

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF
RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

WINTER 2019

FAMILY TIES

LUCY MULHALL



**FROM HARARE
TO BELFAST**

DAVID CURTIS

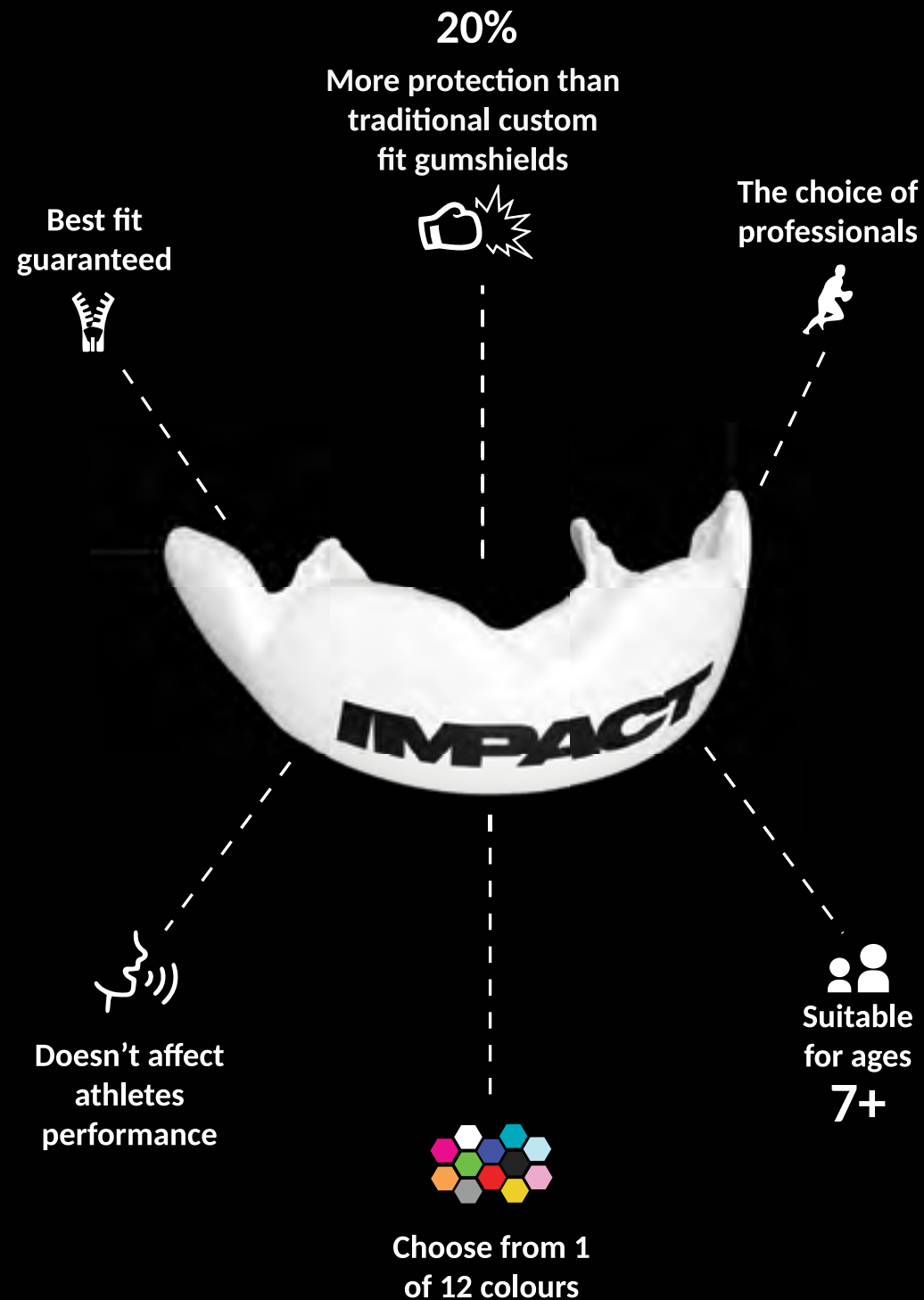
**A FAMILY
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Directors:

R. Kearney (Chairman), L. Galvin, C. Griffin, I. Henderson, E. McKeon, P. O'Mahony, G. O'Shea, J. Sexton, P. McKenna, M. Quinn, S. Keogh

CREDITS

Published by:

Rugby Players Ireland, Irish Rugby Union Players Association, Unit 8, Richview Office Park, Clonskeagh, Dublin 14

Phone: +353 1 676 9680

Email: info@rugbyplayersireland.ie

Web: www.rugbyplayersireland.ie

Facebook: facebook.com/RugbyPlayersIreland

Twitter: @RugbyPlayersIRE

Instagram: @rugbyplayersireland

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/irupa

Photography by Inpho (www.inpho.ie) unless otherwise stated.

Written & Edited by: Richard McElwee & Finola Roache

Design by Brian Gillis & Laura Wilkinson (brian@loudandclear.ie)

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CEO ADDRESS

SIMON KEOGH



The great thing about sport is that there is always next week. In a rugby sense, I know some might be happy to see the back of 2019, however there is was much to be learned and enjoyed from the year, while there is certainly plenty to look forward to in 2020!

On these pages last year, I wrote about the high expectations that the Irish public had for 2019 but I still genuinely believe we are in an enviable position as a rugby nation.

Reflecting on the year that has been, the Rugby World Cup was always going to be a focal point. Unfortunately, results in Japan didn't go as we might have hoped. But that's sport. The aftermath has seen some finger pointing, but the reality dictates that teams will always face challenges and it is the great one teams who bounce back. I am confident that we will.

I would like to focus on the positives of 2019 to demonstrate why Irish Rugby is still in a very healthy position. While our international players were away, all four provinces laid down their marker for the season ahead. In the early months of the domestic season we saw several new faces take their chance. Many have since established themselves as regulars. With a new Head Coach of the national team looking on, no doubt these players see the opportunities that lie ahead. It is an exciting time for them in their careers.

Meanwhile, both the Irish Men's and Women's Sevens sides set off on their World Series adventure together for the first time. I have seen the effort that these players have invested in taking their sport to the world stage at first hand. While the

Women's Sevens are now well established on the circuit, the Men's team will be hoping that all the sacrifices they have made over the years will be somewhat justified. I wish both teams well.

Off the field, Rugby Players Ireland has introduced several new initiatives while improving others further. Of particular note is the new collective agreement established between Rugby Players Ireland and the IRFU. This agreement further illustrates the ambition of both organisations to keep evolving whilst harnessing a winning culture.

Elsewhere, there was further progression in the IRFU's recognition of Rugby Players Ireland as the collective voice for the Irish Women's XVs as well as the Irish Men's and Women's Sevens teams. This development has allowed Rugby Players Ireland to restructure its governance to allow for a better representation of its members at board level.

The off-field development continues to thrive as we work in partnership with the IRFU to deliver a world leading player development programme. For the second year in succession we ran our Rookie Camp, a two-day education seminar for our new academy members.

In April we also saw the continuation of our partnership with the Z Foundation through phase two of Tackle Your Feelings. By leveraging the profile of our rugby players, we are breaking down the stigma and encouraging positive conversation about our mental wellbeing. Additionally, the Zurich Irish Rugby Players Awards remains a social highlight at the climax of the rugby season and was once again televised on Virgin Media One.

Unfortunately, there were some "lasts" for Ireland this year. Most notably, the most successful Irish captain and most successful Irish coach in our rugby history bid farewell. I would like to take this opportunity to thank both Rory Best and Joe Schmidt for all they have done for Irish rugby. We have reached unprecedented highs under their leadership and we wish them both all the best with their respective journeys onward.

