs and teams may also assume, especially at senior level, that PDP activities detract from the core business of performance. This comes despite a general acceptance that retirement from sport can often prove to be a major loss for professional athletes.

Yet Lavallee’s study negates this perception and shows that athletes who are effectively supported by practitioners in preparing for retirement can realise a potential competitive advantage. Therefore, Welsh Rugby Players Association CEO Andries Pretorius asks: ‘if better people make better competitors, should professional athletes be provided with not only athlete and player development programmes, but also personal development support?’

From an organisational perspective, Pretorius, a former Welsh international, points out that owing to the commercial growth of professional sports, the role of the modern coach has already shifted to include both the on-field coaching of the player and the management of the player as an individual effectively through mentorship, counselling and sometimes friendship.

Across the world of sport, player associations are striving to elevate and enhance the role of the PDM and are therefore ideally placed to fill this off-field role. However, this can be complicated by the traditional view of the players association as an independent union. Therefore, Pretorius suggests that by providing clarity and transparency of programme content and the PDM’s role, coaches will be able to relinquish some of the welfare responsibilities that have been added to an already burdensome position.

Furthermore, Lyons points out that, based upon Lavallee’s conclusions, clubs that value a more holistic approach through a PDM that has been fully integrated into a player’s support team, can



keep players in the club, and the game, for longer. This culture of personal development can also be attractive to a player at a rival club where no such culture exists or indeed to the family of an Academy athlete who will be satisfied that off-field needs are being met.

Lyons also believes that the embedding of a PDM in the club system would allow for greater engagement and personal development, in general. To achieve this, she acknowledges that PDMs need to have the skills, competencies, and qualifications to support current and former professional players.

Ultimately, Dr Lyons believes that genuine support in the area of preretirement planning, development and wellbeing programmes, in whatever guise, will ensure that such programmes become the norm in elite sporting environments, which in turn will see the PDM become an integral part of the player’s support team. Furthermore, in seeing the person beyond the player, sport will meet its duty of care to players by helping them to plan for life after sport without compromising their core business of performance.

“**The role of the PDM is to promote the personal development and wellbeing of players through empowering them to take ownership of their own development both on and off the sporting field.**”

THE RUGBY FAMILY

It has been well documented that the support of friends and family may be one of the most important factors influencing sports performance. The encouragement and support of those closest to our players plays a key role in building the confidence of an athlete. Naturally, this can lead to success in a high-pressure sporting event.

Throughout our work we are cognisant that there is more to a rugby player than his on-field aptitude. It is our belief that better people make better players, therefore, by offering programmes and services that develop not only the athlete but also the person, rugby too can benefit.

As the services of Rugby Players Ireland continue to expand, we are playing a more integral role in the day-to-day lives of our players. To raise awareness of our work, several events specifically for the partners of our members have taken place throughout the country this season. These provide close relatives of the players with the opportunity to meet with our staff, learn more about what we do and how they can also benefit.

Further examples of what we can do for a player's family and their children was recently evidenced in the launching of our partnership with videoDoc, as the official digital healthcare partners for Rugby Players Ireland. Through this partnership with Ireland's leading online healthcare service we aim to better member welfare while providing accessible healthcare for family members and past players to improve their physical and general health.

If you want to learn more information, contact Denis Hurley: denis@rugbyplayersireland.ie



#NOWYOU CAN



MCDERMOTT'S MOTIVATIONS

AOIFE MCDERMOTT HAS BEEN PUTTING HER BASKETBALL SKILLS TO USE IN THE IRISH LINEOUT

AOIFE MCDERMOTT

As Ireland readied themselves for the Women's Six Nations campaign, Donald Trump was stepping up negotiations with the North Koreans. Across social media on the day they were to face England, images from Space Jam began to pop up as onlookers determined that only a basketball game could save the world.

