

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF
RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND
WINTER 2018

HELPING RUGBY TO RISE

LOUIS LUDIK



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CONTENTS

- 2** CEO Report - Simon Keogh
- 4** Rugby Players Ireland - News
- 10** Develop - Louis Ludik
- 14** Develop - Conor Fitzgerald
- 16** Engage - James Lowe
- 18** Develop - Goodbody Bursary
- 19** Develop - Hugh O'Sullivan
- 22** Develop - Darren Sweetnam
- 24** Engage - Tackle Your Feelings
- 26** Engage - Créde Sheehy-Kelly
- 28** Engage - TYF Phase One
- 30** Develop - Alison Miller
- 32** Engage - Steve Broglio
- 34** Engage - Neil Best
- 36** Engage - David Wallace
- 38** International Rugby Players - News
- 40** Develop - Up & Coming

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CEO ADDRESS

SIMON KEOGH



With just a year to go until the Rugby World Cup in Japan 2019, expectation is building. Following a clean-sweep of victories in November, it is understandable that the Irish public has such high hopes. However, regardless of what happens, we cannot understate the accomplishments of the current group of players since the last World Cup.

Since 2015, the provinces and the national side have stepped up their performances each season. During that time so many unprecedented feats have been achieved – Connacht's Pro12 success; Leinster winning the European Champions Cup for a record equalling fourth time, Ireland beating the All Blacks twice, taking an away series win in Australia. Not to mention a Grand Slam secured in Twickenham.

Irish Rugby is in a healthy place.

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, so when others begin to emulate what we are doing in this country we know that we are doing something right. Traditionally, we have looked to the southern hemisphere but there has been a definite shift in recent times. The systems and supports in place are undoubtedly world-leading.

Benchmarking is important in any sport and it would now appear that the rugby world is looking to us. Before the recent encounter with the All Blacks in Dublin, Steve Hansen was pressed on the issue of player management. He remarked: "the team that's managing it best at the moment is Ireland".

The Player Development Programme (PDP) run by Rugby Players Ireland in partnership with the IRFU, is much envied throughout the game. A lengthy career in professional sport is never guaranteed. Helping players to achieve a work/life balance whilst encouraging them to maximize the opportunities open to them is integral to the work of the association. The aim is to ensure that their inevitable transition from the game is as smooth as possible. Since 2015, the PDP has grown to ensure that each of the provinces and the women's programme has a dedicated player development manager. However, their impact has also been felt further afield.

Dr Deirdre Lyons, who leads the PDP team, has been invited by FIFPro (the worldwide representative organisation for all professional footballers) to use her experience in their Mind the Gap project to help establish similar programmes in some of their national player associations. Similarly, the International Rugby Players have requested that Dr Lyons present to World Rugby and the Rugby Athletes Commission on broadening the definition of player welfare and how to establish a functioning PDP in emerging nations to model the Irish programme.

Other aspects of Rugby Players Ireland's work have also had an impact beyond the borders of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Tackle Your Feelings (TYF) is a mental wellbeing campaign run by Rugby Players Ireland in partnership with Zurich and funded by the Z Zurich Foundation. The initiative leverages the platform of rugby to ignite widespread, sustainable change in how people think and act around their mental wellbeing.

Inspired by the success of the TYF campaign, Zurich Australia has created a programme modelled on the Irish TYF campaign, in partnership with the Australian Football League Players' Association (AFLPA) and the Australian Football league Coaches' Association (AFLCA). However, not only has the success of TYF been reflected in its adoption in other countries, it has also been extended in Ireland for a further four years.

Ireland's global notoriety was also reflected in the recent World Rugby Awards. Amongst those in receipt of an award was Joe Schmidt. Following his recent announcement that he will vacate his position following the Rugby World Cup, it would be remiss not to mention the huge influence that has had during his tenure. The ethic, culture and systems that he has brought to the country has contributed enormously not only to the national team's standards but to the wider game and to the public's desire for success.

Rugby is in a better place largely as a result of his contribution, but I believe that these high standards will continue to be implemented by his successor, Andy Farrell. As we have shown over the last three years, Irish rugby has become standard setters rather than followers. At Rugby Players Ireland, we will continue to follow that lead, set the pace and always strive to improve what we can offer our players.



“

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RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



READY, STEADY, MO!

Throughout November, several of our members played their part in raising funds and awareness for men's health. November 2018 saw the likes of James Lowe (check out page 16), Jarrad Butler, and Academy players from both Ulster and Leinster don moustaches and find their inner Tom Selleck. Some efforts were commendable, others less so. Nevertheless, well done to all for taking part!



PUTTING THEIR BEST FOOT FORWARD

In September, the Mid West Simon Community Fashion took place at the Castletroy Park Hotel in Limerick. Covering the counties of Clare, Limerick and North Tipperary, Mid West Simon's aim is to support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Our players embraced the glamour of the occasion and had a notable pep in their step, most notably Diarmuid Barron who made his Munster Rugby debut in the following days.



RUGBY RISING

Rugby Players Ireland were delighted to support Rugby Rising earlier this year. The brainchild of former Ulster Rugby teammates Louis Ludik and Tommy Bowe, the week-long festival gave school students a brief glimpse into life as a professional rugby player. Over the course of five days, matchdays were supplemented by informative days, including Q&A sessions with Brian O'Driscoll, Rory Best and Robbie Henshaw. Rugby Players Ireland also had a part to play with Marcus Horan and Dr Ella McCabe speaking at length about the importance of off-field development and 'Minding Your Mental Health.'



WOMEN'S XVS

Ahead of the November Series, Rugby Players Ireland facilitated a team development session in partnership with the IRFU. Having not played together since the final game of the Six Nations in March, it proved to be a useful exercise for introducing new members of the squad including the likes of Béibhinn Parsons who became the youngest ever Irish Test international when she was introduced as a substitute against the USA (check out page 40).



"EVERY CUP COUNTS"

Earlier this year, our Connacht Rugby members hosted a coffee morning in aid of Galway Hospice. Since the first coffee morning was held in 1993, over €35 million has been raised for hospices throughout the country. Having established

a relationship through James Connolly, Ultan Dillane, Saba Meunargia and Rugby Players Ireland, Connacht Rugby has become a keen supporter of Galway Hospice. The morning was enjoyed by all, especially when the cake was produced!



TOUCHING BASE

In recent months we have continued to foster a great relationship with LauraLynn Hospice. Following on from the visit of some Irish Women's XV's players, captain Lucy Mulhall and her Women's 7s teammates dropped by to say hello before they set off for the first World Series event of the season in Glendale, Colorado. There was no resting up however as they were put through their paces by the children.

In the past few weeks, Nancy Chillingworth and the Women's 7s squad have also linked in with Feed Our Homeless on the streets of Dublin's city centre. On several winter evenings, players ignored the conditions and did their best to ensure that the people they met could get through another night on the streets of the capital.



GRADUATION SEASON

It is always great to hear news of our members graduating, we congratulate them on all on what is a significant achievement. Included amongst these recent graduates was Michael Swift who received a Diploma in Strategy & Innovation from the Irish Management Institute (IMI), as part of the Rugby Players Ireland scholarship programme. It has been a busy few weeks for Swift as he also launched a new male personal care company, FrankMan.

If you are thinking of returning to study or picking up a new skill or language, contact your PDM who will be able to connect you with the opportunities that best suit your needs.

ONCE A MEMBER, ALWAYS A MEMBER

Rugby Players Ireland has continued to build a 'Past Player Social & Business Network' throughout the country. Over the course of the past few months, we have met with several former professionals to establish what the predominant past-player needs are and to get their advice on plans for a structured platform.

Breakfast meetings have taken place in Dublin and Limerick, with further meetings to take place in Belfast and Galway in the New Year.

Meanwhile, the Player Development team have produced a 'Transition from Professional Rugby' booklet which is available to all of our members (contact your PDM). Simultaneously, Dr Deirdre Lyons also worked on 'Transition from Sport: A Review of Player Association Research into Retired Players', a paper produced by the World Players Association.



HEINEKEN CLUBHOUSE

As the country baited its breath in anticipation of Ireland's clash with the All Blacks, we sat down for our Heineken Clubhouse event at the Clayton Hotel in Ballsbridge. Following on from our regional Clubhouse events which are solely for the players, we invite our corporate partners to join us for the afternoon as we whet the appetite for the big game! A number of former professionals were also in attendance, including Andrew Trimble and David Wallace who were joined for a brief Q&A by 94-times capped All Black, Conrad Smith.



WORLD RUGBY CLASSIC

In Early November, the 2018 World Rugby Classic was held in Bermuda. From the early 70s, Bermuda has played host to some of the most famous rugby players in the world and yet it all started with a one-off game as locals took on the 'Bermuda-Irish'. It has become a meeting place for many former opponents who use the opportunity to renew old friendships, make new connections and flex some tiring muscles!

This year, the Irish Legends managed to string some impressive victories together, beginning with a 24-10 defeat of France Classic Rugby. This was followed by a narrow 10-7 win over a physical Rugby Canada side. However, they finally ran out of steam in the final succumbing to a 25-0 loss at the hands of the Classic Pumas.



WORLD RUGBY AWARDS

Just days after being named as the Guinness Irish Rugby Writers' Player of the Year, Irish and Leinster out-half Johnny Sexton was named as World Rugby Player of the Year for 2018. On a night of sweeping success for Irish rugby, Sexton became only the second man from these shores to claim the title after Keith Wood in 2001. Incidentally, he was also the first winner from the northern hemisphere since Thierry Dusautoir of France in 2011.

In addition to the out-half's accolade, Ireland were named as the World Rugby Team of the Year while Joe Schmidt scooped the coach of the year award. Unfortunately, Jordan Larmour failed to take home the Breakthrough Player of the Year, while a special effort from Brodie Retallick ousted CJ Stander's iconic effort at Twickenham to claim the Try of the Year award. Our congratulations to all nominees and winners!



CLEAN SWEEP!

Rory Best's Ireland side finished 2018 on a high following a string of Guinness November Series victories over Italy, Argentina, New Zealand and the USA Rugby Eagles respectively.

Over the course of four weeks, 42 players tasted international action with Will Addison, Ross Byrne and Sam Arnold gaining first caps for their country.

