

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF
RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

SUMMER 2020

A TEAM PLAYER

FERGUS MCFADDEN



**WHIRLWIND
WINGER**

BEIBHINN PARSONS

**TAKING IT ALL
IN HIS STRIDE**

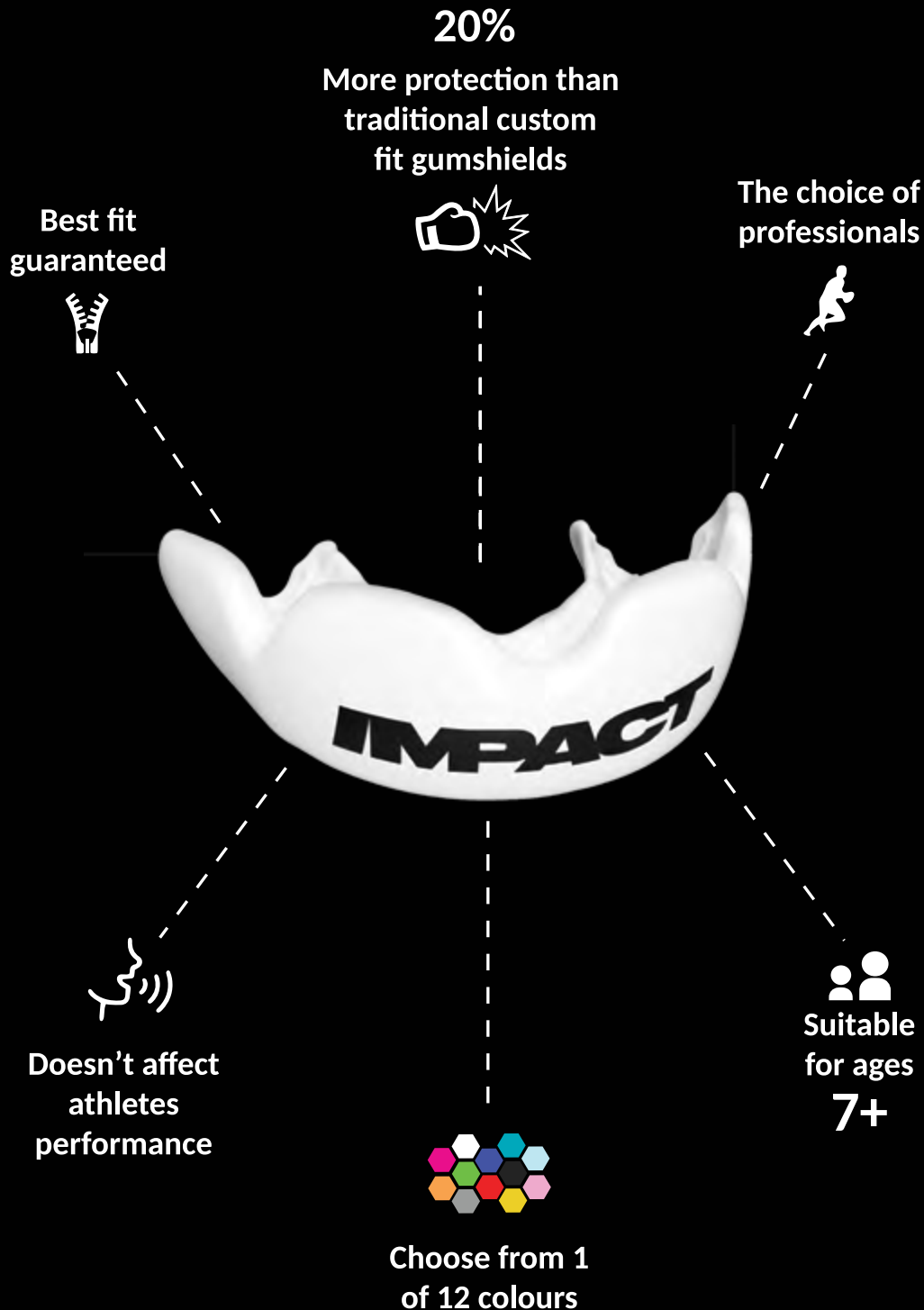
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**RUGBY PLAYERS
IRELAND**

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



Sitting down to write a message for the last edition of our magazine, July seemed like a distant outpost. Back then Ireland's game against Italy in the Six Nations had been cancelled and we were facing into a period of lockdown. There was something surreal about the circumstances, yet it soon became a way of life for us all.

We are now experienced campaigners in the art of life at home and many took full advantage. It was an opportunity to spend time with loved ones and Zoom in to those a little further away. There was an impressive array of culinary skills on show throughout, not to mention the gardening. Some used their time to learn with our Player Development team, others opted to read and reflect. Whatever way you chose to spend the time, more importantly I hope this finds you and your families safe and well.

Unfortunately, not all of us emerged unscathed. Indeed, the past four months have been a huge challenge for us all on countless levels. Loss was felt by many while others were burdened by other consequences of the lockdown.

At this point, I'd like to acknowledge the work of those on the frontline who worked tirelessly for those we could not reach. A recent documentary on RTÉ shed some light on the conditions they had to face on a daily basis. It was a chilling reminder of the devastating potential of Covid-19. I'd like to place on record my thanks to all who played their part and especially note the contributions made by several members of Rugby Players Ireland who toggled out for their biggest battle. When rugby kicks-off again, their teammates will be proud to line out by their side again.

We remain in uncertain territory, but I am hopeful that with every passing day we step a little closer to rugby matches becoming the reality once again. Throughout the past months, the importance of sport and exercise in our lives has never been so

evident. Whether as a willing contestant or a fervent fan, the opportunity to participate will no longer be taken for granted. I look forward to that being embodied on the pitch and echoed from the sideline.

With many of our members having returned to training in the past few weeks, it is clear that few let up in maintaining their physical condition from their homes. This is demonstrable of the professionalism of our athletes which is deserving of the very best off-field conditions. At Rugby Players Ireland we have been doing our level best to ensure this is the case.

As you will have seen through my regular correspondence, we have been working closely with the IRFU on several matters. In the first instance, we came to a quick resolution with regard to salary deferrals to help with the immediate future of the game at the outset of the crisis. In more recent weeks we also played our part in establishing appropriate protocols to get our members back training and playing.

Latterly, much attention has been given to the thorough financial discussions that have been taking place between the IRFU and Rugby Players Ireland on our members' behalf. We are keenly aware of the hardship that has been felt by so many across the country with jobs being lost and many personal sacrifices. No industry has remained untouched. We are no different and we appreciated that some impact was unavoidable.

However, whilst rugby players are perceived to be a privileged entity, we are also limited by our physical capacity to keep playing and earning. This is why we place so much emphasis on ensuring that our members are prepared as best as possible for life after rugby. Our Player Development Programme is much envied across the world of sport and everything is done for our members' benefit, exemplified by the work of the team throughout the lockdown.

Much of this support would not be possible without the assistance of Zurich Ireland who have also played a crucial role in their partnership of the Tackle Your Feelings campaign. With further support from the Z Zurich Foundation, Tackle Your Feelings became a real point of reference for many throughout the lockdown. We are grateful to our membership for the way they shared their experiences and led from the front during what was often a mentally demanding time.

I have every confidence that rugby in Ireland will also play its part in inspiring the country get back to its feet in the aftermath of Covid-19. While I look forward to conclusion of the current season and closing this chapter, I also look forward to a fresh start in 2020/21.

Stay safe.



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



ZURICH IRISH RUGBY PLAYERS AWARDS 2020

Usually this edition of our magazine would be dedicated to our annual awards ceremony. Due to be held on May 20 at the Clayton Hotel on the Burlington Road, plans were inevitably scrapped when it became clear that Covid-19 was much too serious to ignore.

Nevertheless, the team at Rugby Players Ireland (and assorted guests) linked in via Zoom to mark the biggest night in our calendar in a different way – gowns and tuxedos were still compulsory! We hope to celebrate the 2019/20 season later this year!



FRONTLINE FEATS

Our sincerest gratitude to several members of Rugby Players Ireland for all their efforts on the frontline. While some were braced for action, others answered pleas from the government for their help and assistance. The war is not yet won, but their efforts will always be remembered fondly.

There were also some new recruits in the mix! For the past number of years Claire Keohane and Angus Lloyd have been balancing their rugby commitments with their medicine studies at RCSI. Both are recipients of the Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary. All at Rugby Players Ireland were delighted to hear that both recently received news of their respective qualifications!



MAY DAY!

With Darkness into Light postponed, many people throughout the country instead answered Pieta House's Sunrise Appeal on May 9. A little over an hour after the day had dawned, the Ireland Men's and Women's 7s squads hosted a HIIT session to get everyone off to a flyer! Inspired by their teammate Hannah Tyrrell, Stacey Flood and Ashleigh Baxter were to the fore of the effort and gave plenty an insight into the rigours of a 7s game! Well done to all!