There were amusing memes, with Bugs Bunny and Michael Jordan, two of the great egotists of our day, pitted alongside one even greater. All are American products and each in their own way pursue the American Dream. The rabbit and basketballer are cultural icons who have long

since overtaken that dream and passed it out – in that territory there are no pinnacles. They shared that potential with the world.

The Donald, on the other hand, is playing out a supervillain origin story as he presides over a darkening period in the globalist history of the USA. Inevitably, when plans for a Space Jam sequel were first mooted last year with LeBron James in the lead role, there were genuine theories that Trump would assume the antihero role, following the American President's bizarre Twitter taunting of the LA Laker.

However, the Space Jam message was always so much more than a collaboration between cartoon figures and global superstars. "I'd just love for kids to understand how empowered they can feel and how empowered they can be if they face up to their fears and don't just give up on their dreams," James has said of his first starring role in a film. Conceivably then, the stage is set for the empowering figures of James and Jordan to scale Trump's wall.

The theme of the original film was not lost on anyone. In one memorable scene, Bugs Bunny sees that his team mates are under performing due to a lack of charisma and therefore creates 'Michael Jordan's Secret Stuff'. The placebo effect takes hold and they start winning. Ultimately, we learned that the players had the 'secret stuff' inside them all along.

Basketball was never as popular in Ireland than in the mid-nineties. Jordan's dalliance with Hollywood transcended the sport. We obsessed over the Chicago Bulls, Air Jordans paraded through the villages, while Liam McHale, one of the best footballers in the country, admitted that his heart was actually with the hardwood court. Even in the Sligo village of Riverstown, the Jordan effect was keenly felt.

"I always played basketball, it was just something I did!" Aoife McDermott claims. "From the age of 12 it became more of a competitive pursuit I suppose. I was playing on Irish sides from the age of 15 and it sort of went from there."

In 2015, her reputation in the Women's Super League was such that she was invited to become a Sky Sports Live for Sport Athlete Mentor alongside the likes Katie Taylor, Karl Lacey and Jessie Barr. A nurse by profession, McDermott's caring nature wanted to help young people develop life skills and inspire them to achieve their full potential. Privately however, she was at odds with where hers might be fully realised.

"Jenny Murphy was also a Live for Sport mentor and we were paired on a training day. Obviously, we chatted about both of our sports our and I was interested to get an insight into the rugby world. I'd seen the odd Six Nations game but that was about it. I jokingly suggested that I wouldn't mind giving it a go at some stage, it sounded fun. She said she'd get her coach to give me a ring and I thought little of it.

"Next thing, Anthony Eddy was onto me and asking me down to Irish 7s training. I nearly died!"

Coming in from the cold, her baptism of fire with the 7s programme was short-lived. While Eddy could see that her ability was not in short supply, she would need to get up to speed with the game at club level. The reality check was not unexpected and failed to quench her interest. She began to watch clips of rugby matches online to improve her understanding and sussed out others who had tread a similar path.

"Once I first got involved, I spoke to Lindsay Peat and Louise Galvin. I was aware of them having made the transition from basketball and figured that if they'd done it, I could too. Other people didn't agree: 'Oh, Lindsay and Louise are very different players to you.' They thought I was cracked and that it wouldn't work. My target was set.

"I'm not saying it was easy. I was very nervous on my first night at Railway Union. In fact, it was the most terrifying thing I'd ever done. I didn't have a clue what I was doing and even when I was doing it, I didn't know if I was good or not. It was a challenge and there were times when I struggled, but it was the kind of challenge that I was missing. I wasn't seeing any progression.

"In basketball you compete with Ireland in the European Championships every two years, so after the 2016 competition, I knew there was a bit of a window to give rugby a go. I tried to juggle the two in that first season – I didn't want to walk away from starting in an Irish side, so I made sure I'd that safety net. But I spoke to my coach and told him that if there was any clash, I'd be picking rugby.

"I guess there's no conflict there anymore!"