Well done to all on a hugely successful year!



THE WELCOME ORGANISATION

In November, thirteen Ulster members used their day off to help out at a Belfast charity that works with the homeless.

The players, including Executive Board Member Darren Cave, visited The Welcome Organisation to lend a hand.

The charity provides a range of services for people affected by homelessness including a Drop-in Centre on Townsend Street, a Street Outreach service, Crisis Accommodation for Women and a Floating Support service.

The players were helping in the charity's Welcome Home furniture project. A new initiative for the charity, Welcome Home aims to help people moving on from homelessness by offering a range of services including a furniture bank to assist people make houses into homes and a shop selling restyled and redesigned furniture. Money generated from the shop is reinvested back into the service.

The project offers people who are homeless, and volunteers, the opportunity to rediscover skills and be trained in new ones which will help with employability.

"As players, we want to make a difference in the community," Cave said. "We want to help others who might be down on their luck or need to catch a break. With the help of Rugby Players Ireland we identified the Welcome Home initiative as something we could throw ourselves into, even if it is one chair or fridge at a time."



JOHN COONEY SUPPORTS TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS

As we settled into the 2018/19 season, Rugby Players Ireland and Zurich renewed the call to get the nation to adopt a more proactive approach to mental wellbeing as part of the Tackle Your Feelings campaign.

Having already contributed to the Tackle Your Feelings App which was released in February, John Cooney replicated his impressive performances on the field by sharing his own approach to mental wellbeing. Speaking to BBC Northern Ireland, the Irish scrum-half revealed that he saw a counsellor during his time with Connacht Rugby after suffering a number of injury setbacks.

"Through Rugby Players Ireland, they were able to set one up for me in Galway. I did seven or eight sessions with someone there and originally it was just to make me feel better day-to-day because I was struggling with how I was feeling over injuries. Everything day-to-day, I was struggling a bit.

"It made a big difference."



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FROM GRASSROOTS TO GREATNESS

During a lengthy injury layoff, the South African joined forces with Tommy Bowe to help rugby rise in Irish schools.

LOUIS LUDIK

Agen is a charming little city in the southwest of France. Despite being well known for its prunes, medieval alleys and waterways, it doesn't concern itself much with tourism. However, the people of Agen are infinitely friendly... as long as the rugby is going well.

However, when Louis Ludik arrived in the region from the Sharks in 2013, it wasn't quite what he expected. To begin with, he thought he was leaving Super Rugby for a Top14 side only for his suitors to fall into France's second tier between his contract being signed and his arrival. In terms of Ludik's career it was a little disheartening, but he had a commitment to the club.

The South African did all in his power to help Agen climb back into the upper echelons of French rugby. With results going their way, it actually proved to be an enjoyable season on and off the field. Following a year of disappointment, the ProD2 proved to be a good tonic for the avid rugby fans in the bars and cafés of the city before La Rochelle put paid to Agen's aspirations at the final hurdle.

"I had a clause that if we didn't go straight back to the Top14, I could get out of my contract" the versatile Ludik says. "I had heard there was some interest from Ulster but then I heard they were in for Stuart Hogg so I put it out of my mind. It was only at the very last minute that an offer came through.

"I knew it was a great opportunity from a rugby perspective, but that's obviously not the only consideration when moving clubs. My own experiences had taught me to ensure that everything on the table was backed up and in

“Some of the parents thanked us because some things dawned on their kids throughout the week. I guess that's the power a rugby player in Ireland can have these days. It's important that we use our profile in the right way.

place. Because of the timings I literally had to make a decision within a few hours and then get all my paperwork in the post. It was very intense!"

Ludik had heard of Belfast, though not as you'd expect a foreigner might. Upon returning home during the off-season, his good friend Ruen Pienaar would speak highly of the place, the people and the culture. Upon landing in Northern Ireland, Ludik was similarly embraced by the community. Four years later, his young family remain extremely happy.

"My wife [Chame] and son [Leo] really enjoy being here," Ludik claims. "We really enjoy the people, they're awesome. I always think how you act when you drive says a lot. In France and South Africa the people are extremely impatient, but my first time driving here people were waving me out all over and giving space!"

Remarkably, Ludik is now one of the longest-serving members of the current set-up. Only Rory Best, Alan O'Connor, Iain Henderson, Stuart McCloskey, Luke Marshall, Rob Herring, Darren Cave and Craig Gilroy can claim lengthier spells at the province. Having become Irish qualified in 2017, Ludik can rightfully call himself an Ulsterman.

"It was quite sad to see a number of the senior lads move on last year," the 32 year-old admits. "There have been a lot of changes but thankfully there are a lot of young lads coming through and that is really exciting. Unfortunately, I haven't been involved much this season with injury but you can see that they are a good bunch of guys, really good people. It's a good place to be at the minute.

"It's not just the players who create that environment though. You really begin to notice it as you get older, especially with the support staff and medical guys. You see them a little more often and you begin to appreciate the care they have for you and how they manage you back to full health. Personally, it is very special to feel so appreciated by a club and a country, thousands of miles from home."

Having been welcomed with open arms, Ludik has been a consciously active member of the community since setting foot in Belfast. However, in recent weeks his work has also spread further south. Alongside Tommy Bowe, Ludik staged Rugby Rising which brought schools' sides from the four provinces together for a week-long festival of rugby related activities, including talks and hugely competitive games at Energia Park.

"As rugby players we're not really sure what to do after rugby so we try a couple of things here and there to see what we find enjoyable or motivating. Having seen something similar in South Africa, I thought Rugby Rising would work well in Ireland. We wanted to provide the students with information and opportunities that they wouldn't get anywhere else.



"In that respect, having Tommy on board made it that bit easier to get some key Irish players involved. He has built a huge network throughout his career. It was really special for the participants to hear from the likes of Rory Best and Robbie Henshaw, while we are also hugely appreciative of Brian O'Driscoll who made a surprise visit.

"Overall, the week went very well," Ludik proudly states. "We put a lot of work into it, especially because it was the first year. I suppose it was a bit of a blank canvas and we didn't know how things might turn out. Obviously, when you're in there you always find things to improve upon. We got plenty of feedback too, much of which has been positive but there are plenty of work-ons.

"The highlight for me though was meeting with the parents at the end of the week. They were very gracious. At times you begin to think that the majority aren't bothered by some of the talks, especially the off-field stuff (I'm sure you feel the same way at Rugby Players Ireland sometimes!), but you never know who might take something

from it. Some of the parents thanked us because some things dawned on their kids throughout the week. I guess that's the power a rugby player in Ireland can have these days. It's important that we use our profile in the right way."

Given the success of Rugby Rising, Ludik and Bowe are already making plans for a bigger and better instalment next year. It all indicates that the South African is beginning to look beyond his playing career with Ulster, however he has plenty of unfinished business left with the province. In any event, the future would not seem to lie far from Greater Belfast.

"Of course, one day I'd like to return to South Africa but that can be difficult. For instance, our son might not have the freedom that he enjoys here or the future that we would want for him. It is also quite dangerous. I know a lot of people who have moved away to make a home for themselves. But in a couple of years, who knows? Things might turn around. But as things stand, Belfast is our home and we are very happy."

“It's not just the players who create that environment though. You really begin to notice it as you get older, especially with the support staff and medical guys.”



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OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

It has been a remarkable six months for a former Limerick hurler

CONOR FITZGERALD

Hurling is our oldest field game, but its popularity is often surpassed. However, if you landed into the Fitzgerald household on the morning of August 19th as Limerick claimed their first Liam MacCarthy Cup in 45 years, you'd have been left in no doubt as to what comes first.

"My dad is all hurling," claims Conor, who made his Connacht Rugby bow earlier this year. "He'll say he does, but he doesn't really know much about the rugby! Hurling... that's a different story!"

When Conor was introduced as a substitute late into the second-half of Connacht's Challenge Cup clash with Bordeaux Bègles, it added another dimension to the sporting leanings in the family home at Ardnacrusha.

John, his father, was part of the last Limerick team to win an All-Ireland minor title in 1984 and his eldest brother Evan (24) continues to push the hurling cause. Meanwhile, Stephen (23), who played with several of the victorious Limerick side of 2018, has set his sights on regular senior action with Munster Rugby.

"When I was in 4th year at school I actually chose hurling over rugby," Conor admits. "Up until then I'd been able to manage it all. I'd have a rugby game in the morning before hurling training in the afternoon. When you're younger you'd just head out and play, but as it became more competitive and we looked to get an edge, a lot of fitness work was incorporated into training.

After a long day I was coming last in all of the tests. My coach was like: 'what the hell is going on here?'

"I was torn because all of the rugby lads were in the gym, gaining weight and were onto me about doing the same. But with hurling, there is an emphasis on aerobic fitness and that was keeping me very trim. In the end, my body wasn't at an optimum level for either sport. At that time, hurling for Limerick represented the best opportunity for me."

It proved to be a fruitful decision in the short-term. Conor became a key member of the Limerick minor hurling panel, while he also lifted the coveted Harty Cup with Ardscoil Rís. But upon reflecting after an All-Ireland Final defeat to Kilkenny in 2014, he found that he was missing rugby more than he had anticipated. The rugby folk didn't have to think twice about welcoming him back.



Fast forward a few years and Conor already has tasted the trials and tribulations of a career in rugby. Released by the Munster Academy in May, Fitzgerald began to brace himself for life away from the game and watching Stephen flourish from the other side of the turnstiles.

"I got a call on a Monday morning and I was devastated. I felt that my chance to play professional rugby was gone... just like that. But a few days after Munster had announced it, Eric Elwood rang me. We arranged to meet, and he offered me the opportunity to go to Connacht. It was a lifeline.

"I spoke to my parents, I spoke to Stephen, but the decision was always going to be off my own bat. I wanted to do what was best for me. It was either stay at home, focus on my Business degree at UL and play rugby with Shannon, or take the opportunity to move out of home, live in Galway and play with Connacht. In the end it was a no-brainer."

Conor is enjoying his time in Galway where he has firmly focussed his attentions on rugby. Following much discussion with Deirdre Lyons and his parents, he has opted to defer his studies whilst he sets about "proving myself in the rugby sense." Not wanting to tempt fate at this stage, Conor will transfer to NUIG if he is to remain in Galway next season.



