

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND
PRE-SEASON 2018

PLANNING AHEAD INAUGURAL RUGBY ROOKIE CAMP

LEADING FROM
THE FRONT
EOIN MCKEON

DALY
TASKMASTER
SHANE DALY



RUGBY PLAYERS
IRELAND

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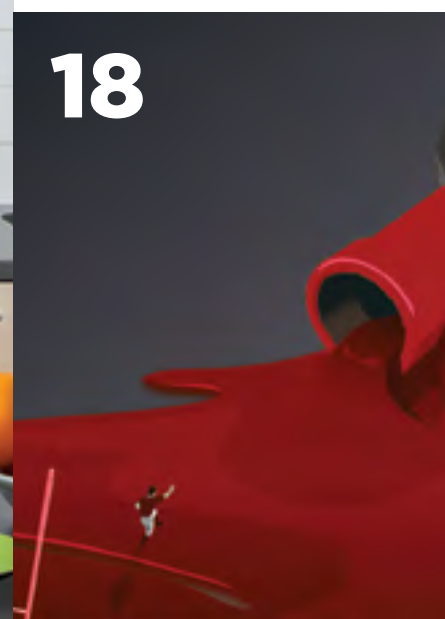
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CEO ADDRESS

SIMON KEOGH



There are so many things that retired players say they miss about professional rugby – the camaraderie, the training, game day, the adrenal buzz, the winning... but very few will say pre-season. It is a time of the year for hard-work, team building and digging in but inevitably waking up each morning stiff and sore. However, pre-season for our members is also a period of enthusiasm, hope, and a time to look at things afresh. Those fortunate enough to be on the podium last year will want to build upon the success, those who lost out will want to make amends and those who didn't get the game-time will want to prove themselves on the pitch in the coming season.

For Rugby Players Ireland, pre-season is an opportunity to get around the provinces, touch base with our members and introduce ourselves to all the new-faces. Like our members we will be looking forward to the new season with excitement, but it is also a time for us to plan ahead and get some new programmes in place.

One such initiative is our inaugural Rugby Players Ireland/BDO Rookie Camp supported by the IRFU which was held in the Druids Glen Hotel and Golf Resort. Starting a new job can be daunting at the best of times but entering professional rugby is a little different. With most rookies between the ages of 18 – 22, there's quite a lot of important information to take on board. The players are no longer just students or employees but professional rugby players. With that territory comes certain responsibilities, while they are become role models almost instantaneously.

The success of our provincial sides and national team means that there is a heightened expectation of our players both on and off the field. The players are aware that behavioural standards extend beyond their workplace and they know they need to be ever conscious. The more we, as the representative body for the players, can assist our members by heightening their awareness through initiatives like our Rookie Camp, the more we can provide

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The players are aware that behaviour standards extend beyond their workplace and they know they need to be ever conscious.

protection for them.

The two-day camp will go some way to prepare the academy players for this with Rugby Players Ireland given the chance to get in front of all first and second year academy members to go through a number of educational areas. The comprehensive agenda of the camp covered areas such as social media, agent engagement, behavioural awareness, communication, mental wellbeing, finance and dual careers.

The rookies heard about personal leadership from national team coach Joe Schmidt and former Irish captain Jamie Heaslip who shared their own respective experiences of the game and what it takes to become an international player. Even after the conclusion of this minicamp, the Rugby Players Ireland player development programme run across the provinces and the women's programme will ensure that throughout the players' professional journey they will have access to ongoing education advice and support.

We continue to work toward our vision “to make Ireland the best place in the world to play rugby,” and believe that developing our educational offering will help us to achieve this. Whilst the facilitation of education is key, so too is strong representation. The core to the establishment of the players' association is to act as the collective voice for the players. Therefore, it is vital that our members are aware that Rugby Players Ireland are working on their behalf so that they feel safe and respected as employees and we continue our work with the IRFU to ensure that this is the case.

Whilst pre-season may be dreaded by some players, for Rugby Players Ireland it gives us a small window where there are no matches and players do not have to have their full attention focussed on what lies ahead of them at the weekend. Whilst we know that their attentions may be diverted in the weeks and months ahead, we will continue with our endeavours to be a resource for our members as education facilitators and a voice for the players.



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND ROOKIE CAMP

In advance of the 2018/2019 season, Rugby Players Ireland hosted new members of the respective provincial academies for a Rookie Camp at Druids Glen Hotel & Golf Resort. The brainchild of Marcus Horan, the camp has been developed over the past number of months to accommodate the predominant considerations for a player who is setting out on a career in the game.

Over two days, various aspects of the Player Development Programme came into focus. From managing social media accounts and addressing expected behaviours, to managing money and striking a balance between studies and rugby, the camp provided players with an invaluable insight into what to expect as representatives of some of

the biggest clubs in world rugby.

Run in partnership with the IRFU, the camp also provided the players with the opportunity to meet some of those who will become key characters in their lives over the coming years. Furthermore, former Irish international Jamie Heaslip popped by to give advice, while national Head Coach Joe Schmidt shared his own insights into how to successfully navigate through the academy system and set about fulfilling undoubted potential in the senior ranks.

Many thanks to Ciarán Medlar and BDO Ireland for their support of the initiative. Our thanks also to the Tom Maynard Trust for their continued support of our Player Development Programme.



WELLBEING STUDY

Rugby Players Ireland has announced that it will be supporting a new study that will explore the overall general health and wellness of retired elite athletes, with a particular interest in brain health.

Alongside Rowing Ireland, the University of Michigan and Trinity College, the representative body for professional rugby players in Ireland is supporting the project in an effort to further inform experts as to the benefits of a career in sport where there is also risk of injury, including exposure to head impacts and how this might affect long term health.

Over the coming months, former Irish professional rugby players and ex-Irish Women's XV players will be asked to participate in a general health screening that will include a battery of health

and wellness questionnaires before carrying out the remaining health screening tests under supervision at various locations throughout the country.

The principal investigators on the team will be Dr Fiona Wilson, an Associate Professor of Physiotherapy at Trinity College and Ms Joice Cunningham, who recently presented some initial findings at the European College of Sports Sciences Conference Dublin. Furthermore, the study has enlisted the help of Dr Steve Broglio and Dr Michael McCrae who have both been responsible for some of the most comprehensive studies carried out in the field of sports related concussions in the United States.

Check out page 36 for more information!

RUGBY RISING

Taking place throughout the October mid-term break, 'Rugby Rising' is a five day event for a selection of rugby schools throughout the four provinces. Led by Tommy Bowe and Louis Ludik, the festival will focus on the development of the player and the team through a series of competitive matches that will be interspersed with fun educational days.

Over the course of a week, teams will hone their skills both on and off the field with Rugby Players Ireland providing information on anti-gambling, anti-doping and wellbeing. Furthermore, international players and renowned coaches will be in attendance, in addition to leaders in the world of Strength & Conditioning, nutrition, player representation and technical analysis.





ZURICH IRISH RUGBY AWARDS 2018

Our congratulations to all those who were recognised by their peers at the Zurich Irish Rugby Players Awards which took place earlier this summer.

ZURICH IRISH RUGBY PLAYERS' PLAYER OF THE YEAR:

Keith Earls

NEVIN SPENCE YOUNG PLAYER OF THE YEAR:

Jacob Stockdale

BNY MELLON WOMEN'S XVS PLAYER OF THE YEAR:

Claire Molloy

VODAFONE MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE:

Duncan Casey

MASON ALEXANDER SUPPORTERS' PLAYER OF THE YEAR:

Bundee Aki

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND/IRFU WOMEN'S 7S PLAYER OF THE YEAR:

Lucy Mulhall

VOLKSWAGEN TRY OF THE YEAR:

CJ Stander v England

DRUIDS GLEN HOTEL & GOLF RESORT MOMENT OF THE YEAR:

The Grand Slam

ZURICH CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY:

Jack McGrath

BNY MELLON HALL OF FAME:

Brian O'Driscoll



TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS
ROADSHOW

Tackle Your Feelings has seen Ireland’s rugby players leading from the front since 2016, breaking down stigma and inspiring people to take action to optimise their mental wellbeing.

Now the Tackle Your Feelings Workshop brings the messages of the campaign to life in an interactive 90minute session that is being rolled out across all four provinces in the coming months.

Drawing on sport psychology and positive psychology principles, the workshop aims to:

- Create a space for people to press pause and reflect on whether they are surviving or thriving.
- Spark conversation around self-awareness and the marginal gains that can be made every day to optimise enjoyment of life.
- Offer a practical toolkit to help people take immediate action to boost their mental wellbeing.

To date workshops have already taken place in schools, universities and businesses across the country.



CONNACHT SQUAD VISIT

Before the 2018/19 season commences, the team at Rugby Players Ireland took the time to visit our members at Connacht Rugby. Following a staff meeting that was kindly facilitated by Connacht Rugby, several senior members of the squad joined us for an informal gathering giving them the opportunity to get to know members of staff at Rugby Players Ireland.

Over the course of the visit, Simon Keogh and Denis Hurley also presented to the greater group highlighting the services that are on offer through the association. In his new role, Denis will be a regular visitor to all four provinces. Check out page 24 for more.



OCTOBER MID TERM 2018

8 SCHOOLS

12 GAMES

2 VENUES

5 DAYS



LEADING FROM THE FRONT

THE CONNACHT BACK-ROWER IS PLAYING HIS PART ON RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND'S EXECUTIVE BOARD

EOIN MCKEON



After 327 appearances over 15 years, John Muldoon took his leave of Connacht Rugby in April. It was the end of an era for the province while the departures of Ronan Loughney, Aly Muldowney and Andrew Browne in recent seasons, has served to compound a very evident changing of the guard at the Sportsground.