A trained intellectual disability nurse, McDermott worked at LauraLynn Children's Hospice before taking up her current role in clinical research at the Mater Hospital. Her professional duties by day keep her grounded as she aspired to the loftier heights of the lineout by night.

"I found that there were a lot of similarities between rugby and basketball," she muses.

"Basketball is very structured, there's a set-offence, in-bound plays like lineouts, so I found it quite easy to get my head around it and even now I still relate back. The contact element was a different story. Being so tall I really struggled with rucking, getting low and clearing people out. That needed work."



Through hard-work, diligence and the ability to overcome the fears that the challenge presented, McDermott's leadership abilities were obvious. Despite just two years rugby experience and a handful of appearances for Ireland, she is now firmly established in the Irish engine room and assumes a role in the squad's leadership team.

"In the lead-up to my debut against Wales last year, I spent the week hoping I'd get a run out for 10 minutes. It was exciting. But on the morning of the game Nicola Fryday pulled up with an injury. Adam [Griggs] took me aside and told me I'd be starting. I don't think I've ever been as nervous.

"Before we ran out, one of the girls (I can't remember who) came up to me: 'this is not your first time to do this, you've played for Ireland before.' I began to think of all the All-Ireland finals, the games for Ireland and it put me at ease. I loved it.

"Now I'm supporting Ciara Griffin in her role as captain, helping to drive and maintain standards. It's important that we encourage the new faces coming in, build relationships. If you look at the current squad, we have lost a lot of international experience over the past couple of years, but what we may have lost in caps, we have gained in togetherness.

"We can't hide away from the fact that has been a difficult run of games for us. But we know that once we stick to our systems, get a bit of luck and fight, we can put in a good performance. If we tick those boxes, then who knows what can happen on any given day?"

McDermott will need little motivation for the months ahead of her and the Irish women's rugby team as they set about scaling their own wall of expectation. After all, if her love of basketball taught her anything, she has had the 'special stuff' inside her all along.

"I found that there were a lot of similarities between rugby and basketball. Basketball is very structured, there's a set-offence, in-bound plays like lineouts, so I found it quite easy to get my head around it and even now I still relate back."

SINK OR SWIM

DYLAN TIERNEY- MARTIN CAN ALREADY CLAIM TO BE A SIX NATIONS WINNER, BUT FOR THE GOODBODY BURSARY RECIPIENT IT HASN'T ALL BEEN PLAIN SAILING!

DYLAN TIERNEY- MARTIN

Dylan Tierney-Martin speaks with the maturity of a seasoned professional. He looks it too.

The Galway weather can make a grizzly bear out of the most placid of men. As the Irish U20s lined out for the anthems during the Six Nations, you'd be forgiven for wondering how the bearded hooker managed to alter his passport.

It's not the only conversion the westerner has made in his fledgling career. Just 18 months ago, Tierney-Martin aspired to be a top-level back-row forward. But despite his innate talent for the role, his direct competitors for numbers 6, 7 and 8 had a physical edge.

"I was too small and too chubby – but nobody said that to my face!" he chuckles. "I have no complaints. When Ambrose Conboy and Collie Tucker suggested the change, I didn't question it because I knew they'd have taken their time over it and had my best interests in mind.

"I spoke to my dad and we figured that once I get a jersey on my back, I can still do the things I have always thrived at anyway. Granted, I'd have to work on my scrummaging and throwing, but after that you're just a rugby player. I've always tried to be as rounded as I can.



"I actually hated rugby until I was about 11, but my Dad was adamant that I play it. I didn't like the contact. At first, I fancied myself as a 10 but I didn't quite have the feet. I was always was one of those club players that had no problem taking on the kicking if the 10 was gone, or I'd throw if the hooker was struggling. I always enjoyed the responsibility, having a role that everybody relies on you for."

Living barely forty seconds from the Sportsground, he will often be found onsite with ball in hand, battling with the wind and rain to hit markers on the wall. Even when they lock the gates behind him, the dedication to his craft fails to dim. Such discipline has proven useful as he also negotiates his way through Quantity Surveying and Construction studies at GMIT, especially now that his parents have moved to England.