He is certainly on course. From packing up his dreams in May to lining out in Europe in October, Conor has enjoyed a remarkable end to 2018. He admits that he never envisaged just how his new chapter would evolve. Regularly involved in senior training, Conor hopes to add a few more caps in the New Year whilst soaking up every trickle of the experience.

"When I made my decision, my parents backed me 100%. They didn't want me telling them in a few years that I regretted not taking the chance, so they said to give it one last go. Initially they were ringing me and texting me all the time, trying to find out how everything was going. They were more nervous than I was. I suppose they had seen how delicate a rugby career can be.

"I don't think any of us thought it could go as well as it has. I thought it would take a while to establish myself. It's still early doors so I've to keep the head down and keep working, but I'd like to think that my parents proud of what I have achieved and how I have managed to turn it around."

No doubt they are, but in time their loyalties might be somewhat conflicted. Before befallen by injury, Stephen was beginning to deliver on his vast potential earlier this season by staking a claim for the vacant full-back role at Munster. At Connacht, Jack Carty, Craig Ronaldson and David Horwitz may sit above Conor in the pecking order, but Andy Friend has already placed great faith in the Limerick man.

Where they once might have lined each other up in the back garden, they might yet face each other in an entirely unforeseen context.

"We were to play Munster in the Celtic Cup earlier this season actually," Conor says. "I was named to play at out-half and Stephen was due to line out at full-back. I was looking forward to having him run around the place. He pulled a sicky on the morning of the game though... didn't think he'd be that scared to play me.

"It's actually good craic though. My parents don't know where to look!"

Oh, to be a fly on the wall at the Fitzgerald's this Christmas.

“Initially they were ringing me and texting me all the time, trying to find out how everything was going. They were more nervous than I was. I suppose they had seen how delicate a rugby career can be.”



“IT’S NOT VERY MANLY TO TALK ABOUT YOUR FEELINGS... BUT IT’S A BIG PROBLEM”

James Lowe took part in the annual Movember campaign which aims to change the face of men’s health

Anyone who has followed James Lowe on social media will know his happy-go-lucky personality comes across in the way he engages with team-mates and supporters, but the Leinster winger is now using the platform to raise awareness for men’s mental health.

Along with a number of his Leinster team-mates and the help of Rugby Players Ireland, Lowe is taking part in the Movember campaign, which is aiming to change the face of men’s health.

The 26-year-old Kiwi is hoping to raise €10,000 and as part of his campaign to break down the stigma, will enter everyone who donates into a draw for a number of money-can’t-buy prizes, including a signed Johnny Sexton jersey from Leinster’s double-winning season.

“I’m more than happy to help in any way I can,” Lowe told The42.

“I don’t grow the best mo but at the end of the day it’s all about raising awareness and money. I’m supporting mental health specifically, and I can’t push it enough. It’s a big problem we need to talk about. It’s not very manly to talk about your feelings but at the end of the day if it helps save people then why wouldn’t we do it?”

It’s a good cause and something I’m proud to be part of. I guess with the little platform I have, I’m able to raise as much awareness as I can and I’m giving away a few different prizes at the end of the month to people who donate.

The statistics are startling, and the rate of suicide — particularly



in men — alarmingly high. Globally, one man dies by suicide every minute and eight in 10 suicides in Ireland are men.

With this in mind, the Movember Foundation is aiming to reduce the rate of male suicide by 25% by 2030, and Lowe understands his status as a rugby player can help drive awareness and facilitate change.

“It’s in all walks of life, not just in rugby [where there’s a reluctance to talk],” he added.

“It’s kind of like that iceberg, there can be so many things going on underneath and people will only show you what they want to see.

“You never know who you’re going to help [by donating] so it’s a cool cause and I’m super happy to be part of it.”

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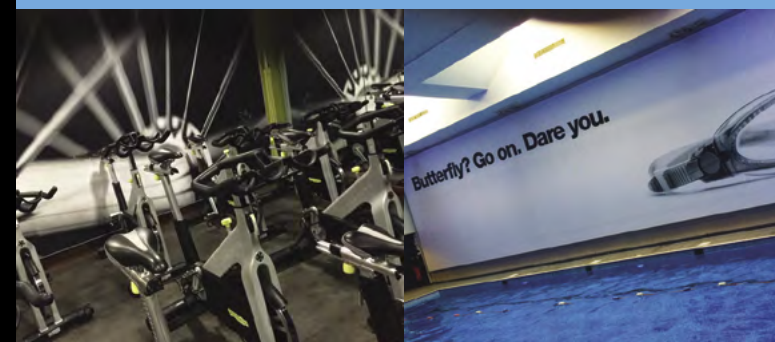
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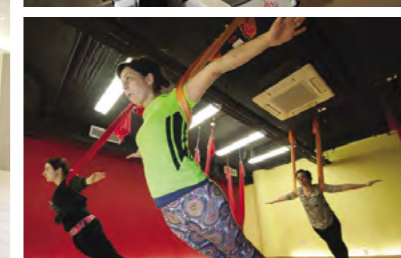
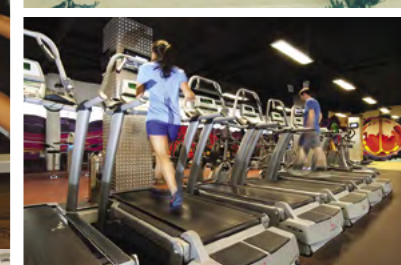
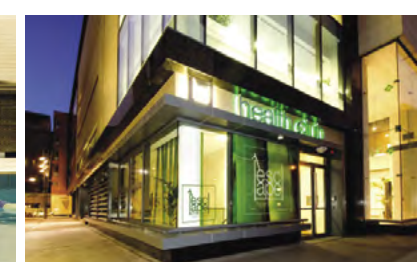
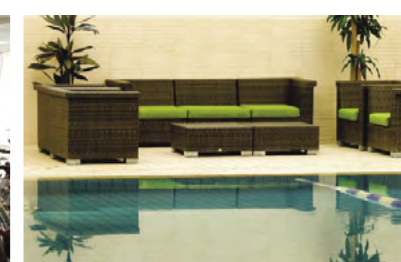
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THE GOODBODY RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT BURSARY

In October, Goodbody – Ireland’s longest established stockbroking firm – announced their sponsorship of the ‘Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary’, which is aiding the development and progression of 12 players’ off-field careers and academic studies. The firm’s market-leading team will also work with Rugby Players Ireland to provide career, business development, retirement transition and financial guidance to their members.

Speaking at the launch of the new partnership, Goodbody Managing Director, Roy Barrett, said:

“For many of today’s players, the road to professional rugby begins at a young age. It can be incredibly difficult to juggle demanding training schedules alongside academic studies or career training. Similarly, moving on from professional rugby to a new potential career can be daunting.

“Through our new partnership with Rugby Players Ireland and our sponsorship of the Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary, we are directly supporting players who are going through these transitions and helping them on the journey to their post-rugby careers. We want to make a lasting contribution to their lives and believe this kind of educational support can have a major impact over the long term.”

Also speaking at the launch of the new partnership, CEO of Rugby Players Ireland, Simon Keogh, said:

“Our mission at Rugby Players Ireland is to act in the best interests of our members and source and provide the opportunities they need to be the best they can be – both as professional athletes and successful individuals. This new partnership with Goodbody symbolises everything we strive to achieve for our members and their sponsorship of the bursary programme is life-changing for the successful recipients. We are delighted to welcome Goodbody on board and we look forward to maximising the potential of our partnership.”

The 12 Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary recipients were selected by a board of trustees, based on submissions from Rugby Players Ireland members. Sitting on the board of trustees was, Professor Roger Downer President Emeritus at UL, Denis Hurley, Rugby Players Ireland Operations Manager, Sarah Moriarty, Goodbody, and Finbarr Griffin, Goodbody. The 12 recipients are made up of four players from the womens programme, four academy players and four senior players.



The recipients of the Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Bursary are:

Alex McHenry
Munster, Academy

Azur Allison
Ulster, Academy

Ciara Griffin
Munster, Ireland Women’s

Claire Boles
Ulster, Ireland Women’s 7s

Claire Keohane
Ireland Women’s 7s

Darren Sweetnam
Munster, Senior

Dorothy Wall
Ireland Women’s 7s

Dylan Tierney
Connacht, Academy

Eoin McKeon
Connacht, Senior

Hugh O’Sullivan
Leinster, Academy

John Andrew
Ulster, Senior

Tom Daly
Leinster, Senior



A WISE HEAD ON YOUNG SHOULDERS

A RECIPIENT OF THE GOODBODY RUGBY PLAYERS
IRELAND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT BURSARY, HUGH
O’SULLIVAN SPOKE TO RYAN BAILEY OF THE42.IE

HUGH O’SULLIVAN

There are whispers and murmurs. ‘Watch this kid, the next big thing.’ ‘A special talent.’ ‘He’ll make it.’ Word can spread quickly on the sidelines of a player with prodigious potential.

For three years, Hugh O’Sullivan of Belvedere College — the fullback, nominally a scrum-half — was the outstanding player at Leinster Schools level, helping his side to back-to-back Senior Cup crowns at the RDS.

Anyone who saw O’Sullivan in the black and white, knew he was the player everyone was talking about. And why. He kicked, created, scored and consistently stood out, earning Leinster and Ireland underage representative honours throughout his time in Belvedere.

There are too many games to go through here, but one of the most memorable was a Senior Cup quarter-final against much-fancied St Michael’s College at Donnybrook on a miserably wet Sunday afternoon.

Both teams were stocked with talent. Max Kearney and Ruadhan Byron were demons for Belvo in the back row, while Michael’s had the highly-rated Harry Byrne, Ryan Baird and Jack Dunne in their ranks. But it was O’Sullivan at fullback who stood out, scoring two tries during a first-half salvo which ultimately settled the tie in Belvo’s favour.

The Meath native would go on to lift his second Senior Cup crown with the Great Denmark Street school the following month in the RDS, before earning a place in the Leinster academy having been earmarked by Peter Smyth from a long way out. When you know, you know.

A couple of weeks ago, Smyth joked with O’Sullivan shortly after the 20-year-old had come off the bench in the home Guinness Pro14 victory over the Dragons to make his senior professional debut.