Finally, as a rugby fan, I wish to urge the public to focus on the positives and remember that rugby is a sport. This means that we will win; and we will lose. That's what makes it so compelling. There will be many ups and downs to come in the years and months ahead, but in the interim I wish all our members and supporters a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



RUGBY WORLD CUP 2019

While there would be no place for Ireland in the latter stages of the Rugby World Cup, Irish eyes were nevertheless still smiling as South Africa claimed the spoils in Yokohama. There was a strong Irish influence on the success, with Felix Jones forming part of a backroom team that also included former Munster Rugby coaches Rassie Erasmus, Jaques Nienaber and Aled Walters. We congratulate them on their achievement!

Unfortunately, despite an encouraging start against Scotland, Ireland failed to ignite in Japan and ultimately succumbed to a rampant New Zealand in the quarter final. While it was undoubtedly a disappointing outcome for a team so heavily fancied before the tournament, all squad members have quickly put the experience to one side as they get back in the harness with their



respective provincial sides who have been firing on all cylinders this season!

While many will want to forget the past few months, their experiences in a place not many had been to before will stand them in good stead for the challenges they face in the years to come.

THANKS JOE!

It will have come a couple of games too soon, but Joe Schmidt bid farewell to Irish Rugby upon Ireland's exit from the Rugby World Cup.

Since arriving in Dublin from Clermont Auvergne in 2010, unprecedented success has followed him wherever he has gone. Having led Leinster Rugby to two Heineken Cups, a European Challenge Cup and a Pro12 title, the IRFU turned to Schmidt in 2013. During his six years at Lansdowne Road, the New Zealander won three Six Nation Championships, including the Grand Slam of 2018. He also oversaw some historic successes for the national side that will forever live in the annals of Irish sporting folklore.

We'd like to thank Joe for his strong, varied and successful contributions to the Irish game. We wish him well in the future!



RORY BEST SIGNS OFF!

It was a long goodbye for Rory Best! Following Ireland's exit at the hands of New Zealand, many assumed it would be the last we would see of the Ulsterman on a rugby field. However, the 37-year-old summoned some extra energy as he lined out for the Barbarians against Fiji, Brazil and Wales (throwing in a conversion for good measure along the way too).

Reflecting on Rory's remarkable term of service as captain and player, Simon Keogh said: "Rory Best has been a true leader on and off the field. He has instigated change through his involvement at Executive Board level of Rugby Players Ireland and brought the country to unprecedented success on the field. We wish him well in his future."

REPRESENTING!

As the darker evenings came to pass across the country, Rugby Players Ireland staff members took to the skies. In October, Dr Ella McCabe presented at the Rugby Science Network Live Conference in Fukuoka about mental health in the game. She was subsequently joined on the ground in Japan by Simon Keogh who was attending the International Rugby Players Conference in Tokyo. Meanwhile, Denis Hurley represented the organisation at the PROtect Integrity Conference hosted by EU Athletes in Athens, Greece.



GOODBODY PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT BURSARY

We'd like to congratulate all our members who have graduated in recent weeks! We were particularly delighted to see both Shane Daly and Alex McHenry earn their stripes from UCC. Both Munster Rugby players have tread a similar path throughout their careers with the Irish U20s, Irish Men's 7s and Cork Constitution, while both are also recipients of the Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary which aids the professional development of their off-field careers and academic studies.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Our congratulations to former Irish international Rosie Foley who swam the Gibraltar Strait in aid of CRY Ireland, a charity that aims to support families who have lost a relative to sudden cardiac death (SCD) and helps raise awareness of the conditions that cause it. Recently, Irish Women's 7s captain Lucy Mulhall was also announced as a CRY ambassador. We speak to Lucy on page 26!

Throughout the winter months, our Ulster Rugby members have been ensuring members of their community have not been forgotten – including furry little animals! Opened in 1996, the Mid-Antrim Animal Sanctuary has found caring homes for an average of 20 animals each month. Run by a small staff and aided

by a dedicated team of volunteers, the charity was delighted to welcome several extra pairs of hands! On another occasion, several players also dropped into Men's Shed Steeple Antrim. Men's Shed is for a place for men aged 50+ to meet, discuss issues, share skills and explore new interests!

In the lead up to Christmas, the Connacht Rugby Academy and their manager Eric Elwood paid a visit to Galway Hospice to ensure the facility was suitably attired for the festive season! While the various squads also took the time to visit those in hospitals and caring facilities at a time when they would dearly wish to be at home.



TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS 2.0

Following the launch of a new look Tackle Your Feelings in September, the TYF team and its ambassadors have been out spreading the message ahead of a busy 2020!

Up to 20,000 teenage students descended upon Zeminar at the National Sport Campus in Abbotstown in September. The event, which was created to bring all those invested in the development and well-being of young people in Ireland, was home to TYF for three days. The stint included World Mental Health Day when several members of the Irish Men's 7s squad paid a visit!

Awareness of the Tackle Your Feelings campaign has also been helped by various partners who have taken an interest in the campaign. We are particularly proud of our Tackle Your Feelings KeepCup which has proved to be immensely popular as teams throughout the country 'go green'!

As a small thank you for their support, we provided each of our members with a unique TYF beanie hat by Noggin Sport to help them through the winter months. Set up by Conor and Kieran Joyce, Noggin Sport is a community interest company dedicated to raising awareness of the effects of mental health and mental illness in sport through fashionable clothing and headwear. We speak to Kieran on page 32!

Meanwhile at the Spiders – Ireland's most prestigious and longest running digital awards ceremony, the Tackle Your Feelings App was named as the 'Best App' of 2019! Since the inception of the TYF campaign, we have worked closely with iZest Marketing across various aspects of the initiative. We were delighted to see them take home

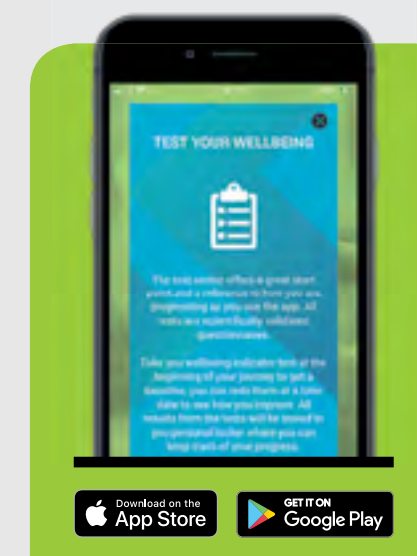


the award – a fitting acknowledgement of their efforts to make the campaign accessible to all!

Finally, as the dust began to settle on the Rugby World Cup campaign, former Irish and Leinster prop Mike Ross spoke to the media on behalf of Tackle Your Feelings about some of the online criticism of players that was prevalent during their time in Japan. For the full interview, check out page 10!



TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS



INTERNATIONAL
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PLAYERS

INTERNATIONAL
RECOGNITION

Our congratulations to Jamie Heaslip who was the recipient of the International Rugby Players Special Merit Award at the World Rugby Awards held in Tokyo following the conclusion of the Rugby World Cup. In addition to being one of the most decorated players in the Irish game, Heaslip has been a key voice on issues in the game at various representative and committee levels.



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TAKING A STAND

Mike Ross speaks to Ciarán Ó Raghallaigh about the disappointment of an early Rugby World Cup exit and the affect it can have on a player's mental wellbeing as they readjust back into their normal lives.

MIKE ROSS



Less than half an hour had passed following Ireland's World Cup quarter-final defeat to New Zealand before Mike Ross took to Twitter.

No kneejerk emotional reaction to the heavy defeat, no criticism of Joe Schmidt and no personal attacks on the players — instead, he felt a need to plead for the opposite.

"Over the next hours and days, spare a thought for the players," he wrote. "As fans, we'll get over it eventually, but for them it will linger for months... They'll have worked insanely hard to get to this stage, and it's soul crushing. For some, it's their last cap in an Irish jersey. For others, it's their last World Cup. The lucky ones have to wait four years.

"In 2015 after we lost to Argentina, it felt like mourning.

"I suppose what I'm getting at is be kind. They'll be far harder on themselves than anyone else. Life will go on, and rugby will continue to thrill and disappoint us."