"Dad moved across the water a couple of years ago, but my mum remained behind until she could see that I was able to stand on my own two feet. Once I managed to get an Academy contract and find a place to live, she trusted that I'd get on with things. It has been tough, but it is nice to have a little bit of my own independence and figure things out for myself."

From an academic point of view, Tierney-Martin is the first to admit that he underperformed during his first year of studies. A full schedule of lectures and assignments proved difficult to manage while he tread a new path on the rugby field. However, such an experience has been a learning that he has taken into the current term, while the Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Bursary has also proved to be an added motivation.

"I meet Deirdre [Lyons] every couple of months to ensure I'm on track, but a lot of it is down to me. Neither Deirdre or my parents are there in the morning to get me to a lecture. They're not there in the evenings when you realise you have an hour to spare and you know you could really use it to do some study.



"With the Goodbody bursary I was able to buy a laptop with enough RAM to access materials no matter where I am. Even if I'm gone to Dublin or Cork with the [Irish] 20s, I can tap into my work for an hour or two which can make a huge difference with continuous assessments.

"Deirdre also helped me to draft letters to my course leaders and lecturers to make them aware of my selection and the implications that might have. I wasn't sure how they might react, but they have all been hugely encouraging. They're just delighted that I have this opportunity and are happy to support me however they can."

Happy in the knowledge that all sides are bought into his venture, Tierney-Martin Exams has one less thing to worry about as he heads into a hectic period. Over the coming weeks and months, his GMIT exams will also have to be negotiated, while preparations for the U20s World Cup in Argentina this summer will be stepped up. Furthermore, he will be hoping that his fine form will be rewarded by Connacht taking him into Year 2 of the Academy.

"It's an interesting one. There are four really good and experienced hookers in the queue ahead of me at Connacht. They're well out in front, but I have to remember that I'm still only developing as a hooker and have a lot of ground to make up. The likes of Dave Heffernan have been very helpful in bringing me up to speed. For now, I need to keep the head down and develop as much as I can. Keep ticking away.

"I was thrown in at the deep end last year. It was a sink or swim scenario in a whole manner of ways. I found balancing college with my rugby was difficult, so I've adjusted my approach this year focusing on three modules. On the rugby side I was thrown into the B&I Cup games against Ealing and Richmond and came up against experienced hookers at Championship standard. It hasn't been easy!

"Through it all, I have found that sometimes the best way to learn is to fail... and I have had my ass kicked a couple of times!"

“Deirdre also helped me to draft letters to my course leaders and lecturers to make them aware of my selection and the implications that might have. I wasn't sure how they might react, but they have all been hugely encouraging.”



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IRELAND V ENGLAND LEGENDS

On the eve of Ireland's Six Nations opener against England, some of the Irish rugby gentry landed into Ballsbridge with their gearbags only to be directed away from the maddening crowds.

For some it had become a familiar dismissal, for others it was a peculiar feeling. Ultimately, their services were no longer required for Six Nations duty, but arguably they had come to answer a higher calling.

In a nod to Doddie Weir, several former Scottish rugby greats counted amongst their number as they made their way towards the RDS. Weir was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease in 2017, but despite his debilitating condition he has embarked on a remarkable journey to raise awareness of the disease.

"You'd have to have been living under a stone if you weren't aware what had happened to Doddie and his diagnosis," said Shane Byrne who has led the Annual Ireland v England Legends rugby game alongside Len Dineen since 2009, raising over €1m for rugby related charities.

"Talking to Jason Leonard, we felt it was appropriate that we do some fundraising for Doddie's Foundation. It is gathering huge momentum but unfortunately there's only a finite amount of time that we can help out here, so we felt it would be a worthy cause."

It was clear that many others, including Craig Chalmers, Tom Smith, Ally Hogg and Max Evans, concurred. The Scottish contingent even agreed to wear green!