Later that morning #TheBigRugbyRun had the Irish rugby community off their feet and doing their part for the Feed the Heroes campaign. We reflect on the event with Johnie Murphy on page 14.








KEEPING THE SHOW ON THE ROAD!

With guidelines proving particularly restrictive for rugby players, Rugby Players Ireland sought to come up with different ways of engaging our members. Ulster Rugby player Louis Ludik had an amusing answer! Following Louis' suggestion, comedy nights for our Ulster Rugby and Leinster Rugby hosted by Shane Todd

and Risteard Cooper respectively brought the groups together on an informal basis while raising funds for the Belfast Trust and Spinal Injuries Ireland. Many thanks to Louis and Dan Leavy for their efforts!

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND WEBCAST SERIES

Following the announcement of restrictions across Ireland and the UK, Rugby Players Ireland set about developing a series of webinars for our members guided by their concerns. The sessions remain online and accessible via your PDM. Many thanks to all our providers!

	Pensions	Gerard Tyrell, Zurich Tax Relief on Pension Contributions
	Mindset Matters	Declan O'Connell Value of Goal Setting – What's Important
	Sleep	Lois James Techniques for promoting Sleep Hygiene to get the best sleep possible
	Sleep 2	Lois James Strategic napping and how it can boost performance
	Mortgages	Vincent Milroy & Derek Sutton, Bank of Ireland & Patrick Greene, BOI UK How to best prepare for a Mortgage Application
	Anxiety	Ross White The B.U.S. Technique to manage anxiety: Breathe, Unhook(the thoughts) & See what matters.
	Stress	Ross White The E.D.I.T. approach to deal with stress: Establish Routines, Drop Anchor, Identify Thoughts, Thank Your Mind
	Resilience	Cathal Sheridan How taking care of our wellbeing can help build our Resilience
	Positive Thinking v Realism	Cathal Sheridan How gratitude can contribute to our own happiness
	Investments	James Forbes, Goodbody Stockbrokers Time in the Market...not Market Timing.
	LinkedIn 1	Mark Oliver, LinkedIn Members with a photo get up to: 9x more connection requests
	LinkedIn 2	Mark Oliver, LinkedIn Linking with people you don't know expands you network quickly
	Financial Awareness (Ulster)	Wayne Nickols & Cathy Brennan, Investec Reducing outgoings in line with reduced cash flow in during Covid-19

CONTROL THE CONTROLLABLES

The uncertainty of professional rugby was made ever clearer during Covid-19

Looking to the future has been a peculiar pursuit for all rugby players recently. Preparation for phantom games has been a mental and physical challenge for many, while those coming off a contract have been unsure whether they have already said goodbye.

This year's spate of retirements began when Dan Tuohy pulled no punches in announcing his decision prior to the lockdown. Capped 11 times by Ireland, the Bristol born lock had been made club captain of Pro D2 club RC Vannes this season before sustaining nerve damage in his hand. In a statement on Twitter, Tuohy revealed his belief that the traditional rugby values of honesty and integrity have been sacrificed for commercial gain.

While Tuohy will have made peace with his decision to move on during the lockdown, many Irish based players who were staring down the last months of their contracts were placed in an uncertain position. Some will have anticipated how the news might unfold but others will have been taken aback and forced to seek out options at a time when the very game itself was vulnerable.

Speaking following news of a raft of departures from Connacht Rugby, Rugby Players Ireland Executive Board Member Eoin McKeon gave an insight into how recent weeks on the precipice have played out.

"They're never easy conversations to have," McKeon acknowledges. "It's not easy for the coaches either

but it's part and parcel of the game. Personally, I didn't feel like I should have been let go. I thought I'd another few years left in me at the club, but things happen. Coaches have different viewpoints and there are a host of other decision makers making calls now too. That's the way the system is. It's not something you can dwell on.



"All you can ask for is honesty. Whatever way the conversation pans out, you can still sit across the table from that person with respect. If there is a bit dishonesty, then that's when the water becomes a bit murky and issues arise. We're all grown men, whether the decision means you're in or out, you have to take it on the chin. The more transparency there is the better it is for both parties."

While the environment of the game and the direction it may have to take remains unclear, McKeon's tenure as a professional rugby player is even more precarious. While he regrets that the breaking point may have come a little sooner than expected, he also notes that his learnings through his steady involvement with Rugby Players Ireland have taught him to be ready. Unfortunately, not all players can say the same.

"With everything going on I don't know whether there'll be anything for me out there. I can't control the rugby side at the moment because there are no games and we're at the mercy of the government, so I've been putting my focus into what I can do off the pitch. When it comes to a decision, it will be the best decision for my career going forward, whether it's on or off the pitch. I'm only putting my focus on the controllables."

"It's a practice what you preach scenario now in the sense that I could be transitioning into other industries. You have to have yourself as well equipped as possible. The end comes for everyone. It's not like you can avoid it! The reality is that very few players build up a high enough profile to fall back on rugby for the rest of their lives. For the majority of players that's not the case at all. You have to go out and find work. It's about how well you can deal with the situation when it arises."



#IMTAKINGCONTROL



What led to my retirement or transition out of sport



A sense of loss of identity



How the team does without me



Attitude of teammates to my retirement



Attitude of fans to my retirement



Being removed from the WhatsApp group



Job career market outside of rugby



Global issues e.g., recession, on-going pandemic

FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL,
LET GO OF WHAT YOU CAN'T



My Gratitude



My Relationships & Connections



My Social Responsibility



My Sleep



My Physical Health



My Kindness



My Optimism



My Social Media Use



My Actions



My Nutrition



My Emotions



My Mindset

A POWERFUL INFLUENCE

When restrictions were first imposed in March, our members came out in force to encourage the public to abide by the rules set out by government and health authorities. By now, the regulations are just a way of life but as morale ebbs and flows, rugby players have sustained their efforts to boost the mood! And by the way... there were way too many to mention! Here are some highlights!

Not many of us own a piece of history, so when Keith Earls offered up his jersey from Ireland's famous 2018 victory over New Zealand many jumped at the chance to take it home. The Munster and Irish winger ultimately raised over €33,000 for Barnardos Ireland, doubling his initial target. Well done Keith!

Numerous members have rowed in behind charities across the island of Ireland. Ulster and Ireland scrum-half John Cooney had something of a wardrobe clearout raising much needed funds for the Alzheimer Society of Ireland, Cancer Focus NI and the NHS. Meanwhile, Cooney's national teammates Andrew Conway (Make-A-Wish) and Robbie Henshaw (Breast Cancer Ireland), as well as Irish Men's 7s player Harry McNulty (Feed the Heroes) also got in on the act.

Inevitably several online challenges cropped up. Conor Murray's box kick challenge has proven to be particularly popular with people of all ages sharing their kicking skills and donating to ISPCC Childline and Barnardos.

Rugby Players Ireland staff took a 5-day #AnCosánathon challenge set by Goodbody which encourages participants to develop a new skill. It quickly made its way to our membership with some dusting down old pianos and books. Others like Aoife McDermott took a different approach and is now adept at balloon modelling! All was in aid of An Cosán, a Jobstown based charity that seeks to empower through education.

Our Executive Board members have also been getting involved. Chairman Rob Kearney and Johnny Sexton ditched their hair alongside their Leinster Rugby teammates for Feed the Heroes, the Down Syndrome Centre and Multiple Sclerosis Ireland. From his home in Cork, Peter O'Mahony was part of Munster Rugby's #PasstheBall initiative to highlight the importance of social distancing.

Using their online platforms our members have been proactive in encouraging physical exercise too. Greg O'Shea has been offering free pilates classes on his YouTube channel while former player Damian Browne got people off the couch with a demanding 14-day burpee challenge. Back at Browne's old stomping ground, the Connacht Rugby squad have been sharing their efforts to keep apace with their coaching staff every week!

Finally, in Belfast Darren Cave was busy delivering donuts to staff at the frontline of Belfast hospitals, while Sean O'Brien followed Robin Copeland's lead by offering up his Dublin home rent-free for healthcare workers.



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A TEAM PLAYER

Fergus McFadden rarely stole the headlines but the appreciation for his contributions was plentiful where it mattered

FERGUS MCFADDEN



Probably from his very first foray onto a rugby field, Fergus McFadden's contribution was always defined by his competitiveness. If there was someone toggled out, running well and hitting hard, you could be sure that they would be returned from whence they came once McFadden had them within his sights. Even if they were one of the biggest names in the game.

"Brian [O'Driscoll] and I used to be very competitive in training," McFadden begins. "I mean, the guy is one of the best competitors of all time for Leinster and Ireland! We were playing a conditioned game one early preseason and a few weeks beforehand he had been blocking me off. It was crafty because Joe [Schmidt] couldn't blow it up for foul play.

"We were back at it a few weeks later and I blocked him off from scoring. In those fitness games if a team starts scoring you can do an awful lot of running trying to get back into it. He wasn't happy. He said to me, 'if you do that again I'm gonna...!'" So, I did do it again. There was a bit of handbags and we had to be pulled apart. I split my eye open.