Ross, the now retired Ireland and Leinster prop, played in two World Cups, with each ending at the same stage as this year's vintage.

On both occasions, Ireland felt confident going into the knockout stages, on both occasions, their dreams were crushed in comprehensive fashion.

"Twitter was still kinda in its infancy in 2011, I think," Ross said, "there was a bit more in 2015, but in the four years since, it's taken over the world."

"I think what rugby players have to deal with now that they didn't have to, even in that recent past, is social media, and having social media is like someone else having your phone number — a direct line to you."



2015 was Ross' last shot at a World Cup, and the loss to Argentina hung over him like a cloud for many months, even after his return to Leinster and the glittering Champions Cup fixtures that have distracted some of Ireland's players in the past fortnight.

The World Cup consumes up to six months of a player's life, and when the end continues to be such a cutting one, it can take experience of that feeling to know that the players need no more punishment piled on.

"For some of those guys it'll be their only shot at it and for some — like [Rory] Besty, it's their last cap... it felt like mourning in 2015 for me, because I knew that was probably my last shot at a World Cup, and to be honest I didn't know if I'd get capped again.



"I think what rugby players have to deal with now that they didn't have to, even in that recent past, is social media, and having social media is like someone else having your phone number — a direct line to you.

"If you're on Instagram or Twitter, you kind of open yourself to things you didn't have in the past."

Richard McElwee, Rugby Players Ireland's head of communications, admitted the squad "expected" some comments on social media during a World Cup, adding that some said it was "tough going" following the All Blacks defeat.

"A few of them...they tell you they don't listen, but it's hard when it's so prevalent and you're getting tagged into things," he added.

Ross' pleading to fans was to criticise if they wanted but to leave the players out of any direct correspondence.

"People have no compunction to slate you on Twitter, but they'd never do that if they met you in a public place," he said.

"Twitter seems to be a place you go to have a fight. There's a lot of really negative commentary, some really over the top criticism.

"I experienced it a small bit myself and I wouldn't have a huge social presence, but people just reflexively send things out without thinking about it. I made a [prop] joke about Tadhg Furlong when he kicked a ball — I said 'he's dead to me', and a lad called me "a talentless prick" ...thinking I'm slagging off Tadhg. Because you're the other side of the screen, people don't really think. A good rule of thumb is if you wouldn't say it to someone's face, don't type it."

Ross sat down to discuss the Tackle Your Feelings app, relaunched by Rugby Players Ireland and Zurich Insurance, a mental well-being app that



aims to promote a proactive attitude to mental health and provide people with the tools to take control in difficult situations.

Ross was just 17 when his younger brother Andrew (16) died by suicide in 1997, leaving the player with a heightened awareness of the importance of opening up and speaking out.

"The Tackle your Feelings campaign has been really good, it started in 2016 and a lot of guys and girls have come out and said 'it's ok to not be ok,'" he said.

"Just like if you get a sprain in your ankle, you go and get help, if you're having mental difficulties you can go get help and be treated in the same way.

"It's becoming a lot more acceptable for someone to come out and say 'I'm struggling here, I'm having a tough time', and realise there's supports there.

"With my own family history, it probably would have been useful to have more conversations around this when I was younger. It was not really spoken about as much as it is today.

"If you look at the statistics, there's rising levels of anxiety in the world, there's rising levels of depression, and so messages like this are needed more than ever."

Rugby is becoming a more balanced sport with World Rugby's focus on growing the woman's game, but suicide is a problem that disproportionately affects males, with 80% of the 392 deaths in 2017.

"It was International Men's Day recently, and men still make up a far higher proportion of suicides, of workplace deaths... we're probably traditionally more likely to internalise things, and think it's not manly to engage with these things," Ross said.

"It's often actually the most manly thing you can do."

Some players thanked Ross for his posts, knowing they'll be more disappointed than any distant observer, but the Cork man would still like to see more done by social media companies.

"I'd like to see an end to anonymous accounts, if you put your name and face to posts, that tends to moderate a lot. If you're hiding behind anonymity you tend to say what you want."



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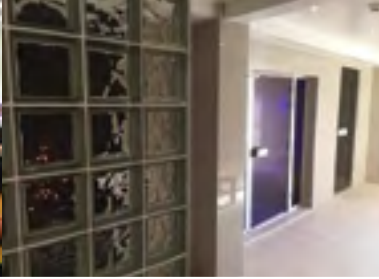
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A BAND OF BARBARIANS

Anna Caplice was a welcome (and natural) addition to the Barbarians family

ANNA CAPLICE

As those less familiar with the women's game trawled through the squad list for the Barbarians clash with Wales recently, they will have immediately noted the presence of an Irish contingent. Solid Irish names like Fitzpatrick and Murphy featured, while Sene Naoupu of the Galway Naoupu's did too.

Caplice was a new name on the list.

"My dad is a historian, so he's done a bit of research on the name," Anna Caplice informs us. "You'd be surprised but there's actually a few Caplices about the place, or so I'm told. I never come across them. We thought it came with the Normans, although that's pretty long ago so even if it did, we can't really say we're that close to them anymore!

"I wondered about it myself so I did a DNA test a while ago and I was really excited to see a bit of a diverse return. It came back with less than 1% British, less than 1% Scandinavian and 98% Irish. So I guess I'm just a plain old Irish girl – there'll be no getting rid of me!"

While she may be a plain little Irish girl, Caplice has certainly spread her wings in recent years. Now living in London, the Mallow-born flanker plays her rugby with Harlequins while working with the famous club's Foundation. Although happy to return home for Irish camps and fixtures, it seems her future lies in the Borough of Richmond.

"I came over here first in 2013 to do a postgrad in teaching. I was a languages teacher – French, German, Spanish. After a few years at home for the World Cup, I came back last season. I've put the teaching to one side now, but I still touch upon those experiences in my coaching. I think I've found my true calling though. I see myself sticking around for a while."

Aside from her good work in using the Harlequin network and brand to help change lives and enable those in the community to fulfil their potential, Caplice has also been making waves on the pitch. Recently she was invited to play with the famed Barbarians as they took on the Welsh at the Principality Stadium.

"It was just incredible. Coming back into work, everyone has been asking me about it and I've so few words to describe it. They were an amazing group of people and then to play with them in the Millennium Stadium – where I've seen Munster win two Heineken Cups and Ireland in the World Cup – it was a dream!

"It was funny because when I got back home, I noticed that the What's App group went quiet for a while. You began to realise that a lot of the group had to travel the world to get home. It's nice to know I've got a new network of friends in every corner of the Earth now!"

It would seem that Caplice does not need much help in the art of making friends. A bundle of energy, she generally seems to be at the heart of any antics. Indeed, while the American girls shared their Thanksgiving traditions with the group, Caplice responded by leading her Irish pals in a performance of the 'Siege of Ennis'. Albeit with a little less refinement.



"It's a very special time. You know that the group will never be together again. It's refreshing because nobody is on their phones, everyone tries to make the most of their time with each other. For example, in Irish camp I'm happy enough to take a bit of time for myself. I can see them when I want! But with the BaaBaas everyone embraces every second."

The Barbarians retain a special place in rugby. Remaining true to their ethos throughout their 129-year history, they continue to play free-flowing, attacking rugby on the field while taking conviviality as far as it will go afterwards. However, for Caplice, it was an opportunity for to enjoy a week entirely dedicated to the sport.

"The social media puts a funny slant on it. Everything is in jest! We actually had quite a few sessions. We didn't need any conditioning, so we focussed on getting used to the people around us and playing heads up rugby. It was fun, but it was full-on! When they're putting together a squad it's both player and person led. You need to be prepared to give of yourself away from the rugby, but you also need to be a bloody good player.

"Of course, if you want to enjoy yourself you can fire ahead. But you have to accept that you're going to make your body suffer. As long as you train, it's done to the best of your ability and with a smile on your face, all is good!"