“Make sure you don’t get stuck on one cap now,” the Leinster academy manager said in jest, while also fully aware of the perils and pitfalls for any young player looking to fulfil their promise.

That O’Sullivan’s debut appearance came as early as it did in his development — he’s still just in his second year in the province’s academy — is a measure of his undoubted ability and just how highly-rated he is by the coaches at Leinster.

While being introduced for the final 13 minutes of a facile home victory is a nice way to ease yourself in, his appearance, becoming the 1,270th player to represent Leinster, was just reward for the hard work he had logged over the summer.

“It was a great experience,” he tells The42. “And for it to come as early as it did, it was probably sooner than expected but it was great to get off the mark. It does become something of a monkey on the back for guys in the academy trying to get that first cap, so it was really good to get it early in the season.”



O’Sullivan came on for Jamison Gibson-Park, who won man of the match for his two-try performance that night, and looked at home behind a dominant Leinster pack, exhibiting his crisp distribution skills as well as a smart game intelligence, which was evident in his ability to switch between scrum-half and 15 at schools level.

The Ireland U20 international was one of the standout performers for Noel McNamara’s side during last year’s Six Nations and Junior World Championship, with O’Sullivan putting his head down during the summer to earn a chance from Leo Cullen.

“I think every player in the academy sees these international blocks in November and the Six Nations as chances to get a few caps under the belt,” he continues.

“Even training-wise, with so many guys going to be away with Ireland, the gaps need to be filled and there will be chances to stake a claim there — but at the end of the day it comes down to what you do if you get that chance.

“You can train as well as you want but getting those chances and taking them are massive. You’ve got to be prepared to take that chance and really go well because it’s not really enough just to play and get through the game, you have to show you’re contributing something extra that wasn’t here before.

“That’s really my ambition, to try and add something to the squad.”

Coming from a family steeped in GAA tradition, O’Sullivan previously represented Meath in football at U14 and U16 level before turning his attention to rugby when he attended Belvedere, but his dual-ability is evident in the way he plays.

An energetic character on the field, O’Sullivan has looked to specialise in the nine jersey since entering the Leinster set-up and his strong playmaking abilities, footballing skills, as well as a penchant for a snipe-try, has impressed the coaches, with Felipe Contepomi working closely with him.

“It sounds very simple but kicking and passing,” he says of the areas of his game he has been working on. “I didn’t play a lot of nine in school, so it has just been really about specialising in the role and, for example, to have a kicking session every Wednesday has been really helpful, just for consistent practice.

“Because I didn’t play there on a regular basis in school, it’s important to really nail down those fundamentals of the position.”

With Luke McGrath and Gibson-Park the two senior nines at Leinster, there is no shortage of competition down the ranks with Munster-bound



“**You can train as well as you want but getting those chances and taking them are massive. You’ve got to be prepared to take that chance and really go well because it’s not really enough just to play and get through the game, you have to show you’re contributing something extra that wasn’t here before.**”

Nick McCarthy and former Blackrock nine Patrick Patterson also pushing for opportunities.

O’Sullivan and Patterson shared duties during Leinster’s run to victory in the inaugural Celtic Cup competition, but it was the former who travelled with the senior team as 24th man for the season-opener in Cardiff, ahead of that senior debut at the RDS in September.

“It has been my first year based up at UCD training with the seniors,” he explains. “Even getting up to speed with the pace and intensity they train at took a while to get used to but it comes. You just have to be confident.

“The amount you learn up there, Felipe has been great and a great help to me. The small stuff he says to you off the pitch and even sitting at the back of team meetings. I’ve certainly no input in them but try and go to as many as them as I can just to soak up as much information.”

A willingness to learn is patently important in the development of any young player, but O’Sullivan — even as his rugby career begins to take off — maintains a very level-headed and grounded outlook. He’s not one to get carried away.

While many of his academy team-mates will be combining rugby with their academic studies across campus at UCD, O’Sullivan instead opted for Trinity College to study Philosophy, Political Science, Economics and Sociology (PPES) after his Leaving Certificate.

Now in the second year of a four-year course, balancing the two is a huge challenge, particularly given the broad-ranging nature of his studies, but it is something — through the help and advice of Rugby Players Ireland — which he has embraced.

“It’s really about time management and planning ahead. I know it sounds simple but I’ve sort of built

good habits around that from my Leaving Cert. In Belvo we’d train two or three mornings and nights a week and I built pretty good habits around that.

“UCD are used to it with Leinster so they can do modules over a longer period of time, whereas in Trinity they’re not used to it as much but they’ve still been very helpful to me.

“A lot of it is just planning ahead with lecturers, flagging things early as opposed to letting them know a week after an assignment was due that you haven’t done it.

“Overall, I find it a good balance as when you go home from rugby, you have to do some work and on your days off, you’ve to knuckle down and do some college work. I don’t get in to a lot of lectures because of training or whatever so there’s a lot to do but it keeps me busy, and that’s good.”

The importance placed on completing a degree is seen in the work of the province’s academies, in conjunction with Rugby Players Ireland, and as O’Sullivan continues through Trinity, will need to narrow his focus on an area he’d like to pursue going forward.

“It is quite diverse in that sense,” he laughs. “I dropped sociology last year and will bring it down to a major in one of the remaining subjects, probably economics and politics.

“When I was coming out of school, I wasn’t 100% sure what I wanted to do but really enjoyed and had an interest in economics. That’s probably an avenue I’ll look to go down but I’ll focus on getting the degree as that’s the hardest thing.

“With rugby, you obviously have to focus on that and giving it your all to be the best player you can be, but I enjoy having something else. Hopefully I can get a lot of connections from the rugby side of things and that’ll help me get that dual career Rugby Players Ireland are always talking about.”

Earlier this year, O’Sullivan was announced as one of 12 recipients of the ‘Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary’, which is designed to aid the development and progression of a player’s off-field career and academic studies.

The 20-year-old, like he has done on the pitch, stood out as an obvious candidate for the programme.



“I just really enjoy my course and have a huge interest in it,” he continues. “I could have gone to UCD with a lot of the academy lads but Trinity offered the course I wanted to do, so was prepared to make that decision.

“It has gone really well so far, and being part of this bursary is a great opportunity for me as living away from home in Dublin while balancing rugby and college can obviously present its challenges.

I’m living with my older brother at the moment and cycle in and out of Trinity but it’s long days because you come from training or the gym. It’s a bit of a cliché but planning ahead is key, between having meals ready to eat between training and lectures or whatever. I’m well used to it at this stage though.

As for the rugby, O’Sullivan has found himself back in the Leinster squad as Cullen’s side bid to bounce back from the Champions Cup defeat in Toulouse.

“This season has been really enjoyable so far,” he adds. “Obviously getting caps is great but I’ve learned you can’t really control those things so I just focus on the day-to-day stuff and getting all that right. I’ve kept the head down and just been plugging away.

“You really want to be ambitious but at this stage I don’t really have any sort of targets for myself. I’m just trying to control myself, whether that’s training or playing as well as I can every week and hard work normally pays off, both on and off the field.

“If things happen off the back of that, things happen and hopefully I’ll take the chances.”

A wise head on young shoulders.



FLYING HIGH

Munster and Ireland's Darren Sweetnam has set his ambitions sky high

Ireland and Munster rugby star, Darren Sweetnam, has become a regular feature in red and green jerseys over the past two years, but the former Cork hurler has also been striving to reach new heights off the rugby pitch, as he aims to pursue another passion to cement his post-rugby career.

Developing a love for flying at a young age, Darren began his journey to become a pilot in July of this year. Studying and flying out of the Atlantic Flight Training Academy in Cork, Darren's goal is to secure his Private Pilot's Licence and then continue his training, to eventually qualify as a commercial pilot.

"I always had a big interest in flying", explains the Munster winger. "Even going away on holidays with my family, being on the plane – I was always fascinated at how it works and I always thought it was cool to be soaring across the sky, thousands of feet up off the ground."

A talented sportsman, Sweetnam was a noted hockey player in his youth, while he also turned out for Cork in the All-Ireland Championship. However, having turned his attentions to rugby, Sweetnam is thankful for the opportunity to represent the Province.

Having been included in Joe Schmidt's squad for the November Series, the Cork native retains strong ambitions of securing a seat on the plane to Japan next year. However, having been in and out of Irish squad's over the past year, he appreciates that nothing in the sport is set in stone. With the guidance of Rugby Players Ireland, he has focused his down-time on developing a career that has become a lifelong goal off the field.

"I know that although working as a professional rugby player is an exciting and fortunate career to have, it certainly won't be something I can maintain until retirement age."

"Becoming a pilot has always been one of my life-long dreams and thanks to the Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary, I am going to be able to continue to pursue my dream."



GUILT TRIP

TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS

By leveraging the profile of rugby, Tackle Your Feelings set out to ignite widespread and sustainable change across the island of Ireland in how people think and act around their mental wellbeing. As the first phase of the campaign draws to a close, a new report demonstrates that Tackle Your Feelings has had a real impact on Irish people's attitudes towards mental wellbeing.



When it was launched in March 2016, the goals of the campaign were to a) reduce stigma around mental wellbeing; b) change behaviours and c) create a movement whereby people began to champion the message of the campaign in their own communities. The success of these objectives has been assessed and evidenced using a specially tailored impact measurement framework devised in association with MT Impact Consulting.

A

Tackle Your Feelings generated encouraging findings in relation to breaking down stigma in individuals. This was achieved through a role modelling aspect that saw almost 1/3 of professional rugby players in Ireland supporting the campaign in some form. 8 rugby ambassador videos were also released, while campaign content was viewed over 23 million times across social media.

On an individual level, there was a reduction in the number of people perceiving barriers in terms of looking after their own mental wellbeing while target audiences reported greater levels of comfort in talking about their feelings. As a result of attending Tackle Your Feelings events, workshop participants increased their levels of comfort by 60%.

B

The development of the Tackle Your Feelings App, launched in February 2018, has been a significant mechanism by which the campaign has started to change people's behaviours. By equipping people with the tools and techniques to proactively work on their own mental wellbeing, the App has impacted upon people in 35 countries around the world.

Tackle Your Feelings Workshops have also been a success, with evidence to show that participants increased their confidence in their ability to look after their own mental wellbeing. Furthermore, participants reported becoming more proactive and taking more frequent action to look after their mental wellbeing.