However, several players are ready to step into the breach. Tom McCartney is a senior campaigner in Galway; Jarrad Butler, Eoghan Masterson and Sean O'Brien have ably deputised in the past, while Eoin McKeon has been refining his leadership skills through his involvement with the Executive Board of Rugby Players Ireland.

Having previously acted as the Players' Representative working alongside Dr Deirdre Lyons and the Player Development Programme, McKeon was the natural successor to Ronan Loughney when the experienced prop retired last year and his place on the Board was vacated. Throughout his tenure, Loughney had been a great advocate for the work of his players' association – McKeon has continued in that vein.

"Eoin Griffin was our Player Representative but when he headed to London Irish it got the ball rolling," McKeon explains of his initial involvement with the association. "I'd sound out the lads as to what they wanted from Rugby Players Ireland (then IRUPA) and feed that back to Deirdre. There was a bit of logistics involved in terms of organising workshops and meetings and we had a number of things going on ranging from work placements to running coffee shops. It was a good way to grasp how the association worked."

"From a selfish point of view, taking a position on the Board was something I was keen on when Ronan stepped away. For my own development I wanted the experience and to be able to point to it on a CV. I am still relatively new to the position, but in that time I have learned a huge amount from being at the forefront of some really important discussions and decisions and learning from some very knowledgeable people. It was a free opportunity to be part of a Board for a national organisation and I'm really enjoying it."

Sitting alongside Simon Keogh (CEO), Rob Kearney (Chairman), Peter O'Mahony, Johnny Sexton, Andrew Trimble, Shane Jennings and Non-Executive Directors Peter McKenna and John Treacy, McKeon and the Rugby Players Ireland Executive Board are in regular contact, especially as player issues arise over the course of the season. As the association continues to grow, the composition of the Board is currently under review.

"Quite simply, Rugby Players Ireland couldn't exist without the players being involved. As a Board, we give an insight as to what we want as players."



An awful lot of work goes on behind the scenes to that end and all to our benefit, but sometimes it can be harder to appreciate it unless it directly affects us. Playing rugby is the predominant focus, we just tend to trust that the work is being done in the background.

"While saying that, it is important that the lads are made aware of what is happening and that they are kept in the loop. The Rugby Players Ireland team visited us in Galway recently and gave us an update on a few things. You could really see the lads' attention was spiked when Simon addressed the South African double-taxation issue, ongoing Collective Bargaining Agreement negotiations and other matters that have a personal impact."

From some time, McKeon has been clearly invested in Rugby Players Ireland. However, he is fully aware

“An awful lot of work goes on behind the scenes to that end and all to our benefit, but sometimes it can be harder to appreciate it unless it directly affects us.”

that some of his peers avail of the services much more than others. It is something he wishes to change. He is keen to ensure that others follow his lead and put the necessary building blocks in place to best prepare them for life after rugby.

“As a Board, there is always more that we could be doing. I think what is key for us going forward is that we need to encourage all players to find a way to make the most of the organisation. Everyone knows that Rugby Players Ireland are there, but many struggle to take the next step. Suddenly, retirement is staring you in the face and you have to try and build relationships and start working towards something that you might have figured out in good time.

“We are very lucky to have Deirdre in Connacht. Her influence continues to grow especially now that she has an allocated time to meet the group in the schedule. Since she first joined up with us she has seen guys like Eoghan Masterson, Jack Carty and I come through from Academy level. We have grown up with her! From what Andy Friend has said since he has come in, it seems that personal development is going to play a big part of Connacht Rugby. Once the season settles back in we are going to see some huge benefits.”



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TO LIMERICK THROUGH LANSDOWNE AND LLANELLI

IRELAND'S LATEST CAP PREPARES FOR THE NEXT INSTALMENT OF HIS CAREER WITH MUNSTER RUGBY

TADHG BEIRNE

It's not often that people get too excited about a scrum-cap. But the appearance of a luminous blue one on a wet Melbourne evening in June was eagerly awaited. Despite plying his trade outside of Ireland, Tadhg Beirne was instantly recognisable to the Irish faithful looking on from sunnier climes in the Northern Hemisphere.

Ever since wreaking havoc against Leinster in the Pro12 last year, Beirne's first international cap has been something of an inevitability. A colossal performance in the subsequent Grand Final further cemented his burgeoning reputation which continued to blossom into 2018. Although the Scarlets came up short in May, Beirne's own performances were never anything but

impressive. His international debut against the Wallabies was yet another moment to cherish on his meteoric rise, but he is quick to acknowledge the wider benefits of the tour.

"It was actually a great way to meet a few of the Munster boys," Beirne says of his time in Australia. "I'd known a few of them through the Ireland U20's and I knew Andrew Conway when he was at Leinster. But when I might have gone to Limerick in the past, I wouldn't have been comfortable picking up the phone to them, if that makes sense.

Having gone on tour though, I'd be happy to catch them for a coffee when I get down there – and I intend to. That is going to be huge for me in terms of settling in at Munster."

While Beirne's future lies down south, his star remains on a northward trajectory. It is an entirely different place to that in which he found himself just two years ago. Travelling to Llanelli in the hope of resurrecting a flagging career, Beirne knew nobody and was undoubtedly daunted by the prospect. Scarlets were similarly unsure. His reputation as a talented but injury-prone lock preceded him and stints in the Welsh semi-professional ranks awaited.

But this was nothing new to the Eadestown forward. With his progress at Leinster severely hampered by injury, the imminent expiration of his contract became a serious concern. To salvage his career, he acknowledged that he was in dire need of game time – a stark contrast to the 2,268 minutes he amassed last season.

"I was clinging to my professional career at that stage. I always seemed to get injured at the wrong time and when I'd get back, other lads would be ahead of me in the queue. I wasn't getting much of a look-in. Time was running out and it wasn't a great place to be in.

"At Leinster, you could tell early on whether you were going to be involved at the weekend. Some lads were a bit disappointed when they were released to play with their club, but I had to see it as an opportunity to play well – so getting up for those games was never an issue. The more you play the greater the chance is of playing well.

"Lansdowne knew what I could do so they were more than happy to use me whenever possible and I managed to rack up a few games with them. Leinster obviously kept an eye on me and I managed to get a short-term contract on the back of my form. Ultimately, that put me in the shop window for Scarlets, so I've a lot to thank the Ulster Bank League for."

With the disbanding of the B&I Cup announced in April, many believe that the domestic game will be the chief beneficiary. Although provincial A-team fixtures will remain part of the rugby calendar, there is a determination to avoid clashes with AIL games.

"With provincial players playing with their clubs on a more regular basis, the standard is only going to get higher," Beirne maintains. "The B&I Cup was a nice avenue for lads already in the system to impress their coaches, but there probably weren't enough games there for them and they were parachuted in for AIL games which wasn't easy for anybody.

"From a broader perspective, it's also a chance for others to impress as the provincial staff will be out



and about keeping an eye on their players. During my time at Lansdowne, several lads got picked up at what might be considered a late stage in their career – the likes of Craig Ronaldson, Matt Healy and Marty Moore. Mark Roache and Foster Horan are playing for the Ireland Sevens now too. Their experience and performances at AIL level got them to where they are."

Indeed, a number have availed of the platform provided by the Ulster Bank League. The latest to profit is the Ulster Bank League's Division 1A Player of the Year, Neil Cronin. The Garryowen man had a brief taste of top-level rugby while at Munster in 2014/2015, but his development stalled, and he returned to his teaching studies. Three years on, Cronin has been given a second chance by the province with some outstanding performances bringing him back into focus.

While there is an undoubted step-up, Beirne believes that one of the greatest challenges he has faced career was in asserting himself on the domestic stage. Playing against players who never had a shot at a professional career, Beirne often felt the brunt of a few tough encounters. But it's all part of the game.

"In my second year at Lansdowne we began to do a bit of training with the senior side. For some reason, Mike Ruddock (head coach) spotted me and began to pay some interest and from there he began to bleed me into the senior side. I think my first game was in Limerick and there was a moment's silence before the game. I remember looking across and a lot of the boys were twice the size of me. The physicality was something I had never experienced before, but after a few games you get used to it and brace yourself!"

The Thomond Park roar is another new experience that awaits Beirne. He may have heard it before, but from now on it will be willing him on. It is an exciting time. "I'm heading to Limerick this week to sort a place to live," Beirne tells us. "It's going to be a big change for me. The culture at Munster is unique and I can't wait to see it and feel it for myself as a Munster player. I can't wait to get going."

“At Leinster, you could tell early on whether you were going to be involved at the weekend. Some lads were a bit disappointed when they were released to play with their club, but I had to see it as an opportunity to play well



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND/BDO ROOKIE CAMP

The newest recruits to the Irish rugby system are given an induction into the professional game in Ireland.

In July, the inaugural Rugby Players Ireland/BDO Rookie Camp took place at Druids Glen Hotel & Golf Resort. Supported by the IRFU, new Academy players from each of the four provinces were invited to participate in an induction programme hosted by the representative body for professional players in the country.

Led by Marcus Horan, a Player Development Manager at the association, the two-day camp introduced players to various aspects of a career in the game. Off-field development was a recurring theme throughout with modules on financial planning, media engagement, behavioural attitudes and leadership all featuring. The session also provided players with an opportunity to hear what it takes to be a professional rugby player in Ireland with Joe Schmidt and former Irish captain Jamie Heaslip in attendance to share their own respective experiences of the game.

Former Munster and Ireland player Marcus Horan explained the purpose of the camp: "In my own experience, I have learned that the education of players is crucial if they are to survive in what is a unique professional environment. Through this programme we have been able to highlight some of the issues that they are likely to face in the coming weeks and months. We have also been able to put the first building blocks in place to equip them with the skills required for the future, whether that lies in the sport or not."

IRFU High Performance Manager, Colin McEntee said, "The IRFU are delighted to support this initiative. This programme

provides a unique opportunity by bringing together players and provincial Academy managers from the four provinces, offering critical education and information on holistic development and player responsibility.