Amidst the novelty of putting on the black and white strip, the teacher turned student. With players from ten different countries represented in the group, there were many insights and learnings to be shared. But above all, she was reminded that win, lose, or draw – rugby is meant to be fun.

"It was nice to remember why I fell in love with the game in the first place. It reminded me why I play the game, why I take so much pride in representing my country. I really enjoyed being able to express myself.

"For instance, there is a lot of emphasis placed on organisation and structure these days. Obviously, structure is important, but it's easy to get caught up in it. We're all good footballers and here on merit, only we tend to forget it. It's something we need to check in on more regularly.

"With the Barbarians, everyone was encouraged to express themselves, whether in the tackle or in open field and running into open spaces. When the shackles are off, every individual has a different way of being expressive. Of course, there is a balance to find, but if you can pull on all those individual traits you create a good team!

"When I get back with the Irish girls, it's something I'm going to emphasise. Everyone has something to bring, so don't be afraid to bring it!"

STRONGER IN GREEN

Ireland and Connacht Rugby scrumhalf Kieran Marmion has put pen to paper on a new deal

KIERAN MARMION



There was no documentation in their heyday of Ancient Ireland, but somebody was good enough to remember the saying: "It's easy to be pleasant when life hums along, but the man worthwhile is the one who can smile when things go wrong."

It's been an interesting few months for Kieran Marmion. For the second time in four years, the London born scrumhalf was denied the opportunity to represent Ireland at a Rugby World Cup.

With only a handful of caps to his name in 2015, Marmion was always towards the periphery as Joe Schmidt opted for Conor Murray and Eoin Reddan, with Ian Madigan as their emergency cover. However, having amassed the majority of his 27 caps in the subsequent World Cup cycle, the Connacht Rugby player was very much in contention in 2019.

Despite star-turns against the All Blacks in November 2018 and even on the wing when the Wallabies came to Dublin that same month, Marmion was ultimately pipped to the post for a seat on the plane to Japan. Injuries and the form of others in his position played their part, yet Marmion was understandably disheartened.

Inevitably, rumours about his long-term future in Ireland began to circulate. Talk of a move to Saracens, the club whom his late father Mick played for, surfaced. The media began to pay great interest as one of Irish rugby's most notable names eyed up the departure gate. The decision-makers had to sit up and take notice.

“It's been a tough period but it's the right thing to do. It makes sense to hang around, I'm happy here. I'm just glad it's done and dusted now, and I can move on into the New Year.”

“It had obviously been a disappointing few months,” Marmion concedes. “I wanted to know where I stood. I had a chat with a few coaches to get their view. I also spoke to some players, lads who I'd be closest to. I valued their opinions.”

“Moving to England was something I was interested in. I have a lot of family on the other side of the water so there was an obvious attraction there. It was only natural that I looked into it a bit. In the end I weighed it up, bounced it around and decided to stay in Connacht for a few more years.”

“It's been a tough period but it's the right thing to do. It makes sense to hang around, I'm happy here. I'm just glad it's done and dusted now, and I can move on into the New Year.”

Described as a ‘diligent professional’ by Andy Friend, the next few years are an extension on what has largely been a fruitful time for Marmion in Ireland. Indeed, his love affair with the west actually began long before the first of his 160 appearances for the province.

“We were always made aware of our Irish heritage,” he informs us of his time growing up in London and later in Brecon, Wales. “Our grandparents and other relations would come over to stay with us and I'd been over to Loughrea a few times when I was younger. I wouldn't say that our house was overly Irish or anything like that, but there was always a natural draw to Connacht.”

While there might not have been any leprechauns or clovers in the Marmion household, it soon became apparent that a future in the game lay across the Irish Sea.





"I remember turning up at an Irish Exiles trial in London," he recalls. "I didn't think much about it because I just wanted to play. In fact, I don't even know if there were any background checks, so I guess they took our word for it!"

"I was only 16 but I managed to make it onto a touring side to play against Munster and Connacht U18s. I was still in-age the following year, so I went again. Then I made the Irish U18 clubs' side. I suppose I began to make a bit of a name for myself in Irish circles."

"I wasn't sure what might come next so I got on with things and went to Cardiff University. It was while I was there that Mike Ruddock got in touch inviting me over to the Ireland U20s. Nigel Carolan was his assistant coach at the time and must have liked what he saw, so next thing I knew I was joining the Connacht academy!"



Less than three years later Marmion would make his Irish international bow on the summer tour of Argentina. It was just rewards having been hovering around extended squads for some time and given that he was both Connacht's Player of the Year and Top Try scorer in 2013/14.

Despite the odd setback, things continued to progress for Marmion in Galway. A Pro12 title followed and he became an established international. Nevertheless, there are peaks in troughs in any career. Having emerged from arguably the lowest trough of them all, it is time to refocus.

"My family was a big part of me staying. I live with my twin brother Liam and his girlfriend. Liam works with Connacht as a soft-tissue therapist so it's a way of life for him too. I've also become very close to the family I have over in this part of the world, so I knew I owed it to them."

"I've also set myself a few goals. The main one is to get back playing. It's been a bit stop-start this season and I've been out injured for the past few weeks. I'll turn a new leaf in 2020 and hopefully perform well enough to get back into the Irish system. It's all about the small goals, then I'll take it from there."

Not everything has gone his way of late. But despite the experiences of 2019, Kieran Marmion has continued to wear a smile on his face and life is beginning to hum along again.

“
I'll turn a new leaf in 2020 and hopefully perform well enough to get back into the Irish system. It's all about the small goals, then I'll take it from there.



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A FAMILY ROLLERCOASTER

The Hawkshaws began 2019 in impressive fashion.
Success followed, as did disappointment.
All in a year's work for a talented household!

DAVID HAWKSHAW

With peaks of joy and valleys of heartache, life is a roller coaster ride, the rise and fall of which defines our journey, that's both scary and exciting at the same time.

If that's the case, the Hawkshaw household must resemble something of a theme park.

The year began on a spectacular high. In January, David was named as captain of the Irish U20s for the 2019 international season. Not long afterwards, Sarah made her debut for the Irish women's hockey team against Chile.

In early spring however, all eyes became oval-shaped as they tracked on the Six Nations. Following victories over England, Scotland and Italy, Ireland were in pole position to win their first Championship since Rhys Ruddock's class of 2010.

While Ireland built up a head of steam, David was flourishing in the leadership role bestowed upon him by U20s coach Noel McNamara. However, as the Leinster Academy player set his sights on a Championship defining clash with France, his season came crumbling down in excruciating fashion.

"You hit rock bottom from a sporting perspective," Hawkshaw says of the ACL injury that precluded him from leading his country down the final straight. "One minute you're preparing for the biggest game of your career, the next all can think of is operating tables, rehab and months on the sidelines.

"It took me a while to get my head around it."

Despite the injury, McNamara was insistent that his captain remain part of his plans. While surgery meant he could not be in Cork for the crucial win over France, he accompanied the squad to Wales. Though an undoubtedly disappointing time on a personal level, Hawkshaw reflects on the experience with impressive maturity.

"It was tough at first because you don't know how much you want to be involved. You almost think you're in the way as the lads are toggling out and getting ready to go and win a Grand Slam.

"But even from my crutches, Noel knew that I could bring something to the table. That has been key for me throughout the past few months – controlling what I can. If I spent all my time worrying about what I was unable to influence, then the things I could still make an impact on would be affected.

"Looking back, it was great to be there on the night we won the Grand Slam. It takes time, but you learn to appreciate that you were very much part of the journey. It was a special time and something I hold onto."

After a difficult few months, things began to come full circle for the Hawkshaw clan. In November, Sarah was part of the Irish women's hockey team that defeated Canada in Energia Park to secure qualification for Tokyo 2020.

"I don't think I've ever experienced such an intense atmosphere at a game," the former Belvedere College man surmises. "I don't think I've ever been soaked as much in my life either, but it was all worth it to be there.