C

As the campaign progressed, both people and institutions stepped forward to become champions of the campaign message within their own communities. Examples include St. Mary's College, Rathmines who brandished the Tackle Your Feelings logo throughout their Leinster Schools' Senior Cup matches of 2017 and 2018. Furthermore, several multinational companies offered their non-monetary support to amplify reach and impact.

With tackleyourfeelings.com being visited in 130 countries, the movement also has a global impetus. This year Tackle Your Feelings will launch in Australia through the AFL Players Association, the AFL Coaches Association and Zurich Australia.

Speaking about the results of the report Simon Keogh, CEO, Rugby Players Ireland said: "Tackle Your Feelings has been an integral part of Rugby Players Ireland for the past three years, so it's in-credibly encouraging to see such positive, tangible results. Mental wellbeing problems can have a significant impact on our overall health and it's estimated that one in four people will experience some mental health problems in their lifetime. Tackle Your Feelings aims to equip people with the tools they need to be more proactive in looking after their mental wellbeing and we hope that the momentum from this campaign grows and that people continue to tackle their feelings on a daily basis."

Anthony Brennan, CEO, Zurich Ireland said: "It is fantastic to see the positive impact that the Tackle Your Feelings campaign continues to have on people's mental wellbeing. Zurich supports the approach that taking steps to build mental resilience helps people better prepare and cope with life events. By being proactive and taking steps each day to be honest about our own mental wellbeing, this can help us achieve greater satisfaction and enjoyment in life."

The launch of the Tackle Your Feelings App last year has given people, including our own employees, a great tool to manage their own mental wellbeing and Zurich is delighted to continue its association with Rugby Players Ireland and the Tackle Your Feelings campaign, as we look forward to building on the campaign's success to date."





PLENTY DONE, MORE TO DO

As she takes her leave of Rugby Players Ireland and Tackle Your Feelings, Créde Sheehy-Kelly reflects on her time leading the campaign.

CRÉDE SHEEHY-KELLY

There is little better than sitting back and reflecting on a job well done.

The dressing room plays host to many contrasting emotions but following a hard-earned victory, players are slow to leave as they savour the moment.

The same can't be said for an office following a productive day but dinner will taste all the sweeter back at home.

Last month, Créde Sheehy-Kelly took her leave of Rugby Players Ireland having led the Tackle Your Feelings campaign for the past three years. Now, having had time to process her transition out of the rugby environment, Créde can reflect on an immensely satisfying period in her career.

"Tackle Your Feelings feels like something I was meant to do," Créde believes. "In a personal context, a friend died by suicide in 2014. That was a catalyst

for me wanting to change society but at that point I didn't know how I might do it. You need a platform.

"Working with elite athletes in my own capacity as a sports psychologist and then with Rugby Players Ireland, I observed the stigma that seemed to surround mental wellbeing in that competitive environment. But I also noticed the difference it made when some of these elite athletes decided to work on it. Helping people come to that decision became a big driver in the original vision of the campaign."

First launched in March 2016, Tackle Your Feelings leveraged the profile of rugby to ignite sustainable change across the island of Ireland in how people think and act around their mental wellbeing. Over the course of three impactful years, almost 100 professional rugby players in Ireland offered their support to the campaign.

Foremost amongst these were the Tackle Your Feelings Ambassadors including Jack McGrath, Hannah Tyrrell, Cathal Sheridan, Jake Heenan, Shane Jennings, Ian Keatley, Marcus Horan and several Ulster Rugby players. Having such prominent rugby figures come forward ensured that the appeal of the initiative was widespread, with Tackle Your Feelings related content being viewed over 23 million times.



"I can still remember meeting one of the players and their story really resonating with me on a personal level. It was quite an emotional experience. It really made me take stock and acknowledge how privileged I was to have been trusted with bringing their stories to the public and in a way that still protected the individual at the heart of it.

"We would never have had a campaign if they weren't so brave in sharing their stories. The success of the campaign is theirs to be enjoyed and shared with everyone at Rugby Players Ireland and at Zurich, who were so invested in it. It was a massive team effort."

While the campaign presented some challenges, the structure of the overall strategy of the Tackle Your Feelings plan ensured that there were a lot of different timepoints and projects to be completed. Créde points out significant milestones such as the launching of the Tackle Your Feelings App and the completion of the Final Impact Report, but she admits that some moments stick out for more touching reasons.

"Something special happened in the room on the night of the Leinster Panel Discussion," Créde remarks. "The guys on stage opened up and the audience followed their lead. It became a really powerful experience. In the months after the event, someone got in touch with me to tell me about the difference that the Tackle Your Feelings campaign had made to their life – and for that person it all started with the panel discussion that evening.

"Hearing stories like that were real highlights of the campaign for me. When you see Tackle Your Feelings connect with individuals and you see the difference it is making within them, that's where you get the motivation to keep driving on."

From now though, Créde will be going back to her performance-focused roots in a performance psychology role overseas. However, her contribution was keenly felt right up until her last hours in Rugby Players Ireland HQ. As Phase One of Tackle Your Feelings drew to a close, she was

instrumental in securing additional funding for the campaign and ensuring that Tackle Your Feelings continues to grow and evolve in her absence.

"It's the right time to step away," she admits. "I completed what I set out to do and that is very satisfying. I think I have taken it as far as I can for the moment and the end of Phase One is a natural break in the cycle. There is loads of room for someone new to come in with energy and a new vision to take it on and build on what we have in place. Ultimately, the campaign will benefit from the fresh input.







"I'll really miss Tackle Your Feelings. It has been a huge part of my life for the last four years, but I have a few more ventures and ideas that I want to take on and explore. It is a good time to pursue those challenges. It's also important that I do step away and allow my successor to take it in the direction they feel is right.

"Most importantly though, is that the players continue to feel connected to Tackle Your Feelings. It is their campaign. I sincerely hope that they can see the impact and the difference they have made."

I can still remember meeting one of the players and their story really resonating with me on a personal level. It was quite an emotional experience.



TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS HIGHLIGHTS

MARCH 2016 Breaking Down Stigma	Jack McGrath, Hannah Tyrrell and Cathal Sheridan help launch the Tackle Your Feelings campaign
MAY 2016 TYF Public Panel Discussions tour the country Dr Eddie Murphy, as the campaign's advisor, leads the conversation	
SEPTEMBER 2016 More players add their voice	Jake Heenan and Shane Jennings urge people to open up
DECEMBER 2016 Screen Time Ominplex Cinemas announce their support for TYF	
APRIL 2017 Building a legacy	Departing Connacht coach Pat Lam backs the players
MAY 2017 Activating the Message People around the country are invited to tackle The Beast!	
SEPTEMBER 2017 TYF goes north Darren Cave, Craig Gilroy, Stuart McCloskey and Andrew Trimble provide rare insights	
FEBRUARY 2018 Changing Behaviours	The Tackle Your Feelings App is launched 
MARCH 2018 Creating a Movement	Ownership of the campaign transfers to the public through TYF Workshops and Provincial Activations
SEPTEMBER 2017 Refreshing the Call John Cooney speaks out	
OCTOBER 20018 Chapter One TYF impact is evident as the first phase draws to a close	



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PICKING UP THE PACE

IRISH WINGER ALISON MILLER IS WELL ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

ALISON MILLER

It was nothing out of the ordinary. Alison Miller in full flight has been a familiar sight on the Irish wing since 2010. With a strike rate that averages a try every two games, the Laois woman has been a key figure for Ireland in each of her 43 caps. So, as she set off in the early moments of the Six Nations clash with Italy in February, we all knew something was going to happen.

What transpired was not on our radar.

As she hit the 4G surface in Donnybrook, it was immediately obvious that Miller was in trouble. Despite the relative security of the wing, Miller relishes the physical nature of rugby and at some stage during a match you can be sure that she'll have to shake off a niggler. Except, this was nothing of the sort. The sight of her teammates shying away told us that something very serious had happened.

For the non-medical practitioners amongst us, Miller suffered the same fate as Seamus Coleman when playing for the Republic of Ireland against Wales last year. It was almost 11 months post-injury before Coleman, a professional athlete, returned. A

compound ankle fracture for an amateur athlete forecast many bleak months ahead.

"I didn't look!" she recalls, "I probably would have fainted. I just knew by the pain. It felt like it was going off to the wrong side. Like all rugby players I've had operations and breaks before, but this was definitely the worst pain. I told the physio it was broken, and he said: 'No, don't worry it mightn't be.' Then he came over... 'no, it's broken!'"

At 33 and faced by a long road to recovery, it would have been easy for Miller to walk away from the game for good, concentrate on her teaching and be happy with a memory bank that includes a Grand Slam, a Six Nations title and a famous victory over New Zealand in the 2014 World Cup. But with strong sporting genes and a competitive thirst that needs constant quenching, that prospect never came into focus. Once she managed to get moving again, Miller felt that she was back in the fold. Her positive outlook also had her find a silver lining in her lengthy lay-off.

"[During the season] you're in a heavy training load, especially when you're not a professional. You're working, up early, out late, driving here, there and everywhere. It takes a toll after a good few years. You get tired and you sometimes question why you're doing it. But when you get an injury you realise how lucky and privileged you are to be in a position to be able to play – that gave me the motivation and energy to get back into it."

There were the obvious hurdles to surmount along the way, most notably through her work as a teacher at Coláiste Lorcáin in Castledermot. In what was a small mercy, Miller's injury occurred just prior to the mid-term break while the

subsequent onslaught of snow meant that she had further time to recuperate at home. Nevertheless, upon her return, Miller's classes had to be moved closer to the staffroom while many of her PE sessions had to be covered by her colleagues.

A talented sportswoman throughout her youth, Miller was a dab hand at a variety of sports including basketball, volleyball and hockey. However, despite having an array of relatives who have lined out for the Laois footballers, Gaelic Football was not one of them.

"I didn't grow up playing football because I was an athlete. I wasn't to go near a football. I was a heptathlete. You train in a very specific way for athletics and if you're out running around a GAA field, different fitness, different systems – it doesn't help."