"We chatted later that evening and it was grand. It was water under the bridge. I've done plenty of things in matches and in training. I've thrown what weight I have around a bit so I can't complain too much! I think it helped me in the end!"

Respect is a hard-earned thing in a rugby environment. Very often there is a price to pay en route, yet McFadden's competitive edge ensured he never shied away from a challenge. That moment, amongst many others, obviously resonated with the former Irish, Leinster and Lions captain. Speaking about 'one of the best teammates of them all' prior to an interview on Off the Ball, O'Driscoll had a message for the retiring winger.

"Not only were you the life and soul of the dressing room, but more importantly you were one of the ones people turned to when it was time to roll the sleeves up. I haven't known anyone with an insatiable appetite for pain quite like you. Competitiveness personified and unwillingness to ever give up, they're the real traits that will serve you well in the next life."

It is obvious that many in the Irish rugby community shared similar sentiments. The raft of social media postings that followed the announcement of his impending departure demonstrated that McFadden had been an immensely popular of dressing rooms throughout his rugby travels. Tributes poured in from all sides; from those whom he battled for and from those he battled against.



“

I don't think there's any other workplace or sport where you get to know people as much as professional rugby.

Although the 34-times capped Irish international broke into the Leinster Rugby squad within two years of leaving school, his rise had been understated. The same could be said of his career. McFadden would be the first to admit that he was never the quickest, nor the most skilful but for all his perceived failings he was the one player everyone wanted in their dressing room.

"Hearing some of the stuff people have been saying has been pretty emotional for me," McFadden concedes. "When I gave the statement to Leinster I thought I'd be fine. I had been building myself up for it for quite a while. Then I started getting messages and hearing from friends and family, current and past players and it began to get a bit emotional.

"I don't think there's any other workplace or sport where you get to know people as much as professional rugby. When you're in the trenches with them you build a bond that will last forever. A lot of these people who have said these things know that I worked for everything I got, they respected that.



"They've been there when we've lost games we should have won, won games we shouldn't. I've picked up injuries and missed big games. I've played well and missed selection. They were there on the good days and the bad. I've seen and done a lot but no matter how ready you think you are until that day comes you don't know how you're going to feel. I was more emotional than I expected."

Over the past number of years, many players destined for Irish rugby folklore have been signing off their careers with a published account of their memories. Scan the index and invariably McFadden's name crops up in amusing circumstances, but the anecdotes were always qualified with an acknowledgement of the sheer determination he exhibits on the field. It's clear that one of McFadden's greatest contributions lay behind the flashing bulbs on matchday.

"It was tempting to stay and contribute, but as much as I respect those guys who manage to play into their late 30s, it wasn't for me. I had been toying with the idea before I signed on for another year. I had a very matter of fact conversation with Leo [Cullen] at the start of the season and I set my stall out.

"I knew it would be the end. I would be turning 34 at the end of the season and while I didn't get as many caps as Jamie Heaslip, there are a fair few miles on the clock. I think I've got a lot out of my body. I've had a great run of it and it felt like the right time. I just I wanted to enjoy every day I had knowing it would be my last as a rugby player. Up until being sent home with the pandemic, I really did."

While his conversation with Cullen was purely professional, he hopes to sit back with his former teammate and many others in time to come to reflect on a journey through one of the greatest periods for Irish teams in any code. It began with a privileged apprenticeship.

"Back in 2009 I was the 24th man for most of the Heineken Cup games. All my caps that season came in the Magners League, but I couldn't force my way through for the bigger games. As much as I would have loved to have been picked, it was one of my first years with the senior squad. I was just delighted to see Leinster win the Heineken Cup for the first time and to be so close to it.

"That team, particularly the backline, was so talented. Guys I looked up to in school – Brian, Gordon [D'Arcy], Shaggy [Shane Horgan], Girvan Dempsey, Felipe [Contepomi]. You also had Rob [Kearney] who I played with for Clongowes and Luke [Fitzgerald] breaking through. I was trying to sponge as much as possible from all these guys.

"I was lucky to come into an environment when things were picking up. The timing was nice but I'm not going to be one of those people who looks back and regrets not picking up a few more caps if this or that didn't happen. Of course, there's a few medals we left behind but the experiences outweigh everything."

Remarkably, silverware almost seems part and parcel of McFadden's professional career. Though medals may yet await in the coming months, the uncertainty has cast a curious shadow over the final moments of a glittering career.

"I did all the training Leinster prescribed and stayed connected to the lads. I'm delighted to have the opportunity to see it out. I'd love to be involved on the pitch. If it doesn't pan out that way, so be it. Some things are more important than Fergus McFadden's retirement.

"Whatever happens beyond that, I'll sit back over the next few months and enjoy some time with my young family. Then we'll assess my options from there. I've picked up many transferable skills, learnings and experiences. I hope to bring them all into the next phase, whatever that is!"

“

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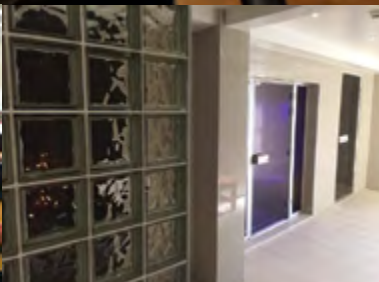
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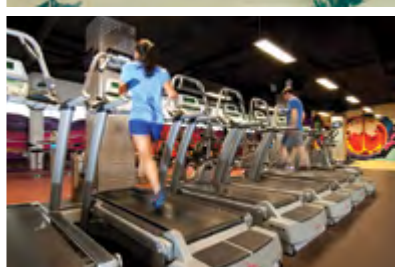
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TAKING IT ALL IN HIS STRIDE

With Covid-19 restrictions unrelenting, Johnie Murphy got the rugby community to their feet for **#TheBigRugbyRun**

JOHNE MURPHY



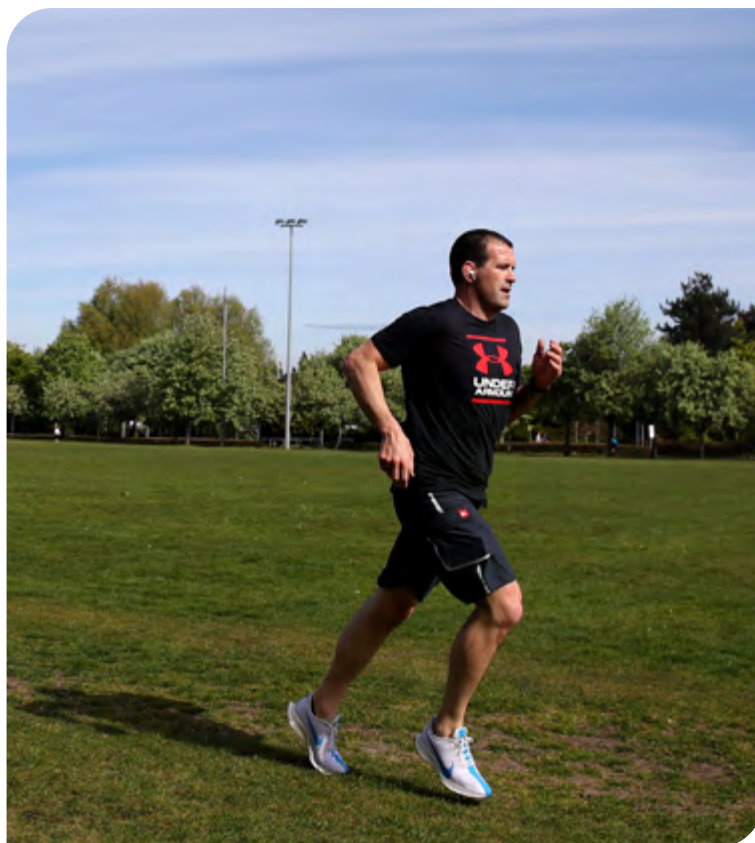
Sitting down for a beer after The Big Rugby Run, John Murphy finally had the chance to reflect on a whirlwind few weeks. He remembered a chat he had with his PSA Academies colleague Graham Ross a short time previously. They had both remarked that it's daft how the simplest of ideas often turn out to be the best ones.

"The whole thing stemmed from Graham really," Murphy tell us. "He coaches the Minis U10s in Newbridge Rugby Club and he was disappointed that the kids didn't have the opportunity to finish the season. Usually there'd be a blitz or end of season party for them, while at Newbridge College our focus was on the Schools' Cup Final. We thought the run might be good way to bring some closure on the season for everyone, get a handful of clubs involved, raise a bit of money and get people out and active."

Get involved they did. With summer camp activities on hold, the PSA Academies team were whisked into action. Murphy's extensive contact list also came in handy. The more calls that went out, the more that came back in. When UL Bohs in Limerick got in touch to say they had roped in 150 members, it began to dawn on Murphy that it was beginning to grow legs.