"Sarah has been away for the past few years on a sports scholarship at the University of Massachusetts. So, it was only when she came back and began to get involved in the Irish set-up that we could even begin to appreciate what has gone into the sport in Ireland, especially in the time she has been away.

"Some of those girls have been there for over a decade, hoping that one day they'd make it to the Olympics. Shirley McCay collected her 300th cap for Ireland on the night. She made her debut back in 2007 or something! Imagine all the work that went into that win!"



It was a memorable night for the family. Steeped in sporting heritage, it should come as no surprise that it had come to this point. Both Hawkshaw parents boast strong sporting backgrounds, indeed Anne is a former international badminton player. The genes were duly passed on. Growing up, Sarah and David also played GAA in various codes for Dublin while brothers James and Daniel are involved with Clontarf's 1st XV and Belvedere College's SCT respectively.

"Sport is important to everyone in the house. Aside from the badminton my mother was also keen on camogie, so practically as soon as we could get our feet underneath us she had us running around in helmets to get used to them!

"It's great that we all have a mutual interest and love of sport. When you have the good days, like Sarah's, you want to share the moment with those closest to you. But on the bad days too, after an injury or a loss, it's the same people you want around you. They are a huge motivating factor for me to get back playing and are the reason why I play at all."

As they grow older and the memories of kicking lumps out of each other in the garden fade a little further, their sporting paths have taken different turns. But from time to time, they'll share notes and latch onto new insights. That said, in the lead up to the crunch qualifier against Canada, David gave his sister a wide berth.

"The last thing she needed was me in her ear!" the young centre says. "She's the one with senior caps so she's obviously doing something right. Of course, if we're chatting away and she asks, I'll offer something. But as for motivational conversations, I know where she'd tell me to go..."

As a beneficiary of Leinster's much envied rehabilitation programme, Hawkshaw has plenty to offer in the physiology regard. His recovery has been stepping up of late. He's back out running and enjoying the fresh air once again. However, it is a slow process. Guided by Darragh Curley, Hawkshaw is on track, but it's much too soon to be distracted by return dates just yet.

"Darragh has me thinking in the shorter term. That's the way it has been right the way through. I have testing sessions every few weeks, so I put everything into them. If you think any longer, you end up getting frustrated and annoyed.

"Leinster work hard to keep you involved. I pop my head into meetings to make sure I'm clued in. It was also nice during the World Cup when the Senior and Academy lads were in the gym together to make up for the numbers away in Japan. It was a nice opportunity to get to know some of the older lads who I'm not meeting out on the pitch.

"The big thing for me is seeing the likes of Michael Milne and Harry Byrne kicking on, getting their senior debuts. It shows that we can do it. I want to be in their shoes, so I'm putting everything in to make sure that one day I will be."

The rollercoaster is set to continue!

GLOBETROTTER

From a young age, Bryan Mollen has been travelling the world. There's plenty more travel in store.

BRYAN MOLLEN



Speak to most players on the World Sevens Series circuit and they'll tell you that travelling the globe is a major perk of the job. Given half a chance they'll get out on a Segway to see Paris, sit atop Table Mountain or climb the Harbour Bridge.

To some extent, Ireland's Bryan Mollen sees it that way too. But in truth, a lot of those experiences are already in the back pocket.

"I was actually born in Kenya!" Mollen, the son of a Dutch diplomat informs us. "My parents met in Kuwait. Dad was on his first posting there while my mum was teaching. They managed to get out a week before the Iraqi invasion and stuck together.

"As a young family we moved around a bit because of dad's job. After living in Nairobi we moved to Paris, then back to the Netherlands before we set off for Australia. I loved it there. It's where I picked up rugby too, so I have a lot of happy memories of throwing a ball around the backyard or tackling my mates into the swimming pool.

"By the time I was 11 I was playing full tilt on a full pitch, with fully contested lineouts and scrums. So, when we moved to Belgium the rugby took a bit of a backward step. Then in Berlin it wasn't even an option. I wasn't enjoying myself, so my parents raised the idea of sending me to Ireland."

It is 7 years since Mollen landed into Blackrock College as a boarder. With an abundance of pitches to whet the appetite, it took little persuasion. While his rugby grounding was unique, he nevertheless felt up to the task. Determined to make an impression, he joined his new friends at internal trial. It proved to be a bit of a reality check.

"I fitted in down the bottom of the ladder in rugby terms!" he admits. But as a Transition Year student, time was on his side. He worked on his skillset and even ventured into the gym. By his sixth year he managed to get a slot on the bench in a star-studded Senior Cup team that included the likes of Joey Carbery, Caelan Doris and Nick Timoney.

Though lucky to have been able to develop his game in a team that would make up a decent professional outfit today, it wasn't until Mollen stepped out of their shadows that he began to push on. Tony Smeeth had worked with Mollen at Blackrock and convinced him to join Trinity College. Once he had a grip, there was no letting go. He rose through the ranks and beyond with haste.

"The Sevens first came into it in November 2016. In my second year at Trinity, clubs were asked for recommendations and Tony put me forward. I'd played it before in Australia, but this was a whole new ball game. I remember going out to Blanchardstown and the pitch being flooded. But I managed to stick with it.



"The real turning point came when I was called into a training camp that I'd originally missed the cut for. At 9pm the evening before an early flight to Alicante, I got a call from Stan McDowell. I didn't have to think twice. I arrived at the airport the next morning in some Leinster kit and the lads just looked at me... Mick McGrath gave me half his bag and said, 'throw whatever you can on'.

"I don't remember the specifics of the tournament aside from playing the Spanish several times. I was thrown in at the deep end, but I had nothing to lose. With the sunshine and heat, it was more like the Sevens I'd known in Australia. I played off the cuff a bit, played to my strengths. I loved it!"

Now in his third year with Ireland, Mollen can count himself among a core group of Sevens players who have guided the country to their first ever season on the World Series stage. It has been a remarkable journey for the group.

"Most of us are lads who were never picked up or were moved on. We were the lads without commitments elsewhere. I guess we all had our disappointments along the way. That's what made qualification so special.

"It was difficult at times. I remember going to Poland after the Rugby World Cup Sevens in San Francisco. No disrespect to Poland or to the competition, but deep down our heads knew it wasn't where we wanted to be. Yet it matters. You go at it and do what you can."

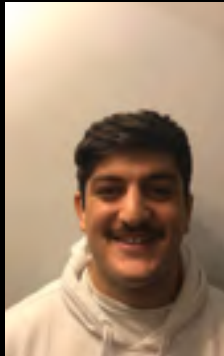
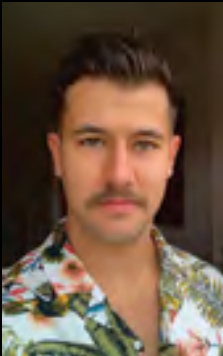
If 'do what you can' means securing the European Grand Prix title for the first time, then Sevens rugby in Ireland would appear to be in a good place. Yet for all the success they have been enjoying, surely it comes at a price?

"We're not an unknown quantity anymore," Mollen admits, "but it's difficult to stop us. Most teams on the circuit have their own characteristics. We don't play in the most complex way. Our attack is a strength, our speed and skills. When we're on song, there aren't many teams that can cope with us.

"The whole set-up in Ireland has improved. There are some spectacular young lads being introduced all the time, guys with such vast skillsets who will go on to have good careers whether they stay in Sevens or not. We still have a lot of ground to make up on teams like Fiji, but when you've 24 lads at each session you can't help but keep pushing on to ensure you'll be in the team."

Growing up in Nairobi, Canberra, Brussels and Berlin, Bryan Mollen could never have expected to one day represent Ireland on the international stage. No matter where he is in the world, his parents never seem to be far away, beaming with pride.