"It also offers great stimulus to the players, which provides greater self-awareness and therefore highlighting future individual development plans. Together with Rugby Players Ireland, we will continue to support all Academy players with their individual off field development plans throughout their Academy cycle."

Speaking about BDO's involvement in the programme, Ciarán Medlar, Head of Tax Services, said, "With a dedicated sports and entertainment advisory unit at BDO, I have seen at first hand how athletes can become embroiled in their career and leave everything else to chance. In the delivery of this Rookie Camp, we have been able to stress the importance of education and personal development and ensure that these players are given every opportunity to fulfil their undoubted potential both on and off the field."

Recent retiree Jamie Heaslip also added, "Thankfully, I was fortunate to have enjoyed a long career in the game. I have many great memories, but also a few painful ones. I was delighted to have the opportunity to get in front of the future of Irish rugby and share a few tips that I would have appreciated when I was starting out. Of course, the game was in a very different place at that time. Taking learnings from the past, the Rugby Players Ireland/BDO Rookie Camp is a great initiative that will put these players in a strong position to progress."

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ICONIC
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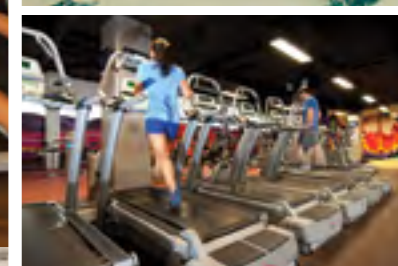
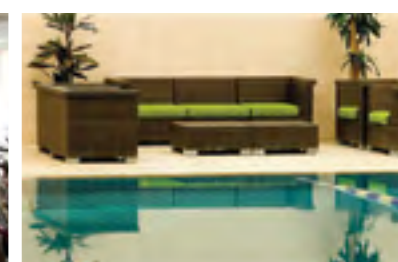
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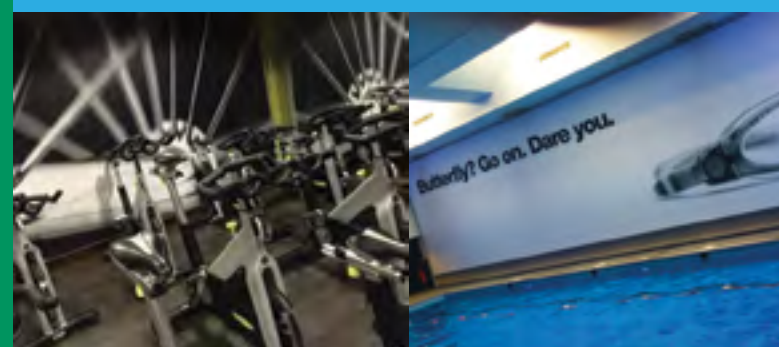
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HITTING THE BOTTLE

ALAN DYMOCK OF RUGBY WORLD TAKES AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT HOW SERIOUS ISSUES WITH ALCOHOL CAN BECOME A NIGHTMARISH SECRET IN THE LIVES OF SOME ELITE RUGBY PLAYERS

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Illustrations: Jamie Latchford

James Holbeck played for the Wallabies seven times. But while his injury-hit career ended early, who knows what the centre could have done had it not been for one person: his alter ego 'Mad Jimmy'.

After a few run-ins earlier in his career, he recalls an incident in 1997 when his Test aspirations were directly affected. "I was warned by Rod Macqueen on a Wallaby trip to South America not to go out in the week of selection," he says.

"Unfortunately, I compromised on the very thing I'd dreamt of my whole life – playing for Australia – to go out for a few drinks... Which meant I walked into the hotel as the sun was rising. I was ultimately sent home from the tour."

Self-control was hard for Holbeck to master. Now 44 and teetotal, he helps young players prepare to transition out of the game, working with Rugby Union Players Australia (RUPA). He's had time to consider why his lifestyle went the way it did.

He explains: "At first, alcohol was something I used to feel more confident, then to be someone else, then to escape the pain of heartache. Then it simply became the role friends expected me to play."

It all came to a head when his playing days were over, as he wrestled with the ghosts of unfulfilled dreams. "I had a particularly ugly night out which left me needing a trip to hospital. The next week a friend pulled me aside and said: 'Mate, you're like a dancing monkey that people wind up with alcohol and watch dance 'til you fall over. Then they laugh at you.'"

There were other incidents Holbeck is ashamed of. The brutal truth was what he needed. Mad Jimmy was resigned to the trash. Now he educates young people about the impact of their choices and the fact that they even have any. Because youngsters can feel helpless. And there are some elite players who will be battling through this themselves.

UNDER THE SURFACE

Hinting at a dark trade, one medic who has worked across professional sport tells Rugby World, anonymously: "Mixed into the bog-standard, end-of-season press release I have seen players who have had issues with drink or drugs being described as having a 'bad back' or a chronic issue.

"I've seen players who have gone into rehab and been transferred (to other teams). I'm not entirely sure how well disclosed their medical history has been. This is in union and league."

While no one wants players' personal medical history to be shared freely, we are being told there is pressure to axe some with a drink problem as soon as possible. No time to fix the human being, a bad few clubs have punted the issue.

The medic continues: "It's not 'let's look after the player.' It's 'let's ignore and bin them off as soon as we can.' It's treated like an infectious disease. They think it's like chickenpox and everyone can catch it. So (teams) end up doing entirely the wrong thing, isolating the player and making them more lonely, which will never solve the problem.

"It's caveat emptor – 'buyer beware.' The (old) club has no undertaking to declare anything. Medical history comes directly from the player and everything else you'd hope is caught in a medical.

"But there are some things you wouldn't routinely look for. Some people outsource medicals and are mainly interested in hearts, lungs, joints and scars – things that are fairly obvious and light up for you, in terms of checking for insurance purposes.

"You wouldn't normally test for liver function or take a hair or urine sample and dip for drugs. Because it's expensive, all of these things. You're more worried that someone's knee is going to be dodgy or that they can't flex a hip or raise their arm above their head. These are things people are worried about, rather than any addiction."

With this we step into the national discussion on mental health. Addiction or alcohol dependency issues must be considered a mental health problem. But still for so many out there, drinking to excess is simply weakness.

Promoting any alternative view begins with accepting that rugby players are not superheroes. All last season, motivational speaker Tom Fitzsimons was addressing Premiership clubs on behalf of the Rugby Players' Association (RPA) about his experiences with alcohol addiction. He also mentors a handful of anonymous elite rugby players.

Fitzsimons says: "We have to be careful that we don't take away the mystique of a rugby player, but we also need to get across that these men are flawed like any other man."

When Fitzsimons speaks, his story is arresting. He is brutally detailed in the description of his horrors. He tells of setting out to prove he was tougher than his father, who died of alcohol poisoning at 39, following a rare foray into drinking. And how he dived headlong into a heavy-drinking culture at 14. He rattles off a catalogue of incidents from his time as a "horrible, violent drunk".

Despite having a good job in the construction industry, it all finally came crashing down for him at 31, when he found his bank account empty and his partner, who had tolerated so much hell, finally decided to leave with the kids.

Forced to face reality, he got fit – training for physical feats became the way he filled the afternoons that had been spent in the pub before – and decided to be honest about his past. Three years into sobriety, he did a presentation for a group of 'troublemakers' in a Barnsley school.

He saw that his story had hit home.

Explaining one of the myriad reasons why elite sportspeople could turn to the bottle to cope, Fitzsimons talks of the "bridge of expectation" – when so much is expected of you, but your sense of self-worth is so far below that level of external belief, something has to give.

"My bridge of expectation was so high, I self-destructed and drank myself into oblivion," he says before giving an example from rugby. "I heard about this player who was put forward to play at international level and he just completely blew up.

“It's treated like an infectious disease. They think it's like chickenpox and everyone can catch it. So (teams) end up doing entirely the wrong thing, isolating the player and making them more lonely, which will never solve the problem.”



People thought it would be exactly what he needed.

“In fact, it was the worst thing you could have done to him because you hadn’t built up his confidence. That’s what we’ve got to work on. We have to work on the player’s self-belief, rather than everyone’s expectations of them.”

Fitzsimons knows there is a lot more to it than just that. Dr Philip Hopley is a consultant psychiatrist and the managing director of Cognacity, who run the 24-hour helpline for RPA members concerned about their mental wellbeing. He lays out some reasons.

“In this kind of space we’re often seeing individuals who might be self-medicating (for) some kind of emotional stress or life challenge,” he says. “So, they don’t like the way that they’re feeling and transition would be a very common life situation.

“That might be dealing with injury, retiring from the sport, moving from one club to another, going through a process where you are working your way back or maybe you’ve been deselected, and those sorts of triggers can cause unpleasant emotions.

“A lot of young men struggle with their emotional vocabulary and guess what, they’ve had social experiences in the past where they drink a few units of alcohol which tends to help them relax, tends to help take their mind off what’s going on, and so they use this as an unhelpful and unhealthy coping strategy.”

Jason Robinson knows how this goes. The World Cup winner has spoken often about his days of drinking while a young star for Wigan Warriors in league.

Robinson says he masked his habit of going out up to four nights a week before playing, by performing so well. He wonders “how on earth did I do it?” when asked how he maintained such a level while drinking heavily. But he is sure of the reasons why he went out.

He was under a huge amount of pressure to perform from a young age, with pressure to fit in, and then there was significant friction in his personal life. Without a good support base, he would say yes to a night out with all-comers so he could avoid his “pain”. When he woke up, the pain was back.

The legendary stepper posits that in the future he would love to see an independent mental health professional being embedded into elite rugby clubs; someone who gets to know the team well enough that they can sense when something is off about any of them, but who does not answer to the club.