"The rugby community has come right behind Doddie. What a tribute from the Irish Legends and it is fantastic to see so many people turn out, rugby is the winner!" said Scott Hastings, the Chairman of the My Name's Doddie Foundation who was fulfilling the role of pitchside commentator with Stephen Ferris on the night.

The assembly of celtic legends ultimately prevailed on what was a bitterly cold evening in Dublin. But the 6,000 in attendance acknowledged that being a little chilly was a small price to pay on a night dedicated to a far greater cause. In any event, a few hot whiskies soon had the spirits high again!

A huge thank you to all who turned out on the night, and to all those who supported us in the lead up to the game!



TEN YEAR CHALLENGE

In 2009, Marcus Horan was part of the first Irish side to secure a Grand Slam in 61 years. Now, as Player Development Manager for Munster Rugby, he continues to help the Irish rugby cause.

MARCUS HORAN

The Five Nations is now a distant memory. A generation ago it was as much a part of a springtime Saturday as Know Your Sport and reruns of Riverdance at the Eurovision.

The coming of professionalism, sophistication and the Italians did away with it, to be replaced by the modern rugby juggernaut that is the Six Nations.

In bygone days, the tournament was contested by farmers, businessmen and students over four weekends. It came and went like the wind which was often a blessing for Irish fans in the early 90s, for whom with every passing defeat it seemed that turning out for Ireland was not as far-fetched as once believed.

Nevertheless, the mystique of the 'World's Greatest Championship' meant that even youngsters who hurled in Clonlara grew up dreaming of running out at the world's oldest rugby ground.

"There was always just something about it," reflects Marcus Horan. "Even the phrase 'Grand Slam' had this aura that always got my attention as a kid. To come close a couple of times surpassed my expectations, so to finally get it in '09 was an unbelievable feeling. We did it in the most dramatic way possible, but I think everyone got their money's worth!"

That we did, and more besides.

Despite several Triple Crowns, it had been years since Ireland had won a championship at all, while a number of our finest and most charismatic players had plenty of years on the clock. There was a grim urgency to Slam situation. When we finally reached the promised land, it was like a glorious release as wild excitement rippled throughout the country.

"It was a fantastic time," admits Horan. "The best moments in a rugby career come in the moments after you've returned to the dressing room after a defining victory. There's nobody there other than the group you've soldiered with all season. Once you leave everyone gets split up and it goes bananas!"

"We'd a great night in Cardiff with family that night. Then we came back to Dublin and stayed in Killiney Castle. We went to a bar up the road and Christy Moore was there so needless to say a bit of a sing-song was had. Fantastic memories, precious to us all."

For Horan and several of his teammates, 2009 was the zenith of their careers. Just five months later his quality of life was at stake as a result of the pursuit of the game he loved. An irregular heartbeat was detected, and he was forced into a patient recovery. Cian Healy took advantage of the circumstances. Rugby was important to Horan, but the incident made it clear that there was a limit to that consideration.

"When I was unwell, I realised that there comes a time when your priority is your health and your

family and to have a quality of life. I didn't want to put that in jeopardy. Thankfully I got back to playing, but at that time whether or not rugby was going to be part of my future didn't matter. It was definitely a wake-up call.

"When I started in '99, the Munster story was just beginning to take off. I was blessed and very grateful to have been involved in some incredible teams with Munster and Ireland and even before all that I was winning All-Ireland leagues with Shannon.

"In some ways, we were having it so good that a lot of us thought it was never going to end. There was a naivety with us. There was this thinking that 'sure, this is great, we're making such a great living out of this that it'll last forever, and we'll be set!' But the reality is very different. It can all be taken from you in a heartbeat."

Since the very start of his career, Horan has always had an involvement with Rugby Players Ireland. Barely a year into his senior career, Horan volunteered to become Munster's player representative for the association. Only in its infancy, some of the players were wary of what the association's agenda was and feared it might affect selection, therefore opting not to stick their necks out.