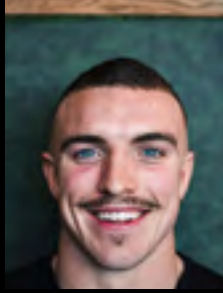
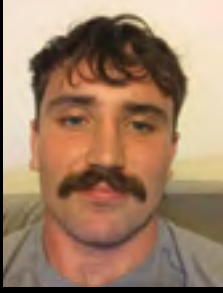
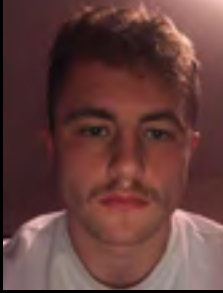
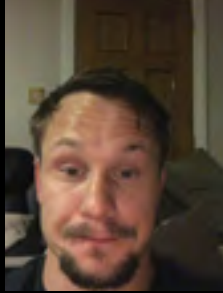
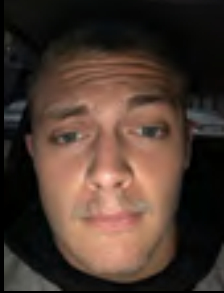
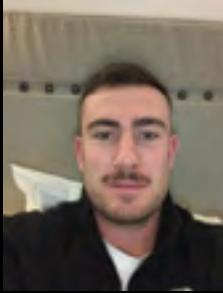
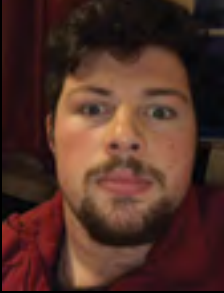
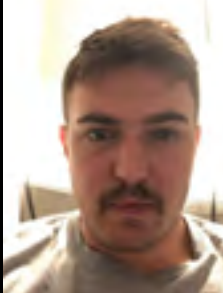
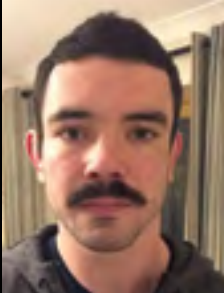
"Don't forget, I'm still half Dutch!" Mollen says, as we get up to leave a Dublin café. "My dad would kill me if I claimed to be 100% Irish! So, in certain sports, like football, I'll go for the Dutch. Other than that, I'm settled here, Ireland is finally my home."



This year we teamed up with Movember Ireland once again to help change the face of men's health. While Movember is the biggest funder of research into prostate cancer in Ireland, it also seeks to raise awareness of the issues that men face. With the support of over 100,000 people since it began in 2008, Movember continues on its mission to reduce the number of lives lost to suicide and cancer by encouraging men to take ownership of their health and open-up about the mental or physical issues they face.

We were delighted with the response to this year's call for participants. In all, over 40 players throughout the country signed up for a hairy month ensuring that in almost every game during November, there was a remarkable moustache to be admired.

We'd like to thank all of our members who took part! Having taken part in the traditional shave-off, it was enjoyable watching them on their 'mo bro' journeys throughout the month.



DEFENDING HER HOUSE!

Ireland 7s captain Lucy Mulhall grew up in a close-knit family.

LUCY MULHALL



Speaking to Lucy Mulhall about Christmas growing up on the family farm in Tinahely, one can't help drawing comparisons with the opening scenes from Home Alone. As the conversations grows, more and more family members and relatives appear out of the woodwork and images of a chaotic household ensue.

"They were great times, they really were!" Mulhall reflects. "I remember we had this big 7-seater jeep, but we had to get extra seats put in so that we could all ramble around together. One big happy family! My Grandmother lived with us too, and my Uncle for a while. You'd never know who was going to show up at the door!"

While Kevin McCallister defied the odds to protect the family home from Harry and Marv, you get the impression that had Mulhall ever been left to fend for herself, she'd have been better equipped to deal with any uninvited guests than Macauley Culkin.

As her sister Emily laid claim to the chores about the house, Lucy was out on the farm helping her father Pat get through the workload. There she

developed a love of the outdoors and a thirst for a physical challenge.

"I was a bit of a tomboy. I wasn't afraid of getting stuck in. Emily was much better at the household stuff, so it made sense for me to take on the things Dad needed help with.

"We probably used to think our parents were pretty strict. We'd come home from school, do our homework and then we were working outside before we could land in front of the TV. We were jealous of our friends who'd be out and about in town while we were out with the sheep!

"But with hindsight, we appreciate that it all has stood to us. From an early age we developed a strong work-ethic and discipline. I think it also made us a close-knit family unit – we were all tied to home and spent a lot of time with each other. We were like a team!"

Although Lucy and her younger brothers Joseph, Noel and Kevin have flown the nest to pursue their own ambitions, there remains a strong pull towards home. Lucy makes it back most weekends, but she can be gone for weeks at a time as she jets about the world in her guise as captain of the Irish Women's Sevens.

“From an early age we developed a strong work-ethic and discipline. I think it also made us a close-knit family unit – we were all tied to home and spent a lot of time with each other. We were like a team!”





"To this day I don't know what overcame me," she says of the first-time rugby came into her life. "I come from a big GAA family. We were always open to other things, but rugby was never on the radar. If we weren't down at the GAA club or out on the farm we were playing music, Irish dancing or running."

Nevertheless, she was intrigued. "I was in a lecture and on my phone when I came across an email from Stan (McDowell). I barely stopped to think before I hopped out and rang him straightaway. To this day, I don't know why."

"When you think of it, I had no idea how much of a risk it was. As a result, I went in with no expectation and that has probably been to my benefit. Looking back, I left my college course in Trinity, I said goodbye to the student lifestyle and packed away my football gloves. I don't think I'd be that brave now – they got me at a good time!"

Unfortunately, injury ruled Lucy out of Ireland's recent trips to Dubai and South Africa. Although disappointed not to have joined them, Mulhall has had plenty to take her mind off things. Having already completed a science degree, Mulhall is due to finish with postgraduate qualifications in maths next May.

"It's a two-way thing. I love the bubble of tournament days. I love putting my phone away. It's a bit of an escape. Nothing matters but the games. But then, on our rest days, I get my mind as far away from rugby as I can. I get stuck into a maths book – it's weirdly refreshing!"

"After being away at tournaments, it can be difficult

to get back to normal. It's so full-on that you can become consumed by it all. In the past I've arrived home and trawled through my games over and over again. The tournaments don't come around every weekend, so you'd have to wait for weeks to correct things that went wrong."

"I've learned how important it is to get your head away from it all. Nowadays, I get off the plane and get stuck straight into my work. It brings me right back down to Earth. After a couple of weeks you're in a much better place to reflect and learn. You've got a clearer mind."

While her mother Helen, who was involved in setting up the women's GAA club in Tinahely, undoubtedly inspired her daughter to captain Wicklow to an All Ireland Junior Football title in 2011, she has also cast her considerable influence over her daughters' academics.

"Mam is a whiz with numbers. She is an accountant. I don't know if that's what I want to do when I finish, but I know that I love maths and numbers. I like working through equations and knowing you're on the right track. I like how you're either right or wrong."

"It's kind of been our upbringing. If you're going to do something, do it right. Otherwise, why bother? Our parents always encouraged us to be the best we can be. So, if I just went for rugby and ignored my education and other interests, I wouldn't be doing my best."

"Counting and tackling all those sheep has paid off!"

“
It's a two-way thing. I love the bubble of tournament days. I love putting my phone away. It's a bit of an escape. **Nothing matters but the games. But then, on our rest days, I get my mind as far away from rugby as I can**

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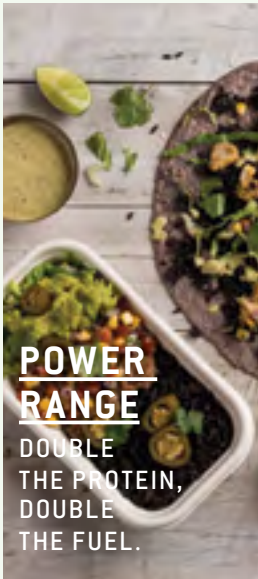
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FROM HARARE TO BELFAST

Angus Curtis has found a new family in a new hemisphere with Ulster Rugby

ANGUS CURTIS

There's a clip of David Curtis making for the line in an interprovincial derby between Connacht and Munster in 1991. While the game itself was largely inconsequential, it gives a little insight into the type of player Curtis was. Robust, pacey, the Exiles man was a key figure in Irish rugby circles.