Its impact is still being felt too. In response to the need of our local communities resulting from Covid-19, the Z Zurich Foundation (Zurich Ireland's charitable arm) donated an additional 50% of funds raised. In all, The Big Rugby Run has raised over €60,000 for the Feed the Heroes campaign, smashing their initial target by 1,100%.

"It was only when we saw the videos coming through that we realised it was something a little special. There was one from Budge Pountney (former Scotland international) in Bangor. Most people did it virtually, but the Bangor Minis



management coordinated in such a way that each young player could actually pass the ball onto someone, all within their 2km limit. For many of them it was the first time they had seen their teammate in weeks! That was the kind of stuff we hadn't anticipated.

"You had 8 or 9-year-old kids running in the same event as elite players like Gordon D'Arcy, Malcolm O'Kelly and John Muldoon. Mind you, those names might have been more familiar to their parents, so we had buy-in from them too! How often do they run 5km with their son or daughter? So really it wasn't us who had made it a success, it was the engagement of people of all shapes, sizes, ages and backgrounds.

“

You had 8 or 9-year-old kids running in the same event as elite players like Gordon D'Arcy, Malcolm O'Kelly and John Muldoon. Mind you, those names might have been more familiar to their parents, so we had buy-in from them too!



"It was great to see so many past-players row in behind it (from Rugby League as well as Union) plus the referees, and humbling to think we can still inspire people out there! I think that's what struck a chord with the Z Zurich Foundation. Their donation is in recognition of the strong partnership between Zurich Ireland and Rugby Players Ireland who do so much for retired players. When we were made aware of their gesture it was one of those 'wow' moments.

"Over the few weeks we worked very closely with the Feed the Heroes team who have been so incredible in terms of keeping everyone on the front-line going. It was amazing to give them this boost as they started to close it out so that they could charge over the finish line."

Though the legs may just be recovering, plans are already afoot for The Big Rugby Run to return in 2021. The hope is that we can stray beyond limited distances at that point but the run will retain much of its original character. For now though Murphy must cast his eye over the immediate landscape. He is monitoring developments closely and is remaining positive.

"We're still planning for a summer programme with PSA Academies at some point. Since the run we have knuckled down and refocused in terms of a Covid-19 perspective. We've been watching Australia and New Zealand closely and I'm happy to say we will be getting some camps off the ground. Bookings are coming in again and things are looking up. Hopefully we remain on course!"

At the very least Murphy hopes that the go-ahead will come before the school-term begins in September. Having seen his stock rise over the past number of seasons with Naas RFC, a Leinster Schools' Senior Cup Final with Newbridge College was set to launch him further. In that respect he has some unfinished business.

"We had an end without an end last season. It was frustrating not to finish it out, win, lose or draw but I'm proud of the boys' response. From the start our motto was 'better people, better players' and they have carried that on. They were obviously disappointed when I broke the news to them but very quickly it became about their social responsibility and their own roles as peer leaders.

"They are a group of mature and intelligent young men. I was always clear with them that we'd be playing up until March 17. We got to March 12 but as we went further into the month there was an acknowledgement that some things are just so much bigger than a schools' cup final. I was just glad they had that semi-final against St. Michael's to showcase their ability.

"They've had it tough over the few months, with all the uncertainty. Some of their milestones haven't really happened which is a pity. That game was a huge focus, the Leaving Cert was canned and they had to graduate online. It all becomes another learning for them, part of the journey.

"That goes for all of us. It hasn't been easy. We take it and keep moving, but never forget it."

**“
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A NEVILLE HOTEL

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

JOHN COONEY TALKS ABOUT THE ROAD HE CHOSE, HOW HE REACTS TO
SETBACKS AND WHAT MOTIVATES HIM TO SUCCEED IN HIS RUGBY CAREER

TACKLE
YOUR
FEELINGS



**"I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."**

I've always loved "The Road Not Taken" poem by Robert Frost. It's fair to say I took the road less travelled to where I am now.

Early in my career I looked to be on an upward trajectory, but it wasn't as straight forward as that.

A couple of weeks after I turned 22, I was part of Leinster's Heineken Cup 2012 winning squad. In 2015, I was lining out for Connacht Eagles against Germany as the senior Connacht squad were getting ready for a big European game.

It has been a road of highs and lows.

Through it all, I rated myself as good enough to compete at international level. That made the injuries and other setbacks even harder to take.

When Ireland beat New Zealand, I was as delighted as anyone else, but I was also dealing with the disappointment of being part of the squad but not getting picked for the game. It hurt that I wasn't there.

That day I jumped on the treadmill to make sure I put in as many metres as everyone else. I'm competitive so that's how I respond.

I do have a chip on my shoulder. I don't see that as a negative thing. It's not about proving people wrong; it's about proving yourself right.

I've no animosity towards anyone but I have certain drivers that make me work hard. I might write Matt O'Connor's name in my notes in my phone before a game. That's nothing personal. It's just a trigger for me.

Sometimes coaches can have an opinion on you and it's hard to shake that. Sometimes what one coach loves about you, another will hate. That's the fickle reality of it all. You control what you can.

I always remember the coaches that go out of their way to help you along. Isaac Boss was a huge influence and support to me early on. Over the years, I've also had amazing skills coaches like Dave Ellis at Connacht and Dan Soper at Ulster.

They keep you accountable for your performances. They help you to think differently. They will push you to work on key aspects of your game. Sometimes your ego might get in the way, you might think you'd a great game, but they'll show you the small margins of improvement and guide you that way.

I recently read, "Ego Is The Enemy" by Ryan Holiday. That was a worthwhile read for me. Ego can get in the way of things if you let it.



I'm very responsive to reading about philosophies and psychology of sports. I like learning from other athlete's experiences.

"The more I read, the less I know."

You just have to keep working as hard you can and performing as best you can. You look for ways you can get a competitive edge.

The truth is that I've always been a better player than a trainer. Marty Moore told me recently that I "train like Jane and play like Tarzan."

I certainly prefer that than the other way around.

When I was sent on loan to Connacht in 2014, I always thought there would be a route back to Leinster. I spoke to Matt O'Connor before I left for Connacht. I expected a few "work-ons." There was nothing from him.

I was playing well at Connacht; I was comfortable there and loved the people around me. I was enjoying my rugby.

So when, after some time at Connacht, I was offered a Leinster contract I asked, "Who will be the coach?" When I found out Matt O'Connor would still be there, I saw no point in disrupting the position I was in at Connacht and signed for them. That produced one of my career highlights, winning the Pro12 Final against Leinster in 2016. Highs and lows.

The same thing has happened for me at Ulster. I feel comfortable there. I feel like I can be myself and that's when I play my best rugby.



“THE TRUTH IS THAT I’VE ALWAYS BEEN A BETTER PLAYER THAN A TRAINER. MARTY MOORE TOLD ME RECENTLY THAT I “TRAIN LIKE JANE AND PLAY LIKE TARZAN.”

Dan McFarland is probably the best coach I have ever seen when it comes to making everyone feel part of the squad. It's a hugely effective thing.

You want a coach you can speak to, bounce ideas off, and one who's not afraid to tell you when you can improve.

The Ulster fans are amazing. I knew I had to win their respect when I moved to Belfast. Ruan Pienaar had been immense. I knew I was a different player. So, it wasn't about trying to emulate Ruan, it was more about putting my own stamp on things.





Near the end of last season, I was given time off and got the opportunity to be in the stand for Ulster's game against Leinster. My brother had a stag so a gang of us watched the game as supporters. I loved that. It was nice to be in among the fans, have a few beers and soak up the atmosphere. It's a special stadium.

Not getting selected for the Rugby World Cup was tough. I should have been prepared for the call, but I wasn't. When the news came that I wasn't going to Japan, it side swiped me.

I did what I always do and hit the gym. When Dan McFarland called to see how I had reacted to the news, I was on a treadmill.

As big of a disappointment as that was, I was determined to come back stronger. That's how it has to be for me.

The scrum half position for Ireland has become highly competitive. That's a good thing. There's a huge mutual respect among myself and the other guys. My job is to focus on my own self-improvement. One of Joe Schmidt's mantras was a Henry Ford quote, "The competitor to be feared is one who never bothers about you at all but goes on making his own business better all the time." I've adopted that mantra. It's written up on the wall.

I'm a footballer who plays rugby. I only took up rugby in my teens. I played with Beechwood FC in Ranelagh up to youths. I went to Leinster rugby trials, scored a couple of tries, made the Leinster schools team and went straight from there play a cup final for Beechwood against Dalkey United.

One of my goals is to play a season of Sunday league football when I'm finished playing rugby. If I'm still in the shape to do it.

I recently turned thirty. Through rugby, I've grown as a person. On and off the field.

When Dan McFarland took the head coach job. He asked every player what human trait they would choose as a superpower. I said, "resilience". It's been a good companion to me on the road less travelled.

John.

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**THE
SPORTS
CHRONICLE**

John Cooney was in conversation with
The Sports Chronicle.

For more see [TheSportsChronicle.com](https://www.thesportschronicle.com)

END OF TERM REPORT!