As a prop, Horan did that for a living. He also wanted to look out for others because from the start of his career there were always veterans who looked out for him.

"If ever there was a fight, I was hauled out right away and someone would stand in front of me. Either Gaillimh [Mick Galwey], Claw [Peter Clohessy], Anthony Foley, [Eddie] Halvey, John [Hayes], Quinny [Alan Quinlan]. On my first trip to Dublin and we had to get taxis to the train station, I didn't have to put my hand in my pocket. Just small things like that, I was always taken care of.

"As the game has grown, the demands on the players have increased. I can't help them on the field anymore, so I like to think that my current position allows me to help in other ways.

"The hype that surrounds the game today is unbelievable. There was obviously plenty of hype leading up to Cardiff in '09, but with social media the way it is, lads are so identifiable now. I might have been able to walk down the street ten years ago and not be noticed, but now everyone knows the players' movements and tweets about what they're doing. It must be tough to maintain focus on a big match week with so much noise.

"I have to admire the modern player and how they handle themselves. A lot of guys are very aware of the role they have to play in the community, and they take the time to think about what is important. You see how good they are with young fans and a lot of them work with charities. It



grounds them a little bit, and that's important."

Horan has been practicing what he preaches in recent weeks. He was to the fore of the action as the Irish Rugby Legends took on England in February for rugby related charities. It was also clear that his fitness on the night had been boosted by his recent jaunt up Mount Kilimanjaro alongside Shane Byrne, Stephen Ferris and Mike McCarthy to raise funds for the IRFU Charitable Trust. Byrne felt it was the toughest thing he had ever done, Horan felt his pain.

"I had to share a tent with Munch [Byrne]... I think people would have donated to the cause for that alone! But in all seriousness, I don't think I was quite prepared for how hard it was going to be. I'd seen loads of pictures of people at the top and figured that if they could do it, then so could I. It was hard at times and we struggled, but there was a real sense of achievement when we made it to the top.

"It's over now, so onto the next thing," Horan says. "In a way, it's a bit like your rugby career. When someone is released from a squad and pre-season starts without them, the What's App notification comes in to say that 'such and such' has left the group. It's a reality these days! Ok, the guy might be living next door to you but he's on the outside now and it is tough.

"We're in a bit of a transition with the game. Most of those who are retiring or contemplating it have never experienced the amateur era, so in some ways they've never known a normal life or held down 9-5 jobs. We're seeing them adjusting and having their issues. From a Rugby Players Ireland perspective, those guys are going to be a huge asset to the guys coming out of the game into the future."



“As the game has grown, the demands on the players have increased. I can't help them on the field anymore, so I like to think my current position allows me to help in other ways.”

INTER NATIONAL RUGBY PLAYERS



It's been a busy few weeks and months at International Rugby Players HQ.

On February 28, reacting to World Rugby plans for an International Rugby Season, the global representative body issued a statement highlighting player concerns with the proposals.

In what was described as a “seminal moment” for our sport, players like Johnny Sexton, Kieran Read and Owen Farrell made their voices heard on what was outlined.

In the statement, the first of its kind, Players Council President Jonathan Sexton said: “While players gave this idea a cautious welcome when we met at the end of last year, it now seems like a commercial deal on the future of the game is being negotiated at a rapid pace with little consideration given to the important points we raised with World Rugby in November.

“The issue of player load has never been so topical, however it needs to be properly understood. To suggest that players can play five incredibly high-level test matches in consecutive weeks in November, is out of touch and shows little understanding of the physical strain this brings”

Player Council member Kieran Read said: “After listening to the issues raised by many of the players, we need to be very careful that we balance the commercial needs of the game, with the player welfare needs and ensure the quality and integrity of matches meets expectations.

“Fans want to see meaningful games; they don't want to see fatigued players playing a reduced



quality of rugby as part of a money-driven, weakened competition that doesn't work for the players or clubs.”