"Thankfully most of his clips are only on videotape so he can't force us to watch it all the time!" his son Angus tells us. "But I've talked to plenty of people he played with. They've told me he was fast, fit, had good skills and was a hard worker. I'd like to think I picked up some of his traits... we're about the same size anyway!"

It's clear that the apple hasn't fallen too far from the tree. Other than the grainy footage and the absence of a scrum cap, one can easily imagine it's Angus darting for the Thomond Park whitewash.

Born in Harare, Zimbabwe, Angus was always aware of his family's proud history on the rugby field for Ireland. His father amassed 13 caps, while his father before him won three caps in green in 1950. Sadly, Angus never got to meet Arthur Bryan but since moving to Belfast in 2017 he probably feels closer than ever.

"Dad lived and played in Ireland, but he didn't bring us up in the traditional Irish way. My grandad was the main Irish link but he passed away when Dad was still in his twenties. We were obviously big fans of Irish rugby and followed whatever games we could get, but my first trip to Ireland wasn't until I was 17 when I came over to look at my options."

A prodigious athlete, Angus was a much-coveted cricket player before rugby began to take over. Indeed, it was only in his final months of his scholarship at Hilton College in South Africa and following his selection for the Sharks U18s that he determined professional rugby might represent a viable career.



"When the pathway became a little clearer, Dad and I consulted an agent who had links over here. Being Irish qualified we just wanted to figure out the processes in the event I'd ever move. It all happened very quickly in the end. Once we started looking, we were invited to come over and have a look.

"There was a bit of interest but as soon as we met with Kieran Campbell at Ulster Rugby we knew it was the right move. I don't think we even discussed it much! It was the best decision for me."

Moving out of the family home is one thing, doing so at 17 to start a new life 13,000km away is quite another. Following his graduation from Hilton in November 2016, Curtis packed up his belongings and landed in Belfast at the turn of the year, halfway through the rugby season. He was an unfamiliar name and face to his new peers, all of whom had progressed through the system together.

"It was certainly tough," Curtis admits. "Toughest of all was probably knowing that all of my friends were heading to universities in Cape Town, Stellenbosch and places like that, all together, having fun. I tried to put it to the back of my head and not let it bother me. I had to remind myself that this was my decision, this was what I wanted to do.

"I was also used to entirely different way of life back in South Africa and Zimbabwe. A few things took a bit of getting used to. The weather was a bigger factor than I'd have thought! When I left home it was the height of summer (even our winter is very pleasant) and here I was toggling out in the wind, rain and snow! It was the people that made the transition a whole lot better. They were very welcoming and made the transition a whole lot easier."

When he first moved over, Angus' older siblings were living in London. While his brother and sister have since moved back home, knowing that they were a short flight away was of great comfort in the early stages. Last year Angus' younger brother Graham joined the Ulster academy, giving their family all the more reason to venture north. Living together, and with their father visiting regularly, Belfast has become a home from home.

"Even from Harare, Mum and Dad tell me they get to see our games. I don't know how, but they do! Dad is over a good bit anyway; he can't stay away! Throughout school he would show up at our games every weekend. I'm sure it kills him not being able to do the same now, but we appreciate the lengths he goes to in getting here.

"Unfortunately, he didn't get to see me play a whole lot last year with my injuries. It was a big relief to get back for pre-season and get going again. I've had a good run recently, but the injuries make me appreciate any opportunities I've been getting again. I have to take them when they come around.

"There's still a long way to go in the season and hopefully in the years to come, so hopefully there'll be a few more excuses for him to come visit!"

THE ORIGINAL MEMBERS OF THE WOLFPACK

Kieran Joyce, with the help of his brother Conor, are behind **Noggin Sport**, a community interest company that keeps heads in the game and promotes the positive effects of mental health awareness

KIERAN JOYCE



Tasked with devising a business plan for a start-up company, Kieran Joyce took his notepad and pen and joined his assigned group for a brainstorming session at Queen’s University. They thrashed out a few ideas before their lecturer advised them to put greater focus on what meant most to each of them.

Kieran didn’t have to think very hard. Sport was an obvious passion having played rugby in Ulster but in the preceding months mental health had also assumed a greater significance in his life.

On his way home, an idea was playing on his mind and he discussed his thoughts with his elder brother, Conor, who he was living with at the time.

In 2011, Conor Joyce became Ulster Rugby’s youngest ever player when he made his senior bow against Leinster Rugby. He would go on to captain a talented Irish U20 side against Fiji amidst backrow competition in the form of Josh van der Flier, Jack O’Donoghue and Dan Leavy.

Conor loved the business idea and together they pressed ahead with plans for Noggin Sport, a community interest company dedicated to raising awareness of mental health in sport. As Noggin Sport has grown, so too has Kieran.

“I’ve been on a bit of a journey with Noggin,” Kieran remarks. “I used to get very anxious in front of people, talking, sharing – but the way our partnership works, that’s exactly where I slot in!”

“As time moved on, I became much more comfortable engaging on the issues. So now I am the one out and about meeting people, spreading awareness. It’s very important that people understand what you’re doing and why.”

Most recently, Noggin Sport also linked up with Tackle Your Feelings with every member of Rugby Players Ireland receiving a beanie hat to mark the launch of #ImTakingControl – phase two of the mental wellbeing initiative.



“Noggin and Tackle Your Feelings promote similar messages, so it was great to align and help each other on our respective journeys. The rugby network is very important to us. Without the support of the rugby community we wouldn’t have been able to raise the awareness we have so far.

“Wherever we have been, we have received great support. When we first started both Conor and I were based in Belfast. To date over 30 rugby clubs in Northern Ireland are on board along with 40 from the Republic of Ireland. Conor then moved onto Jersey Reds, while I went to Connacht.”

Now based at home in Birmingham having been released by Connacht Rugby last summer, Kieran now plays for Moseley RFC in National League One, a club based just minutes from his home.

“I’m enjoying the balance at the moment,” he said. “Obviously it was disappointing to be let go by Connacht, but you also forget how long you’ve been away from home.

“I’ve always stayed in touch with the lads from home but now I’m training with them on Tuesdays and Thursdays, with a game at the weekend. It makes for a nice change.

“I’m really enjoying things at the moment between playing rugby and promoting mental health through Noggin.”

THE IRISHMAN

A lot can happen in a lifetime, but by anyone's standards John Quill has packed more in.

JOHN QUILL



The thrill of coming home never changes. Everything might look the same, feel the same, even smell the same, but John Quill appreciates that it is he who might be a little different.

Back in Youghal and working in the family bakery, it seems peculiar that just two months ago he was lining out for the United States in the Rugby World Cup. It would prove to be the culmination of seven years in the US rugby system.

Frustratingly, Quill's last hurrah in Japan was short-lived. Following a high tackle on England's Owen Farrell, World Rugby intervened. Although his 'good character and conduct' at the subsequent disciplinary hearing was taken into account, Quill was nevertheless hit with a three-week suspension.

With the Eagles in a group that also featured France, Argentina and Tonga, it meant that Quill's tournament was effectively over. His swansong reduced to a lonely flight home.

"I've been ok," he says of the time since his dismissal in the first pool game. "It was a rough couple of weeks the way I went out. There had been a huge build-up to it. Then to have 70 minutes of rugby and that be it, it was disappointing.

"It was a tough pill to swallow, but that's sport. Isn't it?"

However, rather than fly to his base in New York, Quill headed for Cork. While it was always the plan to return home, as things panned out, he needed the support of his family more than ever.

"It's good to be around them again," the Dolphin RFC man remarks. "It's the first time I've been home for an extended period of time in a good few years so I'm enjoying it. Of course, it didn't take them long to get me back into the swing of things."