The ability was always there though. Within months of hanging up her spikes, Miller was playing with the Laois Ladies football side, a source of great pride for her father Bobby. While Alison had never lined out on the football field, the inevitable kickabouts at home with her family had honed her skills. However, Bobby was always cognisant of his daughter's wider sporting ability and encouraged her no matter what she turned her hand to.

Sadly, Bobby passed away while stationed on the line for a Laois Senior Football Championship fixture between Arles-Killeen and The Rock in June 2007. He never saw Alison line out to such great aplomb on the rugby field.

"My dad didn't play rugby, but he always had an interest in it. When I was 13 or 14 we tried to start a girls' team in Carlow. I was really interested until it fell through, but it was always something at the back of my mind. After that summer my father died, I went back to college and said, 'well I'll give this a go, I've nothing to lose.' I loved it. I loved the pace, the physicality, the freedom of being able to run."

"My first ever game was for Portlaoise against Cill Dara and I remember knowing that once I got my hands on the ball I could do something. I scored a good few tries that day and they were like 'you're not going back to any of your other sports.' We were the lowest division possible, but we won that and went on to win the All-Ireland Division 2 and a few years later made it up to Division 1."

While Miller's rugby destiny seemed bright, she had to go searching for opportunities in the game. A failed trial with Leinster prompted her to look west. Deep down she knew that she was good enough to perform at a higher level and over several consecutive weekends, she travelled to Connacht in the hope that her potential might shine through. It did and later that season she was lining out for Ireland in the 2010 Six Nations.

"No one had noticed me! When you're playing in a lower league I don't know if anyone goes around to watch, which is a pity. That's where you get a small club with GAA girls or soccer girls just giving it a go. They could actually be hidden gems. I helped out with the Tullow Women's 7s this year – the talent over there is phenomenal. Some are very raw, but they also could be something very special."

The interprovincial series has seen several new faces come to the fore of the women's game in recent years. The likes of Miller, Munster's Eimear Considine and Aoife McDermott of Leinster have all used the competition as a platform to open the door into the international environment. However, further afield some still question the quality and purpose of the women's provincial sides. Miller is quick to disparage such sentiments.

"The interpros are a very important part of women's rugby in Ireland. Personally, it gave me the opportunity to play for Ireland. Some people are lucky to get that opportunity but for others, playing for your province is a huge thing. Why take that opportunity away from people? It's a huge chance to represent your club and province. It's a great achievement."

"There might be a player in a club who is potentially very good, maybe a little raw. Then they go and play with their province and suddenly, you see their progression. They develop their skills and bring that knowledge back to their club. They become an option for the Irish coaches who wouldn't have seen them before without their skills and abilities having been honed and harnessed in the same way. When you're with the provinces you're playing with a better standard and they're pushing you and you're striving to be better. You learn things at a really quick rate."

Clearly disappointed to have missed so much rugby this year, the November Series came too soon. However, with the help of Joe Montgomery and Ed Slattery at the IRFU, she is picking up the pace.

"I'm at the stage where I'm back running and I'm getting there. There's a lot of work to do, but it's positive that there's no pain. It's onwards and upwards from here. Once you're running you feel you're back at it. You're on the pitch again at least."

"I'd love to get back for the Six Nations. I think it's definitely doable. Injuries are injuries, but I'm on the right path."

"I didn't look!" she recalls, "I probably would have fainted. I just knew by the pain. It felt like it was going off to the wrong side. Like all rugby players I've had operations and breaks before, but this was definitely the worst pain."



FORCE IS FORCE

Renowned expert **Dr Steve Broglio** of the University of Michigan will co-supervise past player study

Loris Karius. A name that Liverpool fans may wish to forget, but never will. Just two minutes after a collision with Sergio Ramos in the Champions League Final in May, the German goalkeeper made the first of two calamitous mistakes that contributed significantly to Real Madrid's success. The second served to confirm expert suspicions that all was not as it seemed.

In the days following the game, Karius was sent for a head scan at Massachusetts General Hospital amid concern at his reaction to a blow to the head he received when challenging Ramos in the air. Footage of the game was also reviewed at length. A statement later released on behalf of Dr Ross Zafonte, an authority on head-trauma injuries suffered by NFL players who assessed the Liverpool goalkeeper, revealed that the player had been concussed.

"It makes sense. Playing when concussed is going to affect decision-making and reaction times," says Dr Steve Broglio who is a concussion expert with the CARE (Concussion, Assessment, Research and Education) Consortium and an Associate Professor at the University of Michigan. "Probably 1/3 of people that have concussion don't show symptoms for up to an hour post-incident, so he might not have known and therefore didn't report it."

Understandably, Peter McCabe, the Chief Executive of the Brain Injury Association 'Headway' expressed his concern at the time taken to identify the issue. As one of the biggest games in club football, McCabe queried the message that it sent to young players around the globe and urged that protocols be urgently reviewed. A further concussion row in the game also took place following Morocco's World Cup game with Portugal when Nordin Amrabat took to the field just five days after a head injury.

While football might not carry the same apparent risks as rugby, these events have highlighted that no sport is devoid of any such dangers. But while rugby would seem to be leading the way in terms of how it deals with head injuries, Dr Steve Broglio insists that they remain largely undefined.

Broglio, who is assisting Dr Fiona Wilson in her study of the overall general health and wellness of retired athletes, began his concussion research over twenty years ago as a University student. Now, as one of the leading authorities on the subject, Irish rugby stands to gain from his expertise over the course of the study. But while extensive research has taken place, Broglio stresses that there remains no hard-and-fast rule when it comes to concussion.

"Everyone responds differently," Broglio states. "Someone will take a really hard hit and they're out for two days. Somebody else might take a benign hit and they find themselves out for two months. It all varies. It's the same with any injury though – people sprain their ankle and can be running in a few hours, others in a few days.

"Some people will have problems but not everybody will. Every sport carries a risk of some sort. We need to understand what the risk is. People can then make an informed decision if they want to participate in that sport or we'd like to think that the powers that be may choose to modify the game if a risk is actually there."

In his role as Co-Chair of the CARE Consortium, Broglio is in the midst of a study that has enrolled over 45,000 University students across the United States. The programme invites athlete students in their Freshman year to provide a baseline test which will be followed by a series of intermittent tests throughout



their college career. Thereafter, the students will participate in further online evaluations. These battery of tests ultimately provide multiple snapshots of an individual's cognitive functioning over time.

"Every sport is captured in the study, from American Football through to Track & Field. The majority will never have suffered a concussion but we want to capture and follow them. Across this catchment, people will have declines. For example, some will develop ALS at an early age. But what people see is that this person may have played American Football and therefore, in their opinion, the disease must have happened because of it. Of course, plenty of people have played these sports and never got ALS, or anything at all.

"What we see is some very small changes in these individuals. There is no clinical significance to these changes. For instance, you might go to a fast food restaurant at lunch. Your blood levels go up but that doesn't mean you are going to have a heart attack that afternoon. But we have to consider what these subtle things might look like when they are 60 years old. We'll track the students over the next 30-40 years to try and understand who is having declines, and why. The reality of life is that some people will."

With Dr Fiona Wilson now leading research in the area in Ireland, Broglio believes that her work represents a unique opportunity for the study of concussion in sport. "From my perspective, Ireland is the size of Indiana. That means that there is great access to everyone on the island from which you can get a great, in-depth analysis. Fiona has designed the study really well and I'm excited to see how the results play out. It will take a few years, but it will be worth it when we get there."

If you are a retired professional rugby player or a retired women's international, please contact Denis Hurley (denis@rugbyplayersireland.ie) for more information.