The reason for this is the fear of contracts being ripped up. Robinson tells Rugby World this is a genuine motivator to swallow your problem and never tell anyone. Our anonymous medic talks of a reticence amongst players to discuss such issues because reputations can kill a career.

When our medic talks of isolation, this is also borne out in everyday life. According to Dr Matthew Dunn, a senior lecturer on public health at Australia’s

Deakin University, you are conditioned to feel apart and also that there are few shared experiences, even with addicts.

“With the support group I’m involved with, it’s very shocking to the guys when they realise that they’re not the only ones,” he says. “They are not unique and almost every session we remind everyone: you’re not a snowflake, you’re as average as everyone around this table. It normalises it more, so that people who feel like they have a problem can seek assistance.”

But Dunn also points out that with sportspeople we can fall into the trap of making heroes out of the few we hear speak out: “Not everyone is going to have that redemption-type story.”

DRAGGED UP FRONT

Fitzsimons says he has suffered the stigma of being ‘out’ as an alcoholic. He believes, despite the good that Alcoholics Anonymous can do for some, that the default of burying your drinking issue deep inside and staying anonymous will ultimately hold our society back.

There’s more. He says: “I would like to see in my lifetime that we get to a point where we have more people – and not just like me – that are very passionate about promoting recovery. We will finally get to a point where any player can go, ‘I’m struggling with this guys, I’ve got an addiction and I need to get it sorted.’

“I don’t think that’s in the next ten or 15 years. A few things I’d like to change before that happens. The anonymous thing has to drop and the clubs’ reaction will have to change as well.”

Of course there are reasons almost no one wants to come out. There is a fear of being hounded in the media and also crushing your resale value – or contracts getting ripped up, as mentioned above.

One man who knows how hard it is to deal with the public glare is Zac Guildford. Having become an All Black at 20, Guildford was admitting to issues with alcoholism just a few years later. He would take years came to terms with his father’s sudden death – he passed away in the stands at the Junior World Cup. At the same time he was thrust into an intense national spotlight. Until he was into his late 20s, his lifestyle overshadowed his playing career.

“Our world is supposed to be full of rainbows and sunshine and we’re supposed to earn good money, but it’s not the reality at all,” Guildford says of hidden stresses. “I see it as especially hard for rugby players, because the stereotype is of us as somebody that’s not supposed to have problems. So there’s a stigma around it.”

But how hard is it regaining ‘trust’ when you’ve had such public issues?

“It’s been really hard. After losing my Waratahs

contract in 2016, I went back and I played rugby for free for about a year. I was actually working on my grandparents’ farm, then took up a job in Hamilton so I could play some sevens, which led to me getting a semi-professional contract.

“I thought that something would then pop up soon after in terms of Super Rugby, but no one out there wanted to trust me again. So I went back to where I was a year before and I played sevens again and then was lucky that the owner of Nevers (in France’s ProD2) had a bit of faith in me and he gave me an option if I wanted to go and join the club. It was the only option on the table so I took it.”

Guildford’s determination to salvage a respectable career in the game is to be admired. However, as the top end of the sport turns away from him, the back-three player feels he should give a warning. He acknowledges that treatment of mental health issues has come a long way in the game, but he feels there is still more to do.

A few, he says, still play lip service to the idea. He would like to see more done within clubs in terms of professional development and “tapping into the brain”.

If anything else, it may help some pros when the game is finally over.

WHEN THE LIGHTS GO OUT

Due to the stigma and the risk to future earnings, finding current players to offer up their personal (anonymous) experiences is understandably tough. Nevertheless, several people contacted considered ex-players an at-risk group.

“There are many players who have to deal with social issues after rugby,” says 37-cap former Springboks wing Stefan Terblanche. He represents South Africa Rugby Legends, a non-profit group of ex-Boks who band together for events but also, it transpires, to keep an eye on each other’s wellbeing after retirement.

“We did a study in 2015,” Terblanche continues. “We did a questionnaire and it was anonymous, but we found that (retired professional rugby players) do struggle with anxiety, sleeplessness, alcohol abuse and eating disorders – much more than the average person of the same age.

“There is certainly a correlation there between retirement and these social issues that ex-players have to deal with. We see it more and more in South Africa because there’s financial strain on you. You earn £10,000 a month, for instance, and the next month all of a sudden you have to find a way of making some money. If you make some bad decisions it puts you under pressure and before you know it the little bit of money you had put away during your career can easily dry up.”

Terblanche says only a few members have sought help, but he is certain there are others out there. The problem is that these are hard, proud men. And while money is held up as a regular sore spot for ex-players, it can be more existential.

At Rugby Players Ireland, Dr Ella McCabe is Player Development Manager. On the causes for concern with former players, she says: “I think one major piece we’ve noted is that when people’s entire identity is focused around being a rugby player, when that part of their life finishes up, it can feel like there’s a big void. It’s a risky time in terms of what will fill that void and all the coping strategies can kick in at that point.

“Our whole programme is about players developing their identity off the pitch right the way through their career. It’s the same around the sense of belonging because exiting the game can be quite a lonely experience.”

While Dunn notes the fact that not all open alcoholics get happy

endings, and Fitzsimons acknowledges that many of us are conditioned to internalise anxieties, both understand the power of shared stories. It can even be more powerful to hear from those who blew their chance to play at the top level.

Many would take notice when Peter Mirrielees says: “My drinking left a path of destruction and with a competitive streak being added with alcohol, things weren’t going to work out.”

Having resolved to change his life three years ago, the former Otago hooker, 35, feels he has taken command of his mindset. And the reason behind that? He felt like the lifestyle he had cultivated for himself would ultimately lead to his family choosing to abandon him.

Mirrielees opens up: “Firstly, I put myself into drug, alcohol and addiction counselling where I found the source of what made me drink the way I did. Then I went from around 200 friends to about ten and I had to change my surroundings, with everything focused on keeping my family together.

“I lost my chance of a full-time Highlanders contract because of my drinking. But once I got rid of emotional stressors I did not need to get wasted.”



Now running a 24-hour gym with his wife, the father of three has offered confidential lifestyle advice to players, friends and clients. But having recognised there were deeper issues he had previously ignored, he knows it is the emotional torment that some try to drown out with booze.

He asks straight out if you would stand by as a mate leant heavily on the bottle, saying: "Are they trying to deal with something? Are we a good enough friend to sit someone down and say, 'Hey, what's going on?' before they go down their own road of destruction?"

HELP AT HAND

Most often, people seek professional help because those around them – partners or relatives – are negatively impacted by the drinker's lifestyle and cannot take it any more. Sometimes, rarely, help is sought because someone has crossed the line, legally.

A whole host of player associations – MyPlayers South Africa, RUPA, RPI, the Welsh Rugby Players' Association and New Zealand Rugby Players' Association – have Player Development Managers in place. Most of these have access to confidential counselling. On the Islands, Pacific Rugby Players push education programmes whilst hustling to set up better services for members in France.

Meanwhile, Dr McCabe and Rugby Players Ireland have worked with International Rugby Players and World Rugby to develop a mental health module for team doctors that will provide basic education on what mental health means, common signs, symptoms (including of alcohol use disorders), screening and referral pathways.

Having made alcohol a big focus in the past season, and staged seminars on problem gambling the year before, the RPA intend to have a broader focus on addictive behaviours next season. But they are keen to point out that their funding for any future services comes from the Restart charity.

Hopley is pleased that the RPA's recent 'Lift the Weight' campaign generated an increase in players calling their line for help. More referrals have come from club doctors too. But he also reiterates that the viability of any add-on services comes down to money.

Every players' body mentioned above would love to provide even better resources. And even then, not all major nations have a truly independent body.

In March, the Scottish Rugby Union launched their 'Rugby for Life' scheme. Following a mandate from the board to do more for players' mental wellbeing, their HR department utilised "advice and expertise from a cross-section of mental health charities, professional organisations and academic experts" in order to "better understand the impact of mental health issues and learn from examples of best practice".

As commendable as this is, many in Scotland feel something is missing without the players having their own body, separate from the union. "I'm aware of a few serious incidents within Scottish rugby," one former pro player, who is still heavily involved in the game, tells Rugby World.

"There needs to be an independent Scottish Players' Association – an RPA-style organisation. Especially for those in professional or semi-professional rugby, like the upcoming Super 6. There isn't anything like the excellent RPA here in Scotland.

"Outside of rugby, life happens – deaths, divorces, children, sickness, relationships. What needs to change is the attitude from the SRU that an SPA organisation is a bad idea that wrests control from them. Such an organisation would give longevity to more players and they would be in a better mental and physical state to give their all for their club and their country."

**This is an abridged version of an article that appeared in the August edition of Rugby World Magazine. It is reproduced here with the permission of the author.*



CONCLUSION

THINGS ARE moving fast in the mental health sphere in rugby union. Hard work already being done must be applauded while current or future initiatives must be given the oxygen they need to succeed.

But the urge to pretend everyone who needs help is getting it must be resisted. Depression, anxiety, fear, addiction... these cannot be grounds for a shredded contract or a trade made in bad faith while a player is still in need of help. And players: there is help out there.

- Rugby Players Ireland members are encouraged to make use of their Player Wellbeing Service. To access support: wellbeing@rugbyplayersireland.ie or contact your Player Development Manager.
- For evidence-based advice on alcohol and information on the range of public supports for alcohol problems in Ireland go to <http://www.askaboutalcohol.ie/> or phone the HSE Alcohol Helpline 1800 459 459.
- In Northern Ireland go to <http://www.drugsandalcoholni.info/> or call Lifeline 0808 808 8000.

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DENIS HURLEY

WE GRILL THE LATEST ADDITION TO THE RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND STAFF!

Denis, can you describe your new role at Rugby Players Ireland?