Speaking at the end of an eight-hour shift in the family bakery alongside his wife Niamh who has been with him every step of the way, the tiredness is evident in Quill's voice. A lie-in during the week consists of a 4.30am start, ordinarily he's in much earlier.

"A few years ago, we relocated the bakery and the deli to the one location. When they were based in two different areas, Dad used to be at work for 10.30pm and work right through until 8am the next morning. Now we get to start at 1.30am. It seems mad, but it's what we were always used to.

"At first it was a bit of a shock to the system. It's very different to your typical rugby day, but it's not the worst either. On the earlier starts I'll get home after 8am and sleep for a couple of hours. You still have a whole day in front of you!"

The Quills' Collins Bakery & Deli has been in his sights for some time. Over the last few years he has worked in several bakeries in the States to keep his eye in. It was also useful for picking up new tips to share with home. Rugby is no longer the focal point but while it might not be the final chapter in that respect, for the moment it's not going to feature.

"I've knocked the rugby on the head for now," Quill reveals. "My body needs a break. I decided a while back that I was going to come home

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after Japan and let the season pass me by. We'll reassess next year and see where I'm at but for now I'm going to enjoy getting my life rolling here and not waking up sore!

"If I do get the boots on, it won't be back in the States. I loved the place and really enjoyed my rugby there, especially at New York where they are really building something. They'll go on to good things.

"As much as that is enticing, playing rugby in a big city is a bit of a graft. New York is a crazy place. I was based in Brooklyn. It would take me two hours to get to training between the subways, buses and walking. By the time I'd get home, it'd be silly o'clock.



"If I was to join the lads for a gym session in Manhattan or catch an appointment with the club physio, that was a three-hour round trip. You spend the bulk of time travelling which isn't best suited to professional sport. While it's improving all the time, the money just hasn't been there for me to continue justifying it."

Not that the flanker regrets his time across the Atlantic. It allowed him to reconnect with his mother's roots, experience a new way of life with Niamh and become an international sportsman. Indeed, within weeks of setting foot on the ground in Boston he was making his Test debut for the Eagles against Russia in November 2012.

A brief stint with London Welsh in 2014 aside, Quill has been based in the USA ever since his time with Munster Rugby finished. The game was slowly evolving there and he managed to pick up professional contracts with Sacramento Express, the Glendale Raptors and latterly Rugby United New York.

"It's a young man's game over there now. If lads aren't getting their opportunities here, I do think it's an ideal place to go for a year or two and get regular game time. Before the concern might have been that the standard was not up to scratch, but it is improving all the time.

"It's like any business though. It takes a while to get going. I hope to be the fifth generation of my family to carry on the bakery, so we've been around the block. In time, rugby in the USA will be too.

"I'll keep an eye on how it develops but for now I'm looking forward to the new challenge in the family business and making sure we continue to evolve."

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PRIZE POSSESSIONS

World Cup winner BJ Botha is helping others to cherish their own special moments

BJ BOTHA



As Siya Kolisi held the Rugby World Cup aloft in Yokohama, BJ Botha was taking in the moment from his Limerick home. 12 years previously, as John Smit enjoyed a similar privilege, Botha took his place alongside him on the podium. 14,000 kilometres away, Kolisi looked on from a tavern in an impoverished township in the outskirts of Port Elizabeth.

"I don't think the Hollywood scriptwriters could have done any better," Botha says of Kolisi's recent duty. "It was an incredible day for the Springboks, but for me it was an even bigger day for the country. The Webb Ellis trophy will visit the four corners of South Africa over the next few weeks and you'll see people ordinarily divided come together to join in the celebrations.

"The players leveraged that support. You could see it online. Rassie [Erasmus] and the players interacted with the people and brought them into their camp. The ordinary man on the street became a Springbok and the support flowed from there. The brotherhood and communal environment showed in their success."

Botha's pride in South Africa's triumph is evident but leaving the country in 2008 remains a conscious decision that he stands by. While he ultimately finished his career in France, positive stints in Ulster and Munster prompted the former Sharks prop to return to Ireland.

"South Africa is born within us," he says, "but we really have fully bought into life in Ireland. This

is home for now. It makes it easier that all my children have been born here but occasions like the World Cup Final cast your mind back home, to the local coffee shop we used to visit or the barbecues with the family.

"In terms of a future though, you have to be realistic. We have a great support network base built up in Ireland and have made many friends, both inside and outside the rugby realm which is so important. It's evident how passionate Irish fans are about their sport, especially rugby. As a result I'm a little fresher in their minds. It means that if we need something, we generally know who to turn to."

It is to the rugby community to whom Botha will first turn as Black Key Diamonds, his new business venture, comes to Ireland. Creating bespoke jewellery at competitive prices, the South African believes that he can become a useful pawn for his former teammates and opponents.

"Many of the guys I know here are 25-35-year-old rugby players. Their world is preoccupied by their rugby and they are aware of the sacrifices their families and partners have to make to facilitate it. Yet their lives move on, like anyone they will get married or want to mark an occasion in a special way, only they rarely know what they're looking for.

"Black Key Diamonds will help them to find their way. From the ground up they will be involved in the process. They give their thoughts and motivations, and the hope is that once the piece is finished they will have something special to both them and the person it is intended for. It's more than something bought on a whim off a shelf."

“South Africa is born within us, but we have really bought into life in Ireland. This is home for now. It makes it easier that all my children have been born here but occasions like the World Cup Final cast your mind back home, to the local coffee shop we used to visit or the barbecues with the family.”



While pieces are available to the general public, Botha has focussed on his rugby network to gain a foothold in Ireland. Several former players have already taken the plunge, while members of the Munster Rugby and Ulster Rugby squads have also been in contact following their recent Pro14 trips to South Africa.

"I'd like to think the guys can relate to me and place their trust in me more than they might do with an unknown agent. With their help we can establish ourselves in Ireland. Already we have started to engage with local manufacturers. We want to give an Irish feel to our products. It's very exciting.

"We will operate in a very niche area. Bigger companies have the capacity to purchase bulk loads of stones that will sit in a safe for ages. We source the diamonds as they are requested and tailor the piece to the customer's liking. It creates a personal connection from the ground up."

It's not Botha's first business venture in Ireland. Shadow Ball is a uniquely designed rugby ball that allows users to simulate technically correct pass and catch training on their own. Botha's old friend CJ Stander is a shareholder and brand ambassador. A new look launch is on the horizon for Shadow Ball Europe.

"It has been a steep learning curve," Botha makes of his entrepreneurial experience thus far. "As rugby players, a lot is done for us. Everything is put in place from the contract to the physical stuff. You're surrounded by expertise. Going out into the business world I didn't have those resources and I learned a hell of a lot! But when it all boils down to it, the key to success is knowing who you are talking to."

In some ways, Botha's connected approach is reflective of the way Siya Kolisi and his team have rallied a nation around them in recent weeks. Whether a South African was watching the game in a township or from a corporate box in Yokohama, Erasmus, Kolisi and co. connected with their people and ensured that their success would be felt by everyone as though they had all played their own role in the win.

"Whether someone chooses to buy a ring for €100,000 or €1,000, their mindset is the same. They want to feel a personal connection to the piece and be part of its journey. Only bespoke items can do that. Of course, a nice piece of jewellery will always be appreciated, but it's what the item symbolises that's more important.

"I think my World Cup medal is on top of my cupboard somewhere. I have medals and all these things in a box. They're very special, as are the accolades. But as I grow older I appreciate that my most prized possessions are the memories that came with them. The medal brings me back to a special time in my life.

"They might not yet realise it but the gold medals around those Springbok necks stand for something more than a rugby game. They are token of a journey that a nation embarked upon. It also symbolises what they've been through as individuals to get, all the variables that contribute to a World Cup success – the sacrifices, the injuries, the selections, the expectations.

"My own medal might live in a box, but the memories live in me."

"I have medals and all these things in a box. They're very special, as are the accolades. But as I grow older I appreciate that my most prized possessions are the memories that came with them."

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