PORTUMNA COMMUNITY SCHOOL ENSURED THEIR STUDENTS WERE
LOOKING AFTER THEIR MENTAL WELLBEING DURING THE LOCKDOWN



On March 13, schools and colleges across the country closed their doors. They remain shut until after the summer holidays, yet many adapted impressively to the new conditions. While the roles of parents, students and teachers may have shifted for a period, it is anticipated that normal service will resume in September.

Unfortunately, the school closures also impacted on the Tackle Your Feelings Schools programme which was due to commence in the spring. Aimed at Transition Year students, the pilot initiative is the first of its kind to be introduced into schools by any organisation. A classroom-based course, students are introduced to a range of resources and tasks designed to help them develop their understanding of mental health and wellbeing, with players from around the country sharing their own tips and advice.

After several months developing the syllabus, the Tackle Your Feelings team enlisted the help of 16 schools across Ireland before Covid-19 intervened. With plans afoot to regularly link in with a designated champion in each school, the hope was that by 2021 the programme could be rolled out nationwide. It was therefore to our great delight when Bríd Dunne, Chaplain at Portumna Community School, informed us that her students would be advancing with the programme.

"I'm here to promote the social, emotional, moral and spiritual wellbeing of students no matter where I am," Ms Bríd Dunne tells us over a call to review the syllabus. "It's being integrated into the junior cycle so I'm happy to say that 'wellbeing' is more within the vernacular of the classroom these days, but it was the heart of the Chaplain's role well before it was rolled out with JC reform.

"I'm always looking at initiatives that are contemporary, that can reach students and support them in their development as human beings. Being Chaplain is a faith-based role but ultimately it's about the care of the child in front of you and the pastoral care of the school community. We were always aware it was a pilot programme and we have fed back on different things to the team, but overall Tackle Your Feelings absolutely supported and developed our aims."

Speaking as she brings an extraordinary year to a close, Ms Dunne outlines how she was cognisant of the peculiar circumstances enveloping her students from the outset of the shutdown. Having encountered Tackle Your Feelings some time ago, she was intrigued when the schools version of the initiative was released and duly sought it out. Looking back, it was a timely move.

"Given the international crisis, never before did it seem so important to continue. There wasn't a question mark. It made us more determined to carry it out if anything. I wanted to make sure we were doing something to support young people who may have a lot more free-time or overthinking time, and tried to focus that energy in a positive direction so that they understand their feelings and themselves both for now and into the future.

"Anxieties may have been more heightened for Leaving Cert students, but it was intense for everyone. Through Tackle Your Feelings we wanted to set their expectations of themselves and of their families, especially in circumstances where they're not used to spending so much time together. Usually they'll be with their teacher most of the day!"



Indeed, Ms Dunne describes the student-teacher relationship as being one of the cornerstones of a young person's development. Although she repeatedly stresses that the autonomy of the teacher should never be compromised, her hand was forced as no return seemed likely. Keen to guide them through the app, Ms Dunne adapted the class and brought TYF into her students' homes twice weekly with Microsoft Teams.

"The biggest conflict for me was actually that the students live digitally these days. Two-year-olds know the passwords to their parents iPhones, while those a little older consume everything from TikTok to Instagram! There's an idealism attached to those social media platforms and it can be difficult to understand that it's a narration, not life itself.

"Every app has its use and they are great in their own right. Many people would say that apps made their lockdown experience much easier. However, I also believe that if you're consuming digitally all the time it can affect your ability to live in the real world. I was relieved when, although digitally based, TYF was rooted in normality and in real time. Learnings came through the student's own lived experience.

"As it happened, everyone was having to engage digitally anyway. Obviously, it then becomes a competition for their attention, yet when we asked them for their thoughts it was comforting to know how much they appreciated TYF and how it had helped them in getting through a difficult few weeks.

"They're genuine kids. They're the kind who'll tell you if they didn't get anything out of it, so

I do think it had a positive impact. A few didn't complete it – some had farming to do, others had little brothers and sisters to look after, but in general nobody said it was a waste of time. In fact a few of them said the timing couldn't have been better!"

In a recent study carried out by TYF consultant psychologist Dr Jennifer McMahon, it was found that young people will look to their heroes to help regulate their emotions and to model the type of behaviour they aspire to. In the context of Covid-19, Dr McMahon believed that seeing rugby players taking their wellbeing seriously translated into young people taking it seriously for themselves. Ms Dunne agrees.

"Seeing people at the top of their sport discuss their wellbeing was a key point of difference, especially in the current climate. In particular, I found that it helped to address wellbeing issues with the lads because it was based in a sporting narrative. Whether it's GAA or rugby, most lessons are about the team and it may be difficult to open up as an individual. TYF offered students the chance to continue in the ethos of sport, although the fixtures were cancelled.

"The fact that Tackle Your Feelings was couched and supported by a rugby cohort made it cooler and more accessible. Ultimately, you're competing for a young person's attention. If they have to decide between a wellbeing app or TikTok you know what they'll choose, but TYF can give food for thought. A little bit more work and it can really make a real difference."

Some learnings for us all!

“
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WHIRLWIND WINGER

Beibhinn Parsons reflects on a busy few months in her young academic and sporting career with Patrick McCarry of SportsJOE

BEIBHINN PARSONS

"I definitely didn't think that, in a couple of years' time, I'd be wearing that jersey or playing alongside some of those players."

In August 2017, Beibhinn Parsons was finding her way back into rugby and getting up to speed by watching Ireland host the Women's World Cup.

At 15, she was taking notice of Sene Naoupu, Jenny Murphy and Sophie Spence but was more concerned with what her Junior Cert results would be or if Mayo would finally win the Sam Maguire. Within 15 months, though, she would be making her senior Ireland debut.

For Beibhinn Parsons, life moves fast as she moves fast with it. It has taken the entire world slowing down for her to properly reflect on a manic three years.

For the past three months, as the country restricted movement and tightened social circles, the Parsons household in Ballinsloe has been a hub of activity. As the youngest of four siblings, Beibhinn Parsons was delighted to get them back from college and work, and back under the one roof.

Her parents were both busy during the Covid-19 pandemic. Her father is a doctor (at Portiuncula Hospital) and her mother is a healthcare worker so they were out and about for work while their children tramped about Ballinasloe and re-lived their days growing up there.



"I've been living in an empty house for so long, with them being off in college so I'm loving having everyone back... We've been doing competitions and games to keep ourselves entertained. We did a week of Come Dine with Me so we all picked a dish and we'll have a winner at the end."

For the 18-year-old Connacht and Ireland winger, having her siblings back close was a huge positive during a time of uncertainty.

Back in February, Parsons was the talk of Irish rugby. She scored superb tries in home Six Nations wins over Scotland and Wales, then left the senior squad to go sit her Leaving Cert mocks at Yeats College.

"I made that decision back in December," she says, "as I knew if I was in the heat of it that I wouldn't be able to leave. I knew going into the Six Nations that I was only going to play the first two games."

"After that Wales game, I sat into my Maths (Paper 1) mocks the very next morning. It was a bit of a rollercoaster. From playing in front of a crowd to being in an exam hall."

The mocks were squared off around the time that the Irish government put lockdown measures into place as the Covid-19 pandemic took a costly toll. For Parsons, and tens of thousands of Leaving Cert students, they were told to keep studying as it was hoped the exams would still take place.

"The online classes kicked in nearly immediately," she recalls, "so I kept to my school routine as much as possible... I took it in my stride and was ready to take the exams in June. When it was extended [to July] I was thinking, 'Great, more time to study'."

That sense of unknown dissipated when Minister for Education Joe McHugh announced that 'Calculated Grades' would replace the seated examinations.

"When the exams were cancelled, I was completely shocked. I really thought that there would be another alternative... it was a lot to take in. There was no real full-stop."

"I remember watching Leo Varadkar's speech online and I was in shock. I couldn't believe it and I was like, 'No way. They're definitely going to find a way to do it'. I think I went back to studying that night. I was in complete denial!"

"In hindsight," Parsons adds, "I'm glad I did take that step back from rugby because, with all these predicted grades, those exams were so important. It was definitely the right decision."

Parsons is hoping to go to UCD, when third level education gets the green light to return. "It's all out of my control now," she notes. "I'll just get my granny to light a few candles and, after that, I'll say a few prayers and hopefully it goes my way."



She is keenly aware that female rugby players are unlikely to have rugby as a full-time career, so getting a good education will be vital over the coming years.

Ireland want her involved as much as possible, too. The XV's have to qualify for the 2021 Women's World Cup, later this year, and a player of Parsons' talent would do wonders to their Sevens prospects.

Considering that she has come from a club that did not even have a senior ladies team when she first arrived, her journey into the national team is remarkable.

"I started playing rugby with the boys U11 team at the Community Games. It was a mixed team but I ended up being the only girl."

"That was the one season with the U11s and, after that, I didn't pick up a rugby ball again until a good few years later. There was a girls team set up and we had huge numbers show up - about 30-plus coming along for training. We really just took off from there."