Among the issues with the then World Rugby proposals, were:

- Player load challenges from multiple top-level test matches in different countries and time-zones in consecutive weeks
- Increased long-haul travel in short time frames
- A lack of real opportunities for Tier Two nations to progress
- Increased conflicts between country and club demands and Regulation 9 release periods
- Potential impact on Rugby World Cup and Lions tours
- The long-term quality and integrity of the international game

Since then, World Rugby have pulled back on many of their plans, with International Rugby Players working with the governing body to formulate a better deal for players, who, from the outset gave the plans a cautious welcome.

International Rugby Players chief Omar Hassanein, a former CEO of Rugby Players Ireland said “Our players are incredibly passionate about having their voices heard, not just in relation to the proposed international season, but in respect of all player issues that impact the men's, women's, 15s and 7s game.”

The Players have subsequently called for a greater voice in major decisions. Ireland's Brian O'Driscoll



joined other international players, past and present, in lobbying World Rugby for a seat at the top table of the game.

“This is a pivotal moment for everyone in our sport,” said O'Driscoll.

“The players have made their views clear on the proposed global competition but at the same time, they want to work with World Rugby, unions, provinces and clubs to genuinely explore what may be possible.”

The International Rugby Players Council is also calling on the governing body and its member unions to enter meaningful negotiations on how to best work together in future, citing that decisions are too often reached without any opportunity for players to positively influence the outcome.

Wales captain Alun Wyn Jones added: “We want to ensure that there will be no repeat of the current situation and that the frustrations over the lack of player consultation are addressed.

Watch this space in the coming weeks and months.



JACK AUNGIER

THE LEINSTER PROP IS PART OF TU DUBLIN'S ELITE SPORTS PROGRAMME

Jack, you're a busy man. Tell us a little about what you manage to pack into your day.

It has been a busier few weeks of late with a lot of the lads away for the Six Nations. I'm usually in UCD from 7.30am and I'm there until 3pm. We'll have a gym session, some meetings and a pitch session during this time. On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday nights I'm in college in TUD (Technological University Dublin) where I'm studying business.

Have TUD been accommodated your various commitments?

My dedicated study time is from 6-9pm so it doesn't really get in the way of rugby but on the occasion that a conflict comes up, they have been extremely helpful and supportive.

You first came to prominence with Suttonians and at schools' level with St. Fintan's. Despite some success at underage levels, was a professional rugby career on your radar?

When I first started playing rugby, I was about 7 years of age. I took to it straight away because I really enjoyed it. As a result, I guess I've always had dreams of playing for Leinster and Ireland!

What has been the highlight of your rugby career to date?

I'd have to say playing for the Irish U20s for the first time. I had always seen it as a bit of a pathway, so it was on my radar and I kept a close eye on it. However, you never actually think that one day you'll be lining out there. It's a great honour to play for your country at any level. It was great to see them win the Grand Slam this year.

There is an array of front-row talent at Leinster. Do you view this an advantage in terms of your development or would you rather a clear path to the senior side?

There are definite benefits because I get to watch, learn and pick their brains. I'm only 20 so in propping terms I'm still quite young. Not many lads would be able to say that they can learn the ropes under Tadhg [Furlong] and then scrummage against the likes of Cian [Healy] and Jack [McGrath]!

Do you have any other hobbies or interests?

I play a bit of golf and enjoy swimming!

Do you find that having a focus outside of rugby benefits your game?

100%. You can't be thinking about rugby 24/7. You have to be able strike a balance and enjoy other things.

What are the benefits of having a Player Development Manager in Dr Ella McCabe?

If I have any off-field issues, she is the person I go to. She has been brilliant in the way she has helped me source a suitable college course and we have also worked a lot on my organisational and time management skills, so that I can make the most of my rugby and study commitments.

What is the best advice that you've ever been given?

Never stop learning and growing as a person!

Finally, tell us an interesting fact about yourself...

Emmm... I was the smallest baby in my family?!



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