The title of my role is Operations Manager and essentially the core of my role is to facilitate the flow and better use of information within our organisation and membership. I will be a key point of contact for players for all legal, insurance or contractual issues. Regarding retired players, I am aiming to develop a “Past Player Social & Business Network” in each of the provinces which will both connect/re-connect past players in a more structured and useable format. This in time will hopefully become a natural resource for players transitioning out of the game and for those looking to widen their database of contacts for their own careers. Other areas of the role will include working alongside Simon Keogh (CEO) in all negotiations with the IRFU as well as continuing and developing commercial relationships and helping to coordinate Rugby Players Ireland events.

What are your aims for the role?

The one thing that I want to focus on is to develop this past player network which I hope will offer support, guidance and work contacts for transitioning players when they go through the process of retiring from the game. Every former professional that I have spoken to sees that the retirement process as being the main area that they feel could be supported a lot better and I aim to put in place such structures that may be aid this in some small way to begin with.

You have been living abroad for some time, was the time right to move back to Ireland?

In many ways, I probably need to explain why my wife and I made the decision to move in the first place. I had been with Munster for 12 years and living in Cork all that time so when I retired I felt I needed some time away to establish myself in the working world. My game-plan was to be still in the

game for a further 2 years which would allow me to get my plans in place but when circumstances forced me to hang up the boots, I still wasn't sure what I wanted to do. We had some close friends and family living in Dubai, so we saw it as a great opportunity to get away and to get some real-life experience in a hot climate. Why Not?!

My wife and I enjoyed the new adventure. I got a lot of great work experience out of Dubai, but we knew after a year that it wasn't the place for us as a family in the long run, so we are very happy to be home in Ireland!

Was it difficult to develop a network in a new country?

The time away in Dubai was tough going as it was an unstable economic environment, businesses were and still are on edge as to what way the economy is going in the short-term never mind in the long run. For somebody like me, without any real work experience since I finished college, I had to adapt as much as possible. Being thrown in the deep end, landing into Dubai without work, meant I had to find an income sooner than later to support my family. Nothing like a bit of reality to give you a kick up the arse and get out meeting people. I contacted any and every contact I was given and tapped up any contact of line of interest that I came across. Is it difficult in a new country?

Yes, but there's always an Irish network to get started with!

How did you find the transition out of the professional game when you retired in 2016?

I felt I had been left go from Munster when I had been struggling with an injury for 6 months so there was little love lost between myself and the professional game. That alone was a hard pill to swallow and took me some time to figure it all out in my head as well as plan for my next career and what that was going to look like. I got into coaching with Dolphin RFC and with the Dubai Exiles which I found was a great focus and enjoyment of being back involved in a team environment as well as throwing on the boots again a few times.

Did you stay in contact with your former teammates?

The reality is that the wheel keeps turning regardless of whether you are in or out of it. I found it difficult to have a meaningful conversation with current players as they couldn't comprehend what I was going through. It might sound selfish, but it can in some small part be compared to losing a loved one. I found more solace in speaking with other retired players as they knew exactly what it is like to lose the structured environment and the opportunity to play the sport you love at a professional level.

Did you maintain your fitness?

For the first 6 months I kept active in the gym and out running...since then not so much! I'm making a conscious effort to get out and do something 2/3 times per week as a minimum since I'm back home.

Did you study whilst playing?

I completed a Commerce degree in UCC and then I finished a Diploma in Accounting and Corporate Finance the week of the 2008 Heineken Cup final. Looking back now I would have done probably a Masters before we had our first child. Time is luxury that is very limited now!

Had you any dealings with IRUPA (as it was)?

I'm probably like most players in that it wasn't until I knew my time was coming to an end that I properly engaged with a Player Development Manager (PDM). Derval O'Rourke was the Munster PDM during that time, followed shortly by Marcus Horan which was great in a sense that they happened to both be former professional sportspersons and knew what the experience was like first-hand.

After being through retirement myself and now



joining RPI, I can see that there's a lot that I can put into practice that can help support the roles of PDM's. I can guarantee that most guys, like myself, can retire with no real plan in place and need a job sooner than later so lean on the PDM's for job prospects. The reality is that most jobs will come down to contacts and connections and the PDM's main role is to offer career guidance rather than being a recruiter. We all have family, friends, AIL club connections, etc., but possibly the most beneficial network for retired players are the guys who have retired from the professional game, who are out working across many different industries for a number of years and, maybe more importantly, understand what transitioning players are going through.

Do you have any regrets from your playing career?

The big one for me is that after having our first child later in my career, it put my job as a professional rugby player into perspective. I put so much focus on doing things “right” that I look back at how I lost along the way that it still is just a sport and as a result of this perspective I didn't play as freely and as confident in myself as I did when I first started out.

One guy and former teammate who has hit new heights in his career is Keith Earls. From reading and listening to some of his interviews, I can see that he is in a great headspace and getting the absolute maximum out of himself. The simple reason is that he puts rugby down the list of priorities in his life, behind his family. When he makes a mistake on the field he can quickly put it into perspective that it's not a major incident in the greater scheme of things.

This is the mindset that I would have loved to have played with – free from my own fear.

Any particular highlights that stand out?

Winning the Heineken Cup in 2008 in my rookie season was a definite highlight. Along the way we had some really satisfying wins in Europe on the road and the game where I felt we played the most accomplished performance was against Northampton in the final pool game in 2012. There is great satisfaction in beating a strong opposition whilst putting together an almost complete performance for the full 80 minutes. It's rare.

If you were starting out in the game again, what advice would you give to a young Denis Hurley?

- Live the game but love it for what it is – a game.
- Get a lot more work experience done during days off and during holidays. Experience different companies and different departments, and this way you can at least figure out what you DON'T like.
- Make connections with people in business and stay in touch. You never know how or when you may need to call on them for advice, support or even a job.

PASSING IT BACK WITH 100 WORLD LEGENDS

THE 2013 GRAND SLAM WINNER IS SET TO TRAVEL INTO SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND HELP DEVELOP THE GAME IN THE REGION.

GRACE DAVITT

Playing rugby opens doors to a world of opportunity. A career in the sport brings with it opportunities to travel the world, to meet new people and to make a difference. While some choose to close that door behind them once their time is up, many continue to knock others down.

Since retiring from the game in 2014, Grace Davitt has recognised that she must make the most of anything that comes her way while she still can. For the former Irish centre though, it is all about giving back.

Since her retirement, Davitt has worked tirelessly to develop the women's game in Ireland. This work will now stretch further afield when she travels to Laos in South-East Asia as a representative of 100 World Legends, an organisation that comprises many former international players who support a number of different charities across the globe.

"As a female rugby player in particular," Davitt begins, "you really have to push yourself forward to make the most of the opportunities that are out there, otherwise you just fade away. We spend so much of our time playing rugby that most are happy to return to their 9-5 jobs and be done with it, but if you want to stay

involved or do certain things you have to remain fresh in people's minds."

Following an impressive career for both Ulster and Ireland, Davitt was contacted by 100 World Legends to join the Irish contingent of participants that includes former Irish internationals Paddy Johns and David Corkery. Through its link with Pass it Back, an Australian-based Sport for Development programme that uses rugby to equip young people with important life skills, Davitt continues to make an impact akin to her robust playing style.

Having been part of the 2013 Grand Slam success before Ireland's World Cup adventure in 2014, Davitt chose to retire from the sport when it was arguably at its highest ebb in the country. A member of the first Irish senior side to defeat New Zealand, it might have been assumed that she would continue to contribute to Ireland's rising fortune. Alas, enough was enough.

"My body was done. I took a lot of knocks over the years – several serious hip and knee injuries;

so, the way I see it, I was lucky to play at such a high-level at all. I carried on training after my retirement and I suppose I could have played on, but the injuries took their toll and I had to opt for reconstructive surgery on my knee. I've been told that I'm never going to play again at any level, so that's that.

"People always ask if I regret calling it a day when I did because Ireland went on to win the Six Nations in 2015, but the time was right. It wasn't just about going out to play those five games, it was about getting up early in the morning to train, training in the evening, missing family events, managing injuries, training through Christmas, prioritising rugby over everything else. I'd felt I'd put my life on the line for long enough and I no longer had the desire. I had played my part."

While her boots may no longer be required, Davitt continues to play an important role in the development of the game in Ireland in a variety of guises. For instance, the 2017 Women's Rugby World Cup reached an unprecedented digital audience with Davitt's insights from the RTE commentary box a regular feature on the clips that traversed the globe. Affording the women's game such profile in the country for a sustained period of time is an undoubted legacy from her time in green.

"Obviously, it was amazing to host the World Cup and it was brilliant to watch as a spectacle. It would have been an honour to play in front of a home crowd, but as selfish as it might seem, a disappointing tournament for Ireland cemented my decision to bow out when I did. I had a poor tournament in 2010 but I managed to find some form in 2014, starting in every game. That brought me back to my peak level of performance in 2006. To do so after eight years was amazing. I was happy to finish on that personal high and move aside to let the game grow and develop through a new cycle of players."

Upon her retirement Davitt moved straight into a coaching role with Cooke RFC while she also continued to put a lot of work into the game behind the scenes with Ulster Rugby in an effort to raise standards in the province. While last year was her first without any direct involvement in the game for 13 years, this season she will return to take the reins at Malone RFC whom she will attempt to guide to the All-Ireland League.

"I was very glad of a break. I found that coaching was almost a bigger commitment than playing. You're planning sessions and because off all the other jobs that come with running a club, you get sucked in. I spoke to Fiona Coghlan about it when I began to fall out of love with the game. We decided that it's ok to take some time out. I'm feeling fresh now and looking forward to a new challenge."

Of course, it's not the only challenge that awaits Davitt this year. In January, Davitt's coaching skills will also be put to the test when she will travel to Laos. With the help of sponsorship raised through the coming together of former international players for exhibition games, programmes are currently being rolled out in the region using rugby as an educational tool.