In between that, Parsons loved athletics and she played underage football for Galway. "That was my main sport," she says, "until rugby came and took over."

Parsons may reside in Ballinasloe but there is a strong affinity, nurtured by her father, for the Mayo footballers. Her cousin, Tom Parsons, is the Mayo midfielder who has come close to All-Ireland glory several times over the past decade.

"You'd have to support Mayo," she remarks, "or you'd be kicked out of the house!"

"My dad would be very close to Tom and Tom's father. We used to go to all the matches and all the finals. My dad's heart has been broken a thousand times now, watching Mayo."

The likes of Declan Murphy, Stephen Reilly and Dermot Tierney, she says, were the main drivers in establishing the girls team, which has led on to the newly formed senior team.

"This season was the first time we had a chance to trial out a senior team. I think we're in the lowest division but it's working well. We're trying to get a core group of girls together."

In 2017, when that senior team was more dream than reality, Parsons was encouraged to go for Connacht trials by one of her coaches at Ballinasloe. She made that squad and made such an impression that she was fast-tracked into the Ireland U18s Sevens squad, who happened to be coached by Adam Giggis.

When Griggs took over as Ireland head coach, two and a half years ago, he sought to introduce some fresh faces. Parsons was called into the senior squad in November 2018 and, aged 16, made her Test debut against the USA.

"It all happened so quickly that I couldn't even get my head around what was going on," she comments.

"I was so intimidated going into the first few camps. I was just in awe of these girls that you'd have watched on telly and now you're playing alongside them.

"I was so far out of my comfort zone but they were so helpful in showing me the ropes and taking me under their wing. It was a surreal experience but, at the same time, I learned a lot and they were very welcoming.

"I remember getting a call from Adam (before the USA game) and he was like, 'How are you feeling? Are you nervous?' Up until that moment I was doing okay but after that call I was like, 'Oh God, this is really happening!'"

Waiting for the break in play, at Energia Park, to come on as a second half sub felt interminable but the adrenalin bump as soon as she ran onto the field soon washed all aside. "I understood, then, what all the training and hard work was for."

The Connacht star blazed past three USA defenders on her first carry, in that game, and fended another off but was denied a memorable try when she was just held up over the tryline.

The tradition for Test debutants is often for their new teammates to each buy a drink at the post-game function. Parsons was still 53 weeks off the legal drinking age after that November series game so prop Lindsay Peat came to the rescue. The winger recalls:

"We were all having a drink each, after the series, and I was like, 'No, I'll have a 7-Up or something'. Lindsay, from across the room, said, 'No, she'll have a gin & tonic and she'll give it to me!' That's how that was sorted out!"

Parsons helped the Ireland Sevens team to a fourth-place finish in the 2019 Sydney Sevens, scoring a try against Fiji along the way. She returned home for Six Nations duty and made a sub appearance against France and scored a try in a losing effort against Wales. Cap number five arrived last November and, in between that, there was more Sevens rugby and a stunning hat-trick to help Connacht beat Munster in a thrilling Interprovincial Championship semi-final.

The stage was set for the 2020 Six Nations and, with Ireland starting with a home-and-home stand, Parsons ignited. With Ireland leading a dogged Scottish side in their opener, Parsons' intercept try was one of the greatest match winners in recent years.



“I was so far out of my comfort zone but they were so helpful in showing me the ropes and taking me under their wing. It was a surreal experience but, at the same time, I learned a lot and they were very welcoming.

"With the Scotland try, I was running but I was waiting for a whistle to be blown. Something in the back of my head was going. 'This isn't real. This is a bit too easy'. On our own five-metre line and then down the other end of the pitch scoring a try.

"It was great, but it was something we had repped out in training a million times - that defensive shape - and then for it to come off in a match is a dream scenario, so I was delighted."

For her next trick, the following weekend, Parsons made Wales pay for a poor clearing kick by scooping a bouncing ball and leaving four defenders in her wake to send the home crowd bonkers.

"My Gaelic skills came into play there," she says, "keeping the ball out of touch. Just another nice try, early on in the match. You're always so glad, as a winger, to get a score early and settle into the match."

Parsons' game is not just about scoring, however. Like most modern wingers, she now has her fair share of work to get through and will be in clearing out rucks, covering the back-field and taking down ball-carriers.

"Wingers are definitely being incorporated into the game a lot more. It's something I'm trying to master and I'm watching the likes of Keith Earls and how he does it so well - getting into those midfield areas and getting line breaks. It's something I'm going to try bring into my game a lot more."

We have heard plenty about the various road-maps for sport, and life, to return to an altered state of normality. For Parsons, the next 12 months will involve college while Ireland and Ireland Sevens will hope to call on her services again when matches, and travel, are permitted.

Having taken the past few months out to reflect, she is proud of what she has achieved. She is also eager for more.

"Sometimes you can end up surprising yourself about how capable you are, compared to what you think you're able to do.

"I'm really excited for this next season and what I can do with that bit more confidence in myself.

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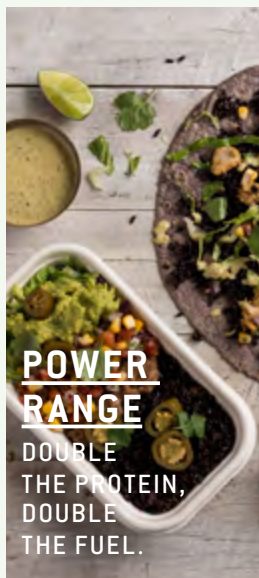
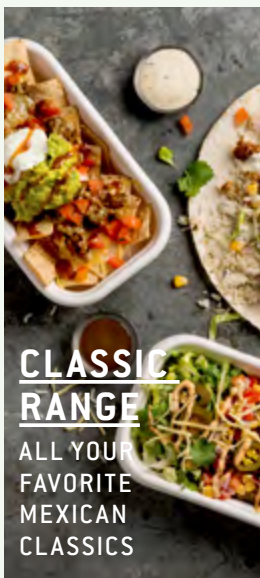
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PUTTING HIS OWN MARKER DOWN

Following the lockdown Seán Masterson is chasing opportunity

SEÁN MASTERSON

Laois and the Electric Picnic are synonymous. Laois and rugby, less so. Before Alison Miller's try-scoring exploits came to national prominence during the 2014 Women's Rugby World Cup, the last person from the county to make their presence felt at the highest level of the sport was Brian Rigney who retired in 1992.

To someone like Seán Masterson, 1992 is a lifetime and a bit ago. While Rigney cut his teeth at Portlaoise Rugby Club amidst a backdrop of moral victories on the Test stage, Masterson, who recently signed his first professional contract with Connacht Rugby, has never been privy to the darker days of Irish rugby. Instead his youth was marked by Triple Crowns, Heineken Cups and a Grand Slam by his tenth birthday.

Yet while success on the field for Irish sides undoubtedly played its part, Masterson's greatest influence lay much closer to home. His brother Eoghan is now one of Connacht's longest serving players.

"You could say I always went against the grain a bit!" Seán confesses. "I always wanted to be anywhere but school. I'd put my hand to anything to avoid it. I wanted to be out welding or building something with my father. I used to dress up as Bob the Builder. It was pure gas! That wouldn't have been Eoghan's thing, he had his own ideas.

"You ask Eoghan as a young fella what he wanted to be, and he'd have told you he was going to be a professional rugby player. It seemed a bit mad to us, but he really went after it, day-in, day-out. It took me a while to cop but when I began to see the pathway he set out for himself, I wanted to be a rugby player too. I knew if I worked as hard as he did, be the best I could be, then it could work out for me. We're quite different people, but we're very similar as rugby professionals."



Though their days of splitting each other open in the back garden in Portlaoise are behind them, Seán says he could have done with having Eoghan around during lockdown. However, while Seán made for Westport where his parents now live, Eoghan remained in Galway with his girlfriend. In any event, it was no excuse to let up. He sees opportunity in the months ahead.

"It was great to get my contract sorted firstly," he says. "Eoghan's contract was also up at the same time so for the both of us to get good news was a huge boost and pushed me on with the training. I was on my own but the days were so long you didn't mind having sessions to get through. Nearer the end it was tough. You didn't really know what you were training for. They all add up I suppose so I'm in good shape going back.

"It'll be interesting to see how we all get on. It's a big year. Obviously, it was tough to see some lads go but we have to see it as a real vote of confidence in the young players from Andy Friend. Sometimes if you're the only young fella in a squad, it can be hard to assert yourself but when you've a load of us trying to get the edge on each other that in turn pushes the older lads. It drives standards.

"News of the boys leaving also reminded us how cut-throat and delicate rugby can be. It's a little bittersweet but I need to focus on my game, get in there and perform from day one. Put a marker down."

Despite his outwardly relaxed nature, Masterson admits that the toll of the game can weigh on players from time to time. As he came to the end of his stint in the academy, Masterson was unsure what the future had in store for him. While it was ultimately resolved, it had burdened his thoughts. The lockdown presented an opportunity to press refresh.