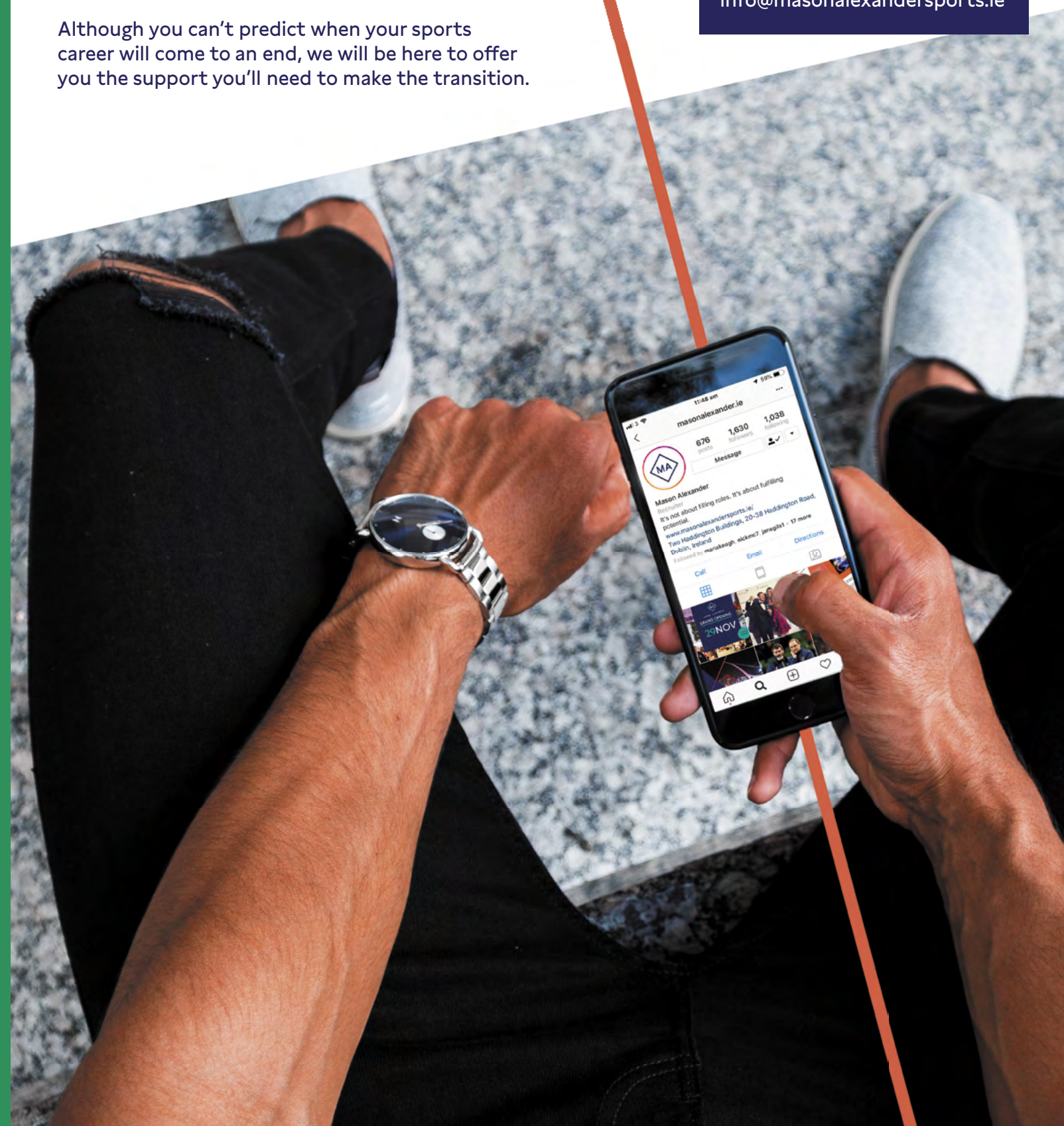
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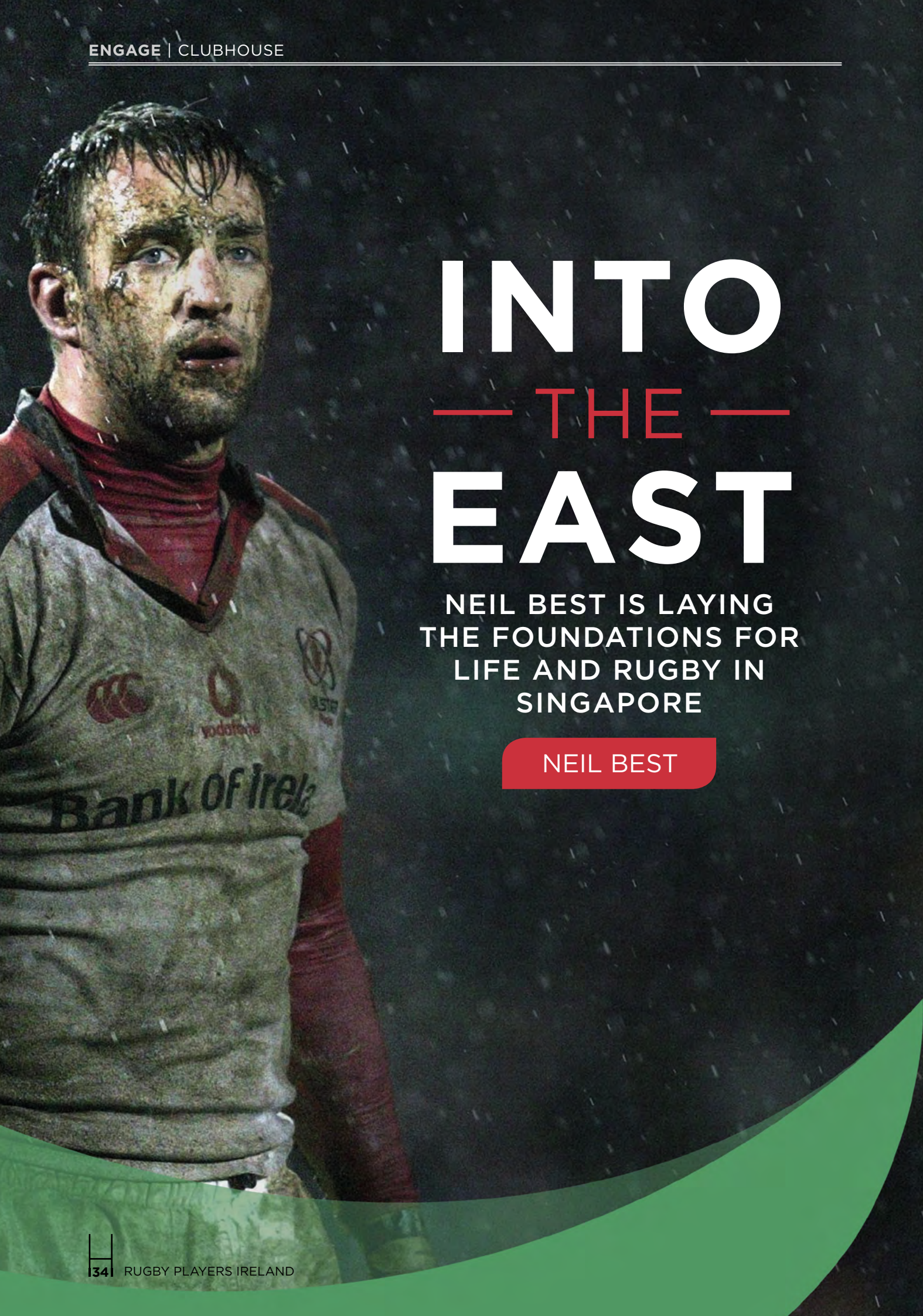
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INTO — THE — EAST

NEIL BEST IS LAYING
THE FOUNDATIONS FOR
LIFE AND RUGBY IN
SINGAPORE

NEIL BEST

We have chosen to wipe much of the game from recall, but many of us still remember Neil Best's abrasive introduction against France in 2007. With 15 minutes to go, the Ulster flanker replaced Simon Easterby at Croke Park as Ireland neared a historic victory.

Best made a spectacular impact, turning over rucks, making huge hits and generally giving rise to hopes that he'd be the Irish enforcer for years to come. As Keith Wood succinctly put it, "[he] looks slightly mad. He was literally tearing into everything."

Cult status probably awaited Best until Vincent Clerc's late, late intervention. Having flirted with the Grand Slam dream, it was a stab to the heart of Irish rugby. Barring an enjoyable jolt against England two weeks later, Eddie O'Sullivan's side largely struggled to recover their true form.

Individuals also paid the price. Following an ill-fated World Cup later that year, Best returned to Ravenhill to find that Stephen Ferris had latched onto his No.6 shirt and was reluctant to part ways. It was one example of a wider changing of the guard. At the end of the season, Best joined Northampton Saints.

"I would have loved to have played for Ulster again," Best says with a hint of regret. "I left at the same time as guys like Roger Wilson and Tommy Bowe, but they were lucky enough to get to return to Belfast to finish their careers. I loved my time in England and playing with Ireland, but there is nothing quite like winning with your hometown club in front of fans who are your friends, your neighbours, your people."

Today, Best is at a far remove from his kin. Based in the Far East with his family, the 18-times capped international works as a Loss Adjuster with Braemar Adjusting. Having firmly settled into his new surroundings with his young family, he has set about building another familial network through Singapore Irish Rugby Club.

"We're starting from scratch, so it will be a great learning experience overall. We've been involved in everything really, from getting a location to designing and sourcing kit, securing sponsors, putting effective communications in place and recruiting players. We want to help grow the sport and levels of participation in the region, so we haven't been taking them from elsewhere!"

"There are a lot of Irish families here and with Irish rugby going so well there has been a lot of interest. Thankfully, the branding hasn't put others off and we've added kids from the UK, India, Taiwan, the Philippines, Russia, Vietnam, Australia and Singapore to our ranks. In a few months we may have the most diverse team ever to play the game!"



“There are a lot of Irish families here and with Irish rugby going so well there has been a lot of interest. **Thankfully, the branding hasn't put others off and we've added kids from the UK, India, Taiwan, the Philippines, Russia, Vietnam, Australia and Singapore to our ranks.**

Diversity was always something Best embraced. A late starter in the game, he played soccer at school before beginning to dabble in some rugby with Malone and Belfast Harlequins for "a few quid in beer money." At the time he was completing a master's in chemical engineering at Queen's University because he didn't want to finish up with 'rugby union player' on his CV and nothing else.

His ferocious intensity quickly marked him out as a potential recruit for Ulster Rugby who were struggling to fill gaps in their back row. Best did that and more, making some of the toughest players in the game seem like pacifists by comparison – a style that seemed completely at odds with his persona.

"I never thought too far ahead. I just worked to tick off the next objective as they came by. At first, I wanted to play for Ulster, but as I made progress my ambitions grew. I've no doubt that David Humphreys' influence got me into the Irish squad. At the start, he literally talked me through games. He accelerated my development, my understanding, my positional sense. He didn't teach me to tackle though – I had that one sorted!"

"I was always keen to learn but when I began to get a bit of notice people always seemed surprised that I had any academic background because of my reputation. I'm glad I continued to study while I played because it has proved important to me in my own transition. Maintaining income and paying bills brings pressures and those pressures don't disappear.

"I began to think about life after rugby when I moved from Worcester Warriors to London Scottish. I was coming to the end. But the right move didn't materialise, nothing that grabbed me. Then I got a call about the role in Singapore and I just thought, why not?"

"Sometimes you don't find the interesting opportunity, it just finds you."

After three years, Best is firmly settled in Singapore and takes great pleasure in how his children enjoy their new environs. Shorts, t-shirts, lots of opportunities, the opening of Singapore Irish RFC means that they too will develop the values and skills that Best took from the game that made his name.

TOGETHER AGAIN

FORMER MUNSTER AND IRELAND FLANKER **DAVID WALLACE**
ON THE IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING IN TOUCH



When Keith Earls recovered brilliantly to make a last-ditch ankle tap on Elliot Daly, few of his myriad admirers realised that nubs of snow had started to come with the icy wind. It was a very cold St. Patrick's Day in London, but in retrospect most of those in green at Twickenham will remember that moment as a fragment of the summer that was to follow.

Many of those in attendance as Earls was named the Zurich Irish Rugby Players' Player of the Year dipped into their imaginations and told those seated beside them that they were there. They may have been watching from Seasons of Baggot Street or in the White House Bar in Limerick, but they say it anyway – and they were right.

David Wallace will certainly have told his kids that he played with the winger from Moyross. While Earls had the Guinness November Series in his sights, the former Munster and Ireland flanker travelled to New York alongside several of

his 2008 European Cup-winning teammates. Ten years on from their triumph in Cardiff, they were honoured at a fundraiser that will benefit underage rugby across the province and aid Munster community rugby programmes.