"As a player I learned some amazing skills through the game. It improved my confidence, I began to enjoy public speaking, I developed leadership skills and I honed the ability to work within a team. But I already had the fortune of having a good education behind me, something these children won't have had. Learning the skills that rugby helps to develop gives them a chance of progressing in their lives. We also use it to increase their awareness of violence in their homes, on the streets, threats to their safety, women's rights... stuff they don't know to be any different.

"It's remarkable how even from such a young age the children want to move on from their villages and do this and that, but they appreciate that they have to grow as people first. They cling onto your every word, even though we need an interpreter. They're eager to learn so everything you say they will want to implement. They are like sponges and want to learn as much as they can. It's very refreshing. In Ireland, there is so much rugby that everyone has become a bit of an expert and they question the knowledge you might impart.

"Rugby was something that was never encouraged in the region," Davitt explains, "so there was never an assumption that it was a predominantly male sport. All the boys play soccer and the girls simply saw rugby as a different game that they could throw their hand to. Off the back of the work being done by Pass it Back with the support of 100 World Legends, the Laos Rugby Federation was set up. Some great work is being done but it is interesting that when their representatives go to Asia Rugby meetings they see a room full of men in the top positions and they don't understand it! It's a very interesting way of looking at how things can develop."

"I was very glad of a break. I found that coaching was almost a bigger commitment than playing. You're planning sessions and because of all the other jobs that come with running a club, you get sucked in."



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND ANNUAL GOLF CLASSIC 2018

MEMBERS AND CORPORATE PARTNERS JOIN FORCES IN THE GLORIOUS SUNSHINE AT DRUIDS GLEN HOTEL & GOLF RESORT

After last year's deluge, the Rugby Players Ireland umbrellas seemed entirely necessary. Box loads travelled to Druids Glen in anticipation of a downpour that ultimately never materialised. Instead, bottles of sun cream were much sought after on what was a glorious day on the Druids Glen Golf Course.

Speaking before he headed out on the course, Rob Kearney felt that there was a good buzz in the clubhouse, before drawing light on the ruthless undertone. "Some boys have been flat out," the Rugby Players Ireland Chairman alleged. "I think four or five came down last night. They got some lessons, stayed over and were up early this morning. The competitiveness has gone through the roof this year!"

There seemed little of the sort as players accompanied their golf partners to their buggies. Of course, a scramble format dictates that a well-working team represents the best chance of success. No doubt there were occasions when the traditionally individualist golfing will-to-win shone through, but ultimately the Rugby Players Ireland Annual Golf Classic provides an opportunity for our commercial partners to mingle with the players that they help to support throughout the season.

"The opportunities that an event like this offers to the players is superb," says Denis Hurley, Operations Manager at Rugby Players Ireland. "Every guy here is competitive in amongst their team. Overall, our corporate sponsors help to support the organisation to run, operate, grow and develop in the direction that we want to best support the players. There's a lot of important factors here but



above all else it's an enjoyable day out that people get a lot of value out of."

Recent retiree Tommy Bowe agreed, adding that it is also a chance to support the work of his association with whom he has worked very closely in recent times. "The work they [Rugby Players Ireland] did for me in helping me ease into retirement is something I'm hugely appreciative of. Retiring after playing rugby for 14 years is obviously going to be a bit of a shock, although it's great at the minute because I'm watching everybody in pre-season (which looks horrible) while I'm off playing golf days like this!

"I'm keen to anything to help Rugby Players Ireland in whatever way I can. They've been brilliant to me throughout my career and hopefully meeting some business people here and other contacts might help me in my life after rugby as well."

Following a delightful lunch back at Druids Glen Hotel, Shane Byrne took to probing Leinster duo James Lowe and Dave Kearney with a few questions before the honours list was revealed:

1st: Miele & Rhys Ruddock

2nd: Wilson Hartnell & Ciaran Frawley

3rd: Vodafone & Ross Molony

Longest Drive: Mick Kearney

Closest to the Pin: Scott Fardy



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DALY TASKMASTER

MUNSTER AND IRELAND SEVENS PLAYER SHANE DALY ON BALANCING STUDIES, INTERNSHIPS AND JOURNEYS ACROSS THE GLOBE.

SHANE DALY

The more things you do, the more you can do. Or so it would seem for Shane Daly.

A member of the Munster Academy, the UCC Finance student was on placement in the Corporate Tax Department at Ernst & Young in Dublin and you'd have thought he'd have little time for much else. However, in recent weeks Daly has played a prominent role for the Ireland Men's 7s side who have been blazing a trail through the rugby variant.

Having fallen short in their bid to qualify for the World Series in Hong Kong back in April, the Irish responded with an all-conquering display in the first leg of the 2018 Rugby Europe Grand Prix Series in Moscow a month later. It is the first step in a qualification process for the 2019 World Series with success in the Russian capital coming ahead of further legs in France, England and Poland.

Yet it has been their impressive showings on the elite stage in recent weeks that has thrust Daly and his teammates into the spotlight. Ireland claimed a bronze medal in London with some heroic displays (not least a 21-19 win over hosts England at the buzzer), while their fine form continued in both Paris and San Francisco where they took home the Challenge Trophy finishing ninth overall in the Rugby World Cup Sevens – ahead of six World Series core teams.

"We clearly proved to everyone that we're capable of being at that level," Daly

insists. "We had a big point to prove going into those competitions and we took enough scalps to prove it. We have come away with a lot from those experiences. Within our own group we always knew that we were as good as any team in the World Series, nobody else did. I think we've done something about that."

Having largely been under the radar since the programme was relaunched in 2015, Ireland have climbed from the very depths of the European 7s circuit to face some of the best sides in the world and have acquitted themselves well in doing so. The likes of Rory O'Loughlin, Adam Byrne, Nick Timoney and Alex Wootton have all played their part but now it is Daly and his teammates who have been charged with taking Ireland to the next stage. A stage that was always going to be the highest hurdle to scale.

"Teams like the Fijians are just incredible," Daly gushes. "They're at another level to any team that we would be used to. There's no doubt that

it is a big step, but we have to remind ourselves that even the World Series teams can't compete with those guys when they're on form. When we played them in Paris there were times when you just couldn't help but admire some of the things that they were doing.

"The thing is, we actually played very well against them!" the Munster centre exclaims. "We dominated the possession in Paris but they latched onto a few of our mistakes. It's a bit deflating when you're on top but you look at the scoreboard and see 20 points in the difference. Once they start getting away from you, there is no catching them. They are so clinical."

Clinical is a word you could also use to describe the Cork Con man as he goes about his day to day business. A recipient of the Rugby Players Ireland Player Development Bursary, Daly has been able to juggle his studies in Cork, Munster training in Limerick and Irish 7s duties in Dublin.

"There's a lot you have to take on board when you have those commitments," Daly says. "I needed a bit of help with my college fees, pay for accommodation in Dublin and I've needed a car to travel between them all. Without the Bursary, I would have been in quite a bit of trouble. It has been hugely beneficial to me this year in that it has taken a worry and pressure off my shoulders when so much has been going on besides."

Daly was also assisted by Marcus Horan, the Player Development Manager for Munster, when arranging for a Dublin based placement in January. While Ernst & Young benefitted from his application to work, Daly has also been able to push on with his 7s training owing to their flexibility ahead of an extremely busy period. Ireland returned to France for the second leg of their qualifying series before heading to San Francisco and the Rugby World Cup 7s in San Francisco in late July. It's probably not the summer he would have envisaged as a professional rugby player.

Rugby was not always in his sights though. A former student of the Presentation Brothers College in Cork, Daly was always a keen sportsman and very adept at a number of disciplines. Lining out for Bishopstown GAA, a turn



in the rebel red was more probable than possible. Perhaps this adaptability has made the transition into the 7s game that little bit easier?

"I would say that transferring across to 7s from the XV's game is actually tougher," Daly opines. "There's a lot more to the game than what you would make out from TV; more shape and structure and it isn't as off-the-cuff as people think. Defending is particularly tough, especially in figuring out your positioning. Often, someone will have 5-10 metres either side of you in which to beat you. That's not comfortable at first."

"On the other hand, there are huge elements of 7s rugby that can be transferred in the opposite direction. You get a lot of experience at some of the core elements of the game – rucking, tackling and passing. People assume you spend your time sidestepping and offloading, but the amount of time you spend passing a ball or tackling is so much more than XV's."

His ball-playing skills have certainly been demonstrated throughout his 7s career, including a monster 27m pass to release Ian Fitzpatrick in Hong Kong that picked up plenty of traction. Having developed through the XV's channels, Daly naturally has his sights on making the grade at Munster. However, given the aerobic nature of the sport, Daly has had to strike a fine balance to ensure that he remains in shape if Johann van Graan were to come calling. Indeed, that call first came in April when Ulster visited Thomond Park.

"I read a statistic that says there is three-times more high-speed running in a 7s session than there is in a XV's. We do a lot of work on the pitch and on watt bikes and there is less of a focus on gym work. Through my involvement with Munster I had built up my body weight, but with a lot more aerobic activity you're naturally going to lose a few pounds. I've had to learn how to manage my nutrition to ensure that my weight stays at the same level and that has been very beneficial when going between the codes."

Despite managing weight, time, studies and rest, Daly has also managed to be successful in all that he has put his hand to. Whether his future career lies in the office or on the field, you can be sure that he is going to thrive.

"We had a big point to prove going into those competitions and we took enough scalps to prove it. We have come away with a lot from those experiences. Within our own group we always knew that we were as good as any team in the World Series, nobody else did. I think we've done something about that."

INTO AFRICA

James Downey travels with Alan Kerins and the Inner Winner Institute to Zambia

As one of Kaoma's dangermen streaked past James Downey and bore down on goal, the former Leinster, Connacht and Munster centre despairingly cried 'offside!' in attempt to somehow put his opponent off.