"Before the lockdown I can't remember the last time I didn't spend some of my week worrying. You'd get nervous in the week of a game. I see it as a good thing because you do want to make sure you do a good job. When you've a contract running out though it can be hard to let it slip the mind at all. In that sense I really enjoyed being able to completely chill out. I didn't have those things hanging over me.

"During the season I try and find things to do to switch off. I've always had an interest in boats. It's a funny one - I'm from Portlaoise like, you know what I mean?! Maybe it's because some of my family were from Arranmore and Achill Island back the way, I don't know! Anyway, a while ago I was in Connemara with Colm de Buitléar and he happens to live beside Michael Staif who is one of the best boat builders in Ireland - he's serious!

"I asked Colm if there'd be any chance that I might be able to work with Michael the odd time and it



went from there. I didn't make it out as much as I'd have liked last year because I was training more with the seniors but this year I'm going to set time aside every Wednesday to head out to him. It'd be great to have that in the diary. It's a great way to clear the head."

Masterson is keenly aware that boat building in the wilds of Ireland is a bit of a niche market. Nevertheless, it has got his entrepreneurial mind thinking. He outlines several ideas currently doing the rounds of his brain and explains he has already been working with Dr Deirdre Lyons on the practicalities of setting up a business. It's something he is keen to follow through on.

"My plans aren't massive but I want to make sure I'm doing everything right. I need to know the ins and outs of things and have the background work sussed. It's one thing having an idea, it's another to act on it. The past few weeks have been great, but now that we're at the other end you realise it's July. There's no point in waiting, time keeps moving!

"Like, it doesn't seem so long ago that Caelan Doris and I were in the backrow for the Ireland U20s. We played together right through the system and from early on he was being talked up as the next big thing. Look at where he is now. He didn't hang around.

"You have to give it to him. I wasn't surprised to see him involved in the Six Nations. I mean, he's starting at No.8 for one of the best sides in Europe! But for my sake, it gives me a bit of drive. Why can't I play for Connacht? Why can't I play for Ireland? It helps to drive me on."

By land or by sea, Seán Masterson will do all he can to go places.

“
News of the boys leaving also reminded us how cut-throat and delicate rugby can be. It's a little bittersweet but I need to focus on my game, get in there and perform from day one

THE HIGHS AND LOWS

From the Rugby World Cup in Japan to lockdown in Dungannon, Peter Nelson has seen it all in the past few months

PETER NELSON



As Peter Nelson streaked through the All Blacks defence in October, the roar from Rugby Players Ireland's offices could probably have been heard in Ōita. In fact, any Irish rugby fan looking on will have urged the Dungannon man to the line.

The moment took off like something of a childhood dream. As Lucas Ramball got the ball away to the former Ulster Rugby player, only Beauden Barrett stood between him and Canadian rugby folklore. From inside his own half, the out-half dared to do what few might.

"I had to back myself," Nelson says of the moment he slalomed outside the covering full-back and darted for the line. "At first I thought I was away but all the time Beauden was reeling me in. Have you seen how fast he is? He's very quick! The speed those guys play at is unbelievable. It was a special experience."

Though Nelson came up just short, on the whole his Canadian side were bettered by 63 points. Memories of such defeats would ordinarily be discarded with haste, yet the opportunity to play the All Blacks is one Nelson gratefully appreciates. Afterwards, Richie Mo'unga sought out his counterpart to swap shirts. The jersey is yet to be framed but will soon find a place where it can be cherished for years to come.

"Playing New Zealand in a World Cup is definitely a highlight in my career," Nelson admits. "I have always been ambitious to play at the highest-level even when I found out I'd be leaving Ulster last year. It wasn't a case of my best years being behind me, I felt I still had a lot to offer. I decided to explore an option I had with Canada because my grandmother was born in Toronto. I joined up with them last June and a few months later I was on the world's biggest stage!"

"To be honest, I felt the World Cup had gone really well for me. I had some good moments and thought I'd be putting myself in the shop window. I really thought it was going to propel me on and set myself up. Even though the season had already started, I came back from Japan hoping something might materialise somewhere in Europe. But weeks and then months passed, and nothing appeared."

With most squads settled on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, Nelson simply wanted to get his hands on a rugby ball. At the turn of the year he toggled out for Dungannon in AIL 2B a couple of times before an option to move stateside emerged. While his preference was to remain a little closer to home, a short-term deal was struck with the Seattle Seawolves. Nelson wasted little time in packing his bags and was set for a March departure.

"I guess it's just been very frustrating ever since the World Cup. It got to the point where I just wanted to play and I'd have gone anywhere. It was a bit disheartening when nothing came up and then as



soon as things began to happen, Covid-19 happened. Maybe I'm lucky I didn't get trapped over there, but whatever might have panned out I'd actually be back by now anyway so I'm trying to put it all behind me and look forward.

"We've been trying to get in contact with clubs but the current climate makes it very tough. It has been very slow and quiet. Understandably, teams are having to reassess their finances and some are cutting back their squads. You're seeing it a lot on social media at the moment – guys coming off contract with nowhere to go. In some ways I'm glad to see I'm not the only one, but that doesn't make it any easier."

At the back of Nelson's mind is also his position within the Canadian squad. While Kingsley Jones has reassured him that he remains in his plans, Nelson is keenly aware that he needs to be playing rugby. He is indebted to Rugby Canada for giving him an opportunity on the biggest stage and isn't prepared to say his goodbyes.

Despite being a relatively new face in the team, Nelson also built a very strong bond with a group of players that drew great praise throughout their Japanese experience. They might have shipped 177 points during their time in Japan, but Typhoon Hagibis didn't allow for much self-pity.

"Having New Zealand, South Africa and Italy all in our group meant that we were really focussed on the game against Namibia. It was disappointing when that was cancelled on the morning of the match. There was nothing in the diary obviously, so a lot of the boys got together and we went out into Kamaishi to help with the clean-up after the typhoon.

"I was in an old lady's house and it was wrecked. There was no saving it. There were water marks halfway up the walls. She had a lifetime of memories in there, all gone. That was tough trying to put it into some sort of shape so she could have a roof over her head.

"In hindsight, it was very special. They are a very proud people so to be there to help pick up the pieces of someone's life is something I'll always remember."

Filling his time during lockdown with training and delivering food supplies to cocooners in his community, Nelson hasn't been resting on his laurels. In anticipation of new opportunities, he can't afford to. Now that he has seen the other side of the fence, he'll be sure to grab any chance he gets with both hands.

"There's no getting away from how tough it has been to go from the highs of playing in a World Cup to returning home and struggling to find anything. I have to keep reminding myself of how fortunate I have been to do some of the things I've done. I think of that old lady in Japan and see how different it all could have been.

"I took rugby for granted. We all took rugby for granted. I took my job for granted. I won't be doing that anymore."

STAND UP, SPEAK OUT

Adam Byrne opens up on his experience of growing up in Ireland and his hopes for the future

ADAM BYRNE



‘Where are you really from?’

It does hurt when people ask. Or when people pass comments or make jokes that they feel are ok. But sometimes it does chip away at you.

I was born in Ireland, raised by my mom and my adoptive father, with my half-brother and sister. I had a great upbringing in a loving family – I couldn’t have asked for anything more.

Having lived in Ireland my whole life, I’ve mainly only experienced Irish culture, but on the other hand, I also feel a sense of belonging to the black community and black culture. It’s something that’s very hard to articulate but I feel a connection with both.

The big thing for me is, Ireland’s been great for me. My experiences have been 99 percent positive. I see myself as a really positive person. It’s just there are some remarks and you do feel it. It chips away. It’s little things.

It’s sad that it took the murder of George Floyd for this discussion to become a worldwide issue. I’ve seen sports stars like Colin Kaepernick and people like that raising awareness but it took the filming of that brutal killing for this to happen. That’s probably what’s disappointed me most.

From now on I hope that this is a point where we move forward – everyone’s treated equally. It would grind at me hearing any other race or culture being stereotyped or slagged. I believe in equality.

At the moment, it’s the black community that is in the spotlight. It’s not about wanting to be treated better than anyone else, it’s about being treated equally and for everyone to feel equal.

But moving forward from this point there needs to be a sense of awareness. It’s not going to happen overnight. I hope that everyone can be treated equally from now on and that people are held accountable.

I hope it’s not just something that’s short-lived on Instagram. I’d like to stay positive and think ‘now is the point where we move forward’.

I don’t see it as a thing of pointing fingers. But hopefully, people can have a look at themselves so we can try and move forward and make it a positive movement. That’s what I’d like to see.

I’ve had a lot of time to think and sometimes I’m not sure how I feel. My emotions have been challenged. It’s great to see so many people supporting the movement, and my friends and family as well. I’m sure Ireland will be one of the countries leading the way forward on this. There’s nowhere else I’d want to be.

I’ve never been prouder in my life than when I represented Ireland, firstly at underage and eventually at senior level. To wear the green jersey and sing the national anthem is something that I’ll never, ever forget. That was a big thing for me. I’ll never forget that day, the number of messages I got from people.