"That 2008 squad had so many characters," Wallace reminisces. "It's something that we have all missed, but we're getting better at catching up now and we relish those occasions when we do. Thankfully, we'll get to celebrate that win a few times over the next while and there's also the Rugby Players Ireland Clubhouse that helps to maintain the special connection that exists between teammates and past players."

Combining the traditional strengths of Munster Rugby: leadership, game management and a doggedness rarely matched in the professional game, Declan Kidney added a cutting edge to the insatiable Munster passion in 2008. Although the team was sprinkled with Irish talent, it was two south sea islanders paved the way in midfield while a legendary All Black drove the standards out wide. Waiting in the wings, Keith Earls undoubtedly learned from Lifeimi Mafi, Rua Tipoki and Doug Howlett as Munster shifted from outright passion to clinical rugby.

Incidentally, Earls is one of only three characters to whom Wallace refers, who continue to tog out every weekend. Mafi has lined out for Manawatu in this season's Mitre 10 Cup, Donnacha Ryan defies Father Time on a weekly basis in Paris, while a little closer to home the Players' Player is in the form of his life.

"It's great to see the lads doing so well," Wallace says. "In fairness, Strings and Donners made a good go of it too until recently. But now that the rugby is out of the way for the majority of the team it's great to be able to reconnect and bring everyone back together. You're all on a different pathway for a while, especially the lads who are still playing. You might only catch them after the game for a few seconds before someone else grabs them.

"I'd say I've caught up with Donners more in the past few weeks than I've been able to for the past few years," admits Wallace, who is now the Business

“
That 2008 squad had so many characters. It's something that we have all missed, but we're getting better at catching up now and we relish those occasions when we do.

Development Manager for Munster at Bank of Ireland. "In his new [Corporate Ambassador] role with Munster Rugby there is obviously a lot of crossover with my own work, but that aside we all need a bit of help to adapt in the day to day things. It's great to have that net of people there when you come out of the rugby space. It might be just be something very simple, but we all are at hand to help and give a bit of advice."

Of course, we hope that Keith Earls won't be joining them anytime soon. The winger was one of the new breed when he sat on the bench for the 16-13 victory over Toulouse. Having made his Munster bow as a 19-year old, Earls provided injury cover for Ireland's 2009 Grand Slam triumph just over a year later. Surrounded by the greatest dynasty of players ever assembled by club or country, the 2009 Lions tourist would have been forgiven for anticipating a trophy-laden career. However, as Wallace can attest to, injuries can wreak havoc with those plans.

"I don't run at all anymore," says Wallace who amassed 72 Test caps in addition to lining out for Munster over 200 times. Despite those impressive numbers, the flanker found himself on the sidelines for long periods of his career as he sought to overcome various ailments, the effects of which can still be felt today. "I have to stay away from the running. My knees, ankles, my back... I'm just not able to take it. Cycling and a bit of gymwork are my main outlets. I don't think I was ever a good long distance runner anyway!"

Wallace's household have duly followed his lead and cycling holidays have become a regular feature of the family calendar. Recently, Wallace also accompanied his brother Paul on the CROSS Charity Annual Cycle which raises money for cancer research. With many former teammates also participating, it is a few days that Wallace looks forward to every year.

"It's great fun. You get to know a lot of the faces that return year on year and the camaraderie inevitably builds. It can prove to be a little reminder of our playing days and our tours! It is very enjoyable but there is a lot of hard work, albeit less pressurised! Going into retirement I was looking forward to my weekends or getting involved in things without the burden of having to perform or meet expectations. Between training, matches and off-field responsibilities it is a very intense environment, physically and psychologically. You only realise that when you leave it.

"But there are also so many things that you miss, like the craic and the fraternity you have when you're playing. Before I can even remember, rugby has been a huge part of my life. When you retire it's all whittled away: your hobby, your career, your social network. It's important that the lads know they have that support group available to them when they come over to our side."



INTER NATIONAL RUGBY PLAYERS



Players' Council

On the eve of the World Rugby Awards in Monaco, some of the world's top players came together for the first time to discuss the major issues facing the game.

The newly formed International Rugby Players' Council is made up of senior men's and women's players from the XV's and 7s codes. The group gathered to debate topics such as the international calendar, concussion return-to-play protocols and better standards for emerging nations, before meeting with the governing body on the following day.

Council President and newly crowned World Rugby Player of the Year, Jonathan Sexton said: "Players need to have their voice heard on a global scale as the game continues to grow.

"There are massive issues that need addressing and governing bodies and unions must make decisions with the input of the men and women on the pitch.

"It was great to get together with so many of the top players from around the world, have a chat and choose the issues that we want to focus on, so

Omar and his team can push the agenda in 2019."

International Rugby Players CEO Omar Hassanein added: "The players decide the course of action for the year ahead and now we have to make sure that these priorities are properly addressed with World Rugby and other governing bodies.

"There are many major issues facing the modern game, so it was a real landmark moment to have the Players Council together in the same room, talking passionately about the sport and working out the best way forward."

The Players Council will continue to meet in person and by conference call in 2019.

ATTENDEES:

Pablo Matera, **Juan Martin Hernandez** (ARG) **Stephen Moore** (AUS), **Rachael Burford**, **Charlie Hayter** (ENG), **Akapusi Qera** (FIJI), **Guilhem Guirado**, **Thierry Dusautoir** (FRA), **Giorgi Nemsadze** (GEO), **Sene Naoupu**, **Jonathan Sexton** (President) **Rory Best**, **Jamie Heaslip**, **Rob Kearney**, **Brian O'Driscoll** (IRL), **Leonardo Gharaldini** (ITA), **Conrad Smith**, **Sarah Goss**, **DJ Forbes** (NZ) **Joe Rokocoko** (NZ / Pacific Rugby Players), **Andre Radoi** (Romania), **Vasily Artemyev** (RUS), **Chris Vui** (SAM), **John Smit**, **Warren Whitely**, **Bryan Habana**, **Jean De Villiers** (RSA), **Blaine Scully** (USA) & **Jamie Roberts** (WAL)



November Conference

As the eyes of the rugby world turned to Dublin in anticipation of Ireland's momentous clash with New Zealand, representatives of player associations from around the globe also took the time to discuss some key issues at our offices in the Irish capital.

Over three days, various areas of the game were discussed at length including the proposed international season structure, the women's game, player load and the 7s game.

With attendees including former All Black Conrad

Smith, former South African captain Jean de Villiers and Irish 15s and 7s player Sene Naoupu, this year's conference was addressed on day two by World Rugby senior executives. They briefed the players and association representatives on the proposed International Season calendar, with players raising welfare and travel questions as well as questioning the benefits to Emerging nations.

The three-day conference was hugely beneficial to Omar and his team at International Rugby Players, with their priorities and plans for 2019 guided by the views raised by the players and associations.



“The players decide the course of action for the year ahead and now we have to make sure that these priorities are properly addressed with World Rugby and other governing bodies.”

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THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT AND GREEN!

IN NOVEMBER, 16 YEAR-OLD BÉIBHINN PARSONS FROM BALLINASLOE ENTERED THE HISTORY BOOKS!

BÉIBHINN PARSONS

Béibhinn, what was it like to become the youngest ever Test international for Ireland against the USA?

I was extremely honoured and privileged to have been given the opportunity at such a young age to train, play and grow as a player amongst Ireland's best female rugby players. Most of all I was filled with an overwhelming pride to be able to represent my country and wear that green jersey at such a young age!

How did you feel before the game?

I had butterflies in my belly before the match of course, but when I was warming up on the sideline they flew away and were replaced by pure excitement and determination. I just wanted to get some ball in hand and show the super stand of supporters what I could do!

Were there many friends and family there to see it?

Yes, I think it's safe to say my friends and family took up a huge portion of the stand and definitely made their presence felt. I was welcomed onto the pitch by a huge roar! I am just so lucky to come from such a supportive community like Ballinasloe where I have encountered amazing coaches and lifelong friends. It made the day that bit more special and momentous. I was extremely touched and shocked by the amount of support I got!

What was the reaction at school on Monday morning?

I was welcomed into maths class with a big clap and 101 questions! Teachers and students were congratulating me, everyone was really intrigued and curious about the whole experience. There was a great buzz!

Were you surprised when you learned that you made the squad for the November series?

Until a year ago, I barely had any significant rugby experience under my belt. I had played in the U18 interpros and that was about it - I was probably more focused on my Gaelic football. Then all of a sudden, I was part of the u18 7s squad being coached by Adam Griggs. I competed in the Youth Olympic Qualifiers in France last April and everything seemed to take off from there!

Funnily enough, when I received an email from Adam about the Irish Senior XV's squad, I actually thought he had mixed up my email address, so I called him to tell him he'd made a mistake. When he assured me that it was meant for me it confused me even more! I was very surprised!

How did you get on with the group?

I thought it would be challenging trying to connect with women who were 10-15 (even 22!) years older than me. But once I got to know the girls and their personalities, I realised I had nothing to worry about. Everyone was looking out for me, guiding me through the experience, on and off the pitch. It was like one big family.

The age gap is just a running joke at this stage. Aoibheann [Reilly] and I found it quite funny when they started talking about their pension plans during camp. But then again, they must have found it funny seeing us do our homework! It

was great to have Aoibheann there. We are good friends from school so it helped us both to ease into the environment.

Speaking of schoolwork, what do you hope to do when you finish school?

I am not completely set on what I want to do after my Leaving Cert. I'm in 5th year, so thankfully I still have some time on my side. However, I would definitely think that I'd be interested in going down a medical or science route.

Were you given any advice from other players?

I picked up a lot over the few weeks, including some valuable advice from the back line on skills and moves and tips on how to manage my schoolwork with training. Fiona Coghlan actually gave me a little word of advice. She told me to keep a diary of the good and bad rugby experiences on and off the pitch throughout my career. I'll have so many rugby memories and I wouldn't want to forget any of them!

Away from the game, do you have any interests or hobbies?

Whenever I'm not in school or at training I just love to spend time with my friends and family. I can't wait for the Christmas break for all my siblings to be at home so we can all have some quality time together.

What are your hopes for 2019?

My aim for the coming months is to continue learning and growing as a player. I firmly believe you can never have enough knowledge. I have loads of things to work on, so I hope to gain as much as possible from every training session to improve on these skills. It will also be an important time for my academics. I need to stay up to date on my work and perform to the best of my ability in tests.



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