Remarkably, the whistle blew, and Downey's wish was granted. But instead of protesting the belated decision, the would-be scorer stopped the ball with his bare feet, picked it up, and ran back to the Dubliner whom he had left in his wake.

"The respect that they have for each other is quite astounding," Downey says of the people he encountered on a recent trip to Zambia with the Alan Kerins Projects who are now in partnership with Self Help Africa.

"I mean, the ref was no more than 10 years old and he was blatantly giving ridiculous free-kicks in our favour all day! Nobody said a word to him – they just got on with it! They were a much better side so I probably took advantage of it where I could but we came away with a draw so it was worth it to some extent!"

That competitive streak is something inherent in a professional sportsman, or one who lives his life as such. The team that lined out to face the local villagers in Western Zambia had it in abundance.

Alongside Downey in defence was Seanie Buckley, a former captain of the Limerick footballers. Dublin dual-star Dotsy O'Callaghan was in the engine room, while Ronan Kennedy led the attack as he does for Leitrim throughout the year. Foremost amongst them however was Alan Kerins.

An All-Ireland winner with the Galway football team in 2001, Kerins was also a regular fixture in the Galway hurling side from 1997 to 2011. But following a significant loss to Kilkenny in 2004, Kerins needed some time away from his all-consuming sporting commitments.

A chance meeting with a Capuchin brother led him to the Cheshire Home for Children with Physical Disabilities in Mongu in the Western Province of Zambia.

Following a three-month placement as a physiotherapist in the facility, Kerins was moved to such an extent that the Alan Kerins Projects came into being. To date, Kerins has raised over €5m (and millions more indirectly) for an area devastated by AIDS, drought and poverty.

"Meeting the children in Mongu was one of the most moving experiences of my life," Downey continues. "Some of the kids are marginalised from society and others are even unwanted by their families. Everyday they face enormous challenges. Yet while they might not have very much but they don't let that stop them." Downey adds. "They have an unbreakable human spirit and love for life and each other that is infectious."



Upon returning to Ireland, Downey has reflected upon his time in Zambia and the perspective the trip has given him. Not without his own challenges since retiring from rugby, the former Northampton Saint appreciates that, all things considered, he remains very lucky.

"When I first finished up, I thought I knew what I wanted to do. I worked towards it and was as prepared as I thought I could have been, ready to go. But everyone deals with it in different ways.

"Of course, that transition is not just exclusive to sportspeople either. There were business people on the trip who were selling-up, exploring new ventures and looking for clarity as to the direction in which they were headed.

"There was a lot of relevant learnings for us all, regardless of our background and this is compounded by the workshops that Alan provides throughout our time in Zambia."

Designed to give athletes and individuals more clarity, a new purpose and identity as well as leadership and life skills, the programme has served to provide many with the courage to take their lives down a different path. Kerins' Inner Winner Institute will once again travel to the region in November.

"I'm hugely appreciative that Rugby Players Ireland pointed me in this direction," Downey says. "It came to me at a time when I was having itchy feet and looking for something different. It's not something I'd normally do and I knew I'd be taking myself out of my comfort zone, but at the back of my mind going into disadvantaged communities in Africa was always something I wanted to do. I always talked up a great game, but I'd never acted on it. I felt it was the right moment in my life."

If you require more information on the Inner Winner Institute African Discovery Programme, please contact richard@rugbyplayersireland.ie



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THE END GAME WITH TOMMY BOWE

THE FORMER IRELAND AND ULSTER WINGER EXPLORES THE TRANSITION OUT OF THE PROFESSIONAL GAME IN RTE DOCUMENTARY

When Tommy Bowe took to the stage outside the Mansion House in Dublin following Ireland's 2009 Grand Slam success, his fearless rendition of Black Velvet Band had diamonds in many eyes. In April, as he brought down the curtain on a distinguished rugby career, there were also many tears.

The quick-witted, quick footed lad from Monaghan gave us myriad moments of delight – and caused many an opponent to wonder if a rugby career was worth this hardship. In contributing some of the most iconic moments in Irish sport, Bowe will live long in the memory but his lasting legacy may yet be in how he shed light on some of the difficulties that face retiring athletes upon retirement.

Scanning social media as 'The End Game' aired on Monday night, many inevitably brought a cynical viewpoint to the discussion. Of course, life as a sportsman is perceived as the ideal existence. But the gods have a wry sense of humour and tend to exact a price for their seeming gifts.

"You have to accept that as a sportsperson you have a time limit," AP McCoy, the legendary Irish jump jockey warns. "It's never coming back. No matter how successful you are in your next career, it's not going to be the same. No matter how many international caps you have or how successful you have been, you are no different to anyone else." Some might dispute that.

Bowe has packed a lot into his 15-year professional rugby career and has huge entries on the credit side of the book to show for it. Ryle Nugent's depiction of the winger's dash to the Cardiff line has entered the annals of Irish folklore, while his recovery from a broken hand to help the 2013 British & Irish Lions to a first series victory in 12 years was of mythical proportions. Above all, his humble manner won and retained the hearts of the country throughout his career.

Announcing his retirement at the turn of the year, Bowe was giving himself several months to process the fact he would be embarking on a period of transition. Yet, despite the needs of his young family and several business interests, he acknowledges that he struggles with the concept of walking away from the game that has defined him throughout his life.

"In those moments you have to remember that you were there, you did it for a long period of time, Derval O'Rourke reminds him. As one of Ireland's



most decorated athletes and as a former Player Development Manager at Rugby Players Ireland (formerly IRUPA), the advice stands firm. "We're the lucky ones that got to go on that rollercoaster and live the dream."

With a trophy cabinet boasting Six Nations Championships, Lions caps and individual accolades such as the IRUPA Players' Player of the Year in both 2008 and 2010, Bowe has enjoyed an illustrious career. However, not all players can claim to have enjoyed similar journeys through the game. As the new season approaches, players throughout the country are struggling to cling onto their rugby dream, while others will accrue career-ending injuries in the weeks and months ahead.

"I've had a couple of pretty low points," Bowe remembers. "One of the most frustrating ones was getting back from a knee injury, working the hardest I have ever worked to get back into the Six Nations squad and get back in for the Welsh game. I get onto the pitch on 79 minutes, 15 seconds. Jamie Roberts lands on my leg on 79 minutes, 40 seconds. That feeling of being taken off and knowing that you're off to surgery and going right back down to the bottom. To build yourself back up through the torture rehab, the physio work, S&C and fitness work to get back to that level... it can be really tough.

"I'm fortunate to have other interests outside of rugby to be involved with," Bowe adds. He's not the only one. In a 2016 survey carried out on IRUPA members by Accenture, 92% felt that interests outside of the game actually benefitted their game. "They take my mind away from sport" Bowe continues, "especially when you're injured, things are slow and you just want to get back onto the pitch. Having something outside of rugby is invaluable. Being able to come into training, get the work done, then get into the car to chat about something completely different. It's a great way to change your focus and give you something else to work for."

However, it is not as easy as it would seem. For any rugby player, detail and structure has been an automatic part of their daily lives. Throughout any

career players are told where they are meant to be, when they are meant to be there and what they are to wear while they're there. A sudden removal of that construct can leave many floundering.

Dr Kate Kirby, Head of Performance Psychology at Sport Ireland Institute worked with Bowe in her previous role at Rugby Players Ireland. "Removal of structure is an initial release," she says, "but a few weeks down the line you have to set it up. If you leave it too long the apathy sets in. The better transitions will enjoy the luxury of having nothing to do for a few weeks, but like anyone with a holiday they go and get their structure back."

Having faced into a new challenge every week, Bowe has had a definitive purpose every day that he has been a rugby player. He has had a purpose to eat properly, train well, stay healthy and to get up every morning. Dr Kirby acknowledges that moving into a completely random lifestyle can be a difficult adjustment. "Endorsements and media stuff also becomes ad hoc so it doesn't give you a time to get up or a place to go. Have certain commitments like dropping the children to school or crèche, give a structure to your week and a reason to get up and go somewhere," she recommends.

As Bowe departed the field following his final game at Kingspan in April, several things hit home. Roaming the pitch to say goodbye to his adoring Ulster fans he became very aware that as a rugby player he has spent much of his time in a bubble, concentrating on himself in an effort to make the most of his abilities. Now he would need his friends, his family, his wife and daughter and his parents more than ever.

"You go up through the stages," his mother Ann says as she reflects on Tommy's career. "The first time playing for your club – really, really exciting. You go on to play for your province and then playing for your country is just phenomenal. It is the most incredible thing to stand and hear the national anthem being sung and to see your son out there. That will never be replicated."

Nothing will ever beat scoring a try at Twickenham or running out at Lansdowne Road, but Tommy Bowe has given rugby all that he can. Even in retirement, he continues to give.

Irish rugby boasts many young and prodigious talents, but Grand Slam medals and European Cups will not make them invincible. One day they too will stare into the same challenges that Tommy Bowe faces in retirement. Having someone who has played such an important role for Irish rugby acknowledge and highlight them can only benefit what we set out to achieve at Rugby Players Ireland.



“There is never a good time to leave, but there is a right time.”

Sir Terry Wogan, 2009





There are so many positive effects that it brings. We need robust science to determine what are the long-term risks as well as benefits of playing rugby”

Having qualified as a physiotherapist, Dr Wilson moved to South Africa before the professionalism of rugby began to take hold. Working closely with people like Evan Speechly, who was the team physio with the Springboks for several years, she developed a greater appreciation for the game and began to see the direction in which it was going.

“The South African team at the time were unusual in that they were so much fitter and better prepared than everyone else. That’s why they won the World Cup in 1995. Francois Pienaar was a real leader and driving force. Physically, it wasn’t as demanding as it is now, but that team raised the bar. The game has become significantly faster and harder in the years since, but the players are also more conditioned. A lot of that is because of Pienaar and the Springboks of ’95.