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In Leinster, we have a lot of cultures: South African, Samoan, Fijian, New Zealand, Australian. It's something that Leinster have always been great at, incorporating everyone. Obviously, we have such a strong identity of people from Leinster representing the province. It's the club I dreamed of playing for. The sense of identity is so strong, but also so welcoming to other cultures.

I've never, ever experienced any issues in Leinster, from the colour of my skin or my background. I'm just judged on how I play rugby and how I am as a person, from teammates to backroom staff and coaches.

The rugby community is great. With Leinster, you're playing against a lot of teams in Europe. With the Ireland Sevens and underage, you're playing against other nationalities, or you're experiencing a lot of cultures. I've never experienced any kind of racism or any issues like that playing rugby.

I try to look at all of this from the Irish point of view. Mainly in the last few days, I've tried to reflect on what it's like here and what we can do better. It's hugely positive and I can see Ireland leading the way forward. It's sad that it took the killing of George Floyd for this movement to happen. But in a way, it did also open my eyes to what it's like in America. I have thought about how my life would be totally different if I was living there.



But I've been hugely fortunate: the family I've been raised in, the friends I've had from a young age to the teammates I have now, to the friends I've made along the way. They've only been supportive and they've been great. They've always treated me equally. I've mainly experienced really positive things. But there have been a handful of negative things. It does hurt. It's not even Irish people. It could be wherever.

I'm looking forward to this whole movement and seeing what Ireland can become. When I'm older and the younger generations are coming up, hopefully, everyone's treated equally. It's not even a thing that's mentioned, it's not a thing in the news. From America to Ireland, and worldwide, that there's no inherent bias. I believe it can happen.

Hopefully, this is sustained and it's not just a few hashtags or posts on Instagram and then it fades away. I hope, from this point forward, it's something everyone is aware of and we can make some little steps of change. I look forward to seeing how we progress.



Leinster Rugby and their club photographer Ramsey Cardy (Sportsfile) collaborated recently on a photography project to champion black athletes in Ireland, with Adam Byrne and Linda Djougang representing the club. As part of that project, both Adam and Linda gave their thoughts to Leinster Rugby on growing up and playing rugby in Ireland.

Both pieces can be read in full on [LeinsterRugby.ie](https://www.LeinsterRugby.ie)

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DANCING IN THE STREETS

Mikey Smyth has been helping people find their rhythm during the lockdown

MIKEY SMYTH



Prior to Covid-19, the last time there was dancing in the streets of Ireland, Daniel Timofte had just made Packie Bonner a superstar. There was a vivacity and relaxed nature to life in Ireland back in 1990. But after the nation held its breath with Genoa, the waistlines began to expand and tension on red tape intensified.

At the time Mikey Smyth was growing up in Terenure in a home that had embraced the freedom of it all. Though his father was once a Captain in the Irish Army, it wasn't a regimented household. Instead, the youngster was encouraged to indulge his creative instincts. Indeed, Smyth Snr. was a rock n' roller with a band called the Rising Suns in the 1960s, while his uncle Paddy Roche was in a well-known folk group called The Ludlows.

"It was hard not to be taken by the music at home," Smyth tells us. "Something or other was always being played. The family would have been quite well known on the Dublin scene, but there was a balance to it. We had had a strong foothold in sport too. We were steeped in it on both sides.

"My grandfather (also Paddy Roche) was a professional footballer with Fulham and QPR. He played for Ireland in the 1930s. Then there was my great-uncle who founded Terenure College RFC in 1940. Fr. Jackie Corbett was his name and he noticed that a lot of his students fell away from the rugby once they left school so he rallied the past-pupils and got the club up and running.

"I guess that's where my father got the bug from. He also became a highly regarded rugby man, absolutely dedicated to it. He was an out-half for Terenure, played for Leinster and won a senior cup medal with UCD when he was studying medicine."



Sadly, it is 22 years since Dr Michael Smyth passed away in a car crash. Described as a larger than life character who lived and breathed the game, he had a profound influence on his son's life – in spite of the rigorous early morning training sessions in Bushy Park.

"I was going well," Smyth tells us of his early career. "I won a Schools' Senior Cup with Terenure College and went on to play for the Irish schoolboys, the U21s. I was making a bit of a name for myself and it was a very real passion. My dad was integral to that. He was my head coach. So, when he died, I think my rugby died with him."

The professionalism of the rugby was just being mooted in Ireland when Smyth linked up with Leinster in 1996. Under Jim Glennon, Ciaran Callan and Paul Dean, a new-look side boosted by the inclusion of Trevor Brennan, Girvan Dempsey and Denis Hickie headed for a pre-season tour to Italy with an impressionable Smyth in tow.

"None of us were paid for going on that trip. Had it been ten years later and I could see the road ahead, lads ahead of me earning a living and making a name for themselves while they were at it, then maybe it might have been a game changer. But the sport was taking a new direction and nobody really knew where it was going to lead. In the end I just didn't fit the mould. They weren't picking me.

"A couple of years after dad had passed away, I gave it another go with Connacht. The former Irish coach Gerry Murphy was back at Terenure and had given Steph Nel the nudge. I went out there and played for a season in a backline with Eric Elwood, Mervyn Murphy and Pat Duignan.

"Unfortunately, the professional game just didn't suit me. I was a bit confused by it all. My rugby had always been about enjoying myself, but soon it became about having a mindset. You can be the most talented player in the world but if you can't reach to those extra percentages, forget it.

"I was a great trainer and I played hard on the pitch, but I didn't let up afterwards. You can't live the life you want to lead alongside professional rugby. That was a big shock to me."

Summoned by friends to America, Smyth vacated the temporary home he shared with James Ferris, Tommy Keating and Marnus Uijs ('a crazy South African') and walked away from rugby in Ireland. Alongside his intermittent duties as player/coach with the Bayonne Bombers in New Jersey, Smyth whetted his musical appetite with a few jamming sessions in the local Hoboken neighbourhood.



"We only trained a couple of nights in the week so I was able to give the music a good go again that year. It actually began to take off so I decided to do something similar back home. I got a sound system and began hitting up some bars around Dublin. Truth be told, I got booed off one too many times. I was enjoying a drink or two while I was playing and leaving it all to chance. I wasn't prepared. The bookings began to dry up and I took on a job as a medical rep."

Until two years ago, that is.

"I suppose it was a bit of a mid-life crisis. I realised I didn't want to be doing the same thing for the rest of my life. I wanted to follow my dreams. I quit my job on the spot, turned to my guitar and promised to quit the messing. Those first twenty gigs playing sober, no alcohol to lean on, was tough. But you get used to it, become stronger for it and thankfully everything has gone from strength to strength ever since."

Since first landing into a nursing home in Saggart to play a few tunes for the residents, Smyth has forged a reputation as a great entertainer for the elderly across Dublin. Before restrictions were imposed back in March, he was a regular visitor to 20 homes every week. He subsequently tailored his efforts, responding to Simon Harris' calls to look out for each other with impromptu sessions from outside the window of residents' rooms.

Of course, as the regulations clamped down on movement, Smyth could no longer reach many of the people he visited. The obvious answer was

to go online and he soon became adept at hosting Facebook Live sessions (every Friday 8-9.30pm) from the comfort of his home. To date he has raised almost €11,000 for Our Lady's Hospice, ALONE, the Sarah Jennifer Knott Foundation, St. Vincent de Paul, the DSPCA and Pieta House.

He acknowledges that social media has played a significant role in recent weeks. He'll continue on that virtual journey for some time yet. For his latest stream (on Friday night), Louis Copeland has donated a suit to the cause with all money raised in aid of Saoirse Women's Refuge. However, as measures begin to ease it has also been made abundantly clear to him that his energy is needed beyond his sitting room once again.

"People have missed live music. I was getting loads of requests in for birthdays and to call by cocooning neighbours. I wanted to help but with just a guitar it was hard to create a bit of a stir. Then I had this lightbulb moment a few weeks back. I bought a beat-up trailer, some plywood, paint and a generator and now I travel the streets of Dublin entertaining people, elderly people in their neighbourhoods.

"I'm not a psychologist but I know how important it is to look after your mental health. My dad's death came as a big blow to me. It's hard to believe I've spent almost half of my life without him. But we had a lot of time together. He had a special interest in psychology and without realising it, I had soaked up bits of advice he had given me over the years. I got through a tough time with his influence in my head.

"From my perspective I see how important music can be to people, especially the elderly. It's probably the worst time of their lives when it should be one of the happiest with their families. I thought to get out there and do something about it and help to raise the spirits. It's hard to describe the feeling you get when you bring a smile to their face – probably one of the few smiles they've shared during this period."

Since 1990, the feel-good factor on the streets of the capital have been hard to come by. People have been much too busy. But much like 11 men on an Italian football field helped us to shed what had come before, so too has Mikey Smyth been helping people forget themselves for a moment.



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