“My father was also a keen rugby player,” Wilson adds. “In another era he may have been a professional. Sadly, he developed dementia at an early age. It all got me thinking. Perhaps in both his case and that of other retired athletes who have suffered the same fate there was always an underlying risk, but did a trauma accelerate their respective conditions? For years, concussion was managed very badly. Better protocols are in place now, but ultimately, we still don’t know enough about concussion or the individual risk factors. Someone might present with clear symptoms, yet it is normal for scans, blood tests and other investigations to show no sign of injury. It’s very complicated.”

Clearly, the study is of great importance to Dr Wilson and in embarking on this project she has ensured that she has the help and support of some of the world’s leading medical professionals in this area. For instance, Dr Steve Broglio of the University of Michigan, who has played a leading role in some of the most comprehensive studies of concussion and head impact exposure, will

co-supervise the study and provide invaluable expertise. In addition, there is the capacity to crosscheck findings with the Irish Longitudinal Study of Aging (TILDA) and other pots of information that are housed at Trinity College.

Participants will be asked to complete a battery of overall health and wellness questionnaires before attending to a health screening and further tests at various locations across the country. Details of individual findings will remain confidential, however help will be made available where necessary.

“From my point of view, I want to look at how the brain works as a whole – not just based on injury,” Dr Wilson states. “I want to see the effects that a lifetime of sport has on the health of your brain. The positive; the negative; exiting from the sport. I intend to do this by looking at a group that have encountered brain trauma during their careers whilst comparing them to a group that hasn’t. In this instance, retired Irish rowers.

“From my experience, a lot of elite athletes struggle when they retire. It’s not an easy path. You’re in a bubble where the kind of people that are drawn to you might not have your best interests at heart. But elite athletes aren’t normal punters. Some tip the scales in terms of their cognitive skills such as processing and integration, while others may be found to have different difficulties that have gone undetected throughout their careers owing to the focus on their capacity to perform so highly in one area.

“As a team physio you spend some great time with the players. You’re pitchside and you become part of the team. Working with individual guys you also get to know them very well and begin to pick up some great insights. They are happy to share things with you knowing that you’re bound by your confidentiality. But I have been somewhat dismayed by what the media say they are doing to themselves. We don’t have a balanced output. It will take some time before we get some really good and useful information but we’re in this for the long run.”

“When you go fox hunting, you will find a fox.”



INCLUSION CRITERIA

- Retired professional rugby player who has played at least one season of professional rugby
- A retired Ireland Women’s XVs player

EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

- Please contact Denis Hurley: denis@rugbyplayersireland.ie

EXPLORING THE EFFECT OF A LIFETIME OF SPORT

AS RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND ROW IN BEHIND A NEW PAST PLAYER STUDY, WE SPEAK TO DR FIONA WILSON ABOUT THE PROCESS

Although the 2015 film ‘Concussion’ was largely pilloried, it nevertheless brought degenerative brain disease into the spotlight. According to research carried out that same year by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and Boston University, of the 91 former NFL players who donated their brains suspecting they suffered from chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), 87 were found to have the disease. But as Dr Fiona Wilson would suggest ‘when you go fox hunting, you will find a fox.’

With the support of Rugby Players Ireland, Rowing Ireland, the University of Michigan and Trinity College, Dr Wilson, who is Associate Professor of Physiotherapy at the latter, is a principal investigator in a study that will explore brain health and wellness of retired professional Irish rugby players over the coming months.

“As scientists, we need to be open minded,” Dr Wilson says. “What are we looking for? We don’t know. You should always be wary of a researcher that will tell you what they are going to find. There is definitely a slant to the media reporting in terms of what rugby is doing to the long-term health of players, especially when we do not have enough research to answer the question.

“A study can be designed with a bias to support a pre-determined conclusion – but that’s no good for anybody. It scares the player, it scares the parent. Obviously, with kids there is no messing, but let’s not kill the notion of sport and activity.

INTER NATIONAL RUGBY PLAYERS



With International Rugby Players HQs now firmly embedded in Dublin under former Rugby Players Ireland boss Omar Hassanein, we check in with the latest from the global players association.

Former All Black Conrad Smith has officially joined the team at International Rugby Players.

Smith, who retired from the game at the end of last season, will immediately get to work on a global agent accreditation scheme to help avoid rogue agents exploiting players. He will also assist the organisation around areas like player load, concussion and getting better conditions for tier two players across the world.

So how is the two-time Rugby World Cup winner feeling about joining the Dublin-based team?

"I'm very excited! I'm obviously at a new stage in my life where I'm moving from a playing career to something different.

"(The players association) is something I thought about a lot and was

involved with when I was playing, so now is a chance to take it a bit more seriously and spend a bit more time on it. It's something I'm really looking forward to."

Smith will blend the role in with being part of the coaching ticket at Pau.

"I'm still coaching with my club but with the time I have, I'm keen to be involved in a few projects that International Rugby Players are running. One of those is around Agent accreditation or registration.

"It's something I was involved with back in New Zealand (with the NZRPA) and now it's something we want to do internationally so that we can protect players and avoid some of the problems that have come up in other sports.

"I'll also be involved in other big issues, such as player workload, concussion, which is a big issue in all contact sports, and we're also keen to see better



conditions for tier two countries, to help them and help the game."

With all that the former Hurricane centre could have done after hanging up the boots last season, why did he want to get involved with the global Players group?

"I guess I played rugby for a long time, I love the game and it has given me a lot," he mused.

"But sport, moving forward, needs good representation from the players. When you're looking after player interests, ultimately it helps the game move forward.

"Rugby has benefited from good administration in the past but it also needs a strong player voice and that has to continue for the good of the game. To be involved in that is something I feel good about and it's good for the game."

With the recent retirement of British and Irish and Wales captain Sam Warburton, player workload and burnout is high on the agenda of both the Players and the game in general.

"Player load is a big issue but is one that, by listening to what players are saying, ultimately

that's the way to get to an outcome that will suit everyone. It won't be easy; there's a lot of interests involved that we'll have to appease and align.

"I think a player voice is massively important; if you can get the players onside and have World Rugby listening then we can get to a good solution."

PLAYER LOAD

One of the priorities for International Rugby Players this year is the ongoing issue of workload for players, with the global players' body taking the initiative to solve the divisive issue.

An expert group, comprising current and former players, coaches and medical professionals, have convened to discuss solutions and will meet several times before the end of the year. They aim to bring together a series of guidelines that will outline best practice to ensure player welfare but also maximise player performance.

The issue was once again brought to the fore last month when Lions and Welsh captain Sam Warburton announced his retirement, aged just 29.

“But sport, moving forward, needs good representation from the players. When you’re looking after player interests, ultimately it helps the game move forward.”



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WHERE THERE'S A WILL, THERE'S A WAY

WILL CONNORS

How was your porridge this morning?

The usual... Hard to vary it up much these days!

You made your first senior appearance earlier this year, can you describe it?

Unfortunately, we lost to Edinburgh on the night which was very disappointing, but it was still a very special moment for my family and I. Being able to run out in the blue jersey was a dream come true and something I will never forget. For the entire week I was so focused on knowing my stuff and prepping that I didn't really dwell too much on the occasion. It was only afterwards that I had some time to reflect and appreciate the moment.

You were also heavily involved with the Irish 7s. Do you think this has benefitted your game on a technical level?

Yes, I think there are some benefits that can be transferred to the 15s game. Playing 7s has definitely helped me to develop a more open style of rugby and I would now be a lot more confident with an offload or even trying to take a player on one-on-one. In the 7s format you obviously have a large number of involvements and this gives you the opportunity to be a greater threat over the ball or even to improve your defensive side of the game.

With Isa Nacewa, Jamie Heaslip and Richardt Strauss all retiring there will be some familiar faces missing from the Leinster squad this season. Do you see that as an opportunity?

It's always sad to see some of the lads move on as they offered a huge amount off the rugby pitch as much as they did on it. However, I suppose it gives a few of the younger lads a shot to throw our hand up and take whatever opportunity comes our way.

You were a formidable player at schools' level with CWC, was a career in the game always in your sights?

You could only dare to dream really, but to be honest I had never really thought about it much. At the time it was about giving everything to my school side so it never really dawned on me that there could be a career opportunity down the line. After losing out in the Senior Cup semi-final to Belvedere in my final year my focus then turned to the leaving cert. It was only that summer when I was playing Leinster 20s that I really strived to become a full time rugby player.

What are you studying?

I'm going into my 4th year of computer science in UCD in which I have refined my focus more to data science. Data Science ties in nicely with my interest in rugby because like so many different sports there is now a huge emphasis in data analytics to help optimise team performances.

Do you have any other hobbies or interests?

I don't have a range of hobbies outside of the usual, however I have started getting into vinyl recently and I'm trying to build some kind of collection. For Christmas my mum gave me a load of her old records which has bulked it up considerably! Other than that, I tend to do whatever activities the lads in my house are getting up to. We're not the most adventurous house and so some fishing might be the height of it!

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

Yes, definitely! For me, college is a great way to remove myself mentally from rugby and focus on something that challenges me in different ways. Having a different focus allows me to switch off from rugby in the evening and turn my attention to assignments and other college work. It means that when I go into Leinster in the morning I can apply myself 100% to what I need to know and learn that day.

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

Ella is a huge support to so many people in catering for our development needs outside of rugby. Whether it's just a chat or to helping with college work, she's always there for us. Throughout the year there is a huge variety of workshops and talks regarding different areas outside of rugby. This varies from cooking classes to more business orientated workshops. All of these skills are essential to developing off the pitch and to find something beyond it.

Finally, in 2018/2019 the goals for Will Connors are...

After getting a taste for the Pro14 last year I'd love to have another few opportunities there and maybe even the chance of playing a European game. I really want to build on last season so I look forward to see what the year has to offer.

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