

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND
AUTUMN 2020

A LONG
CHAPTER COMES
TO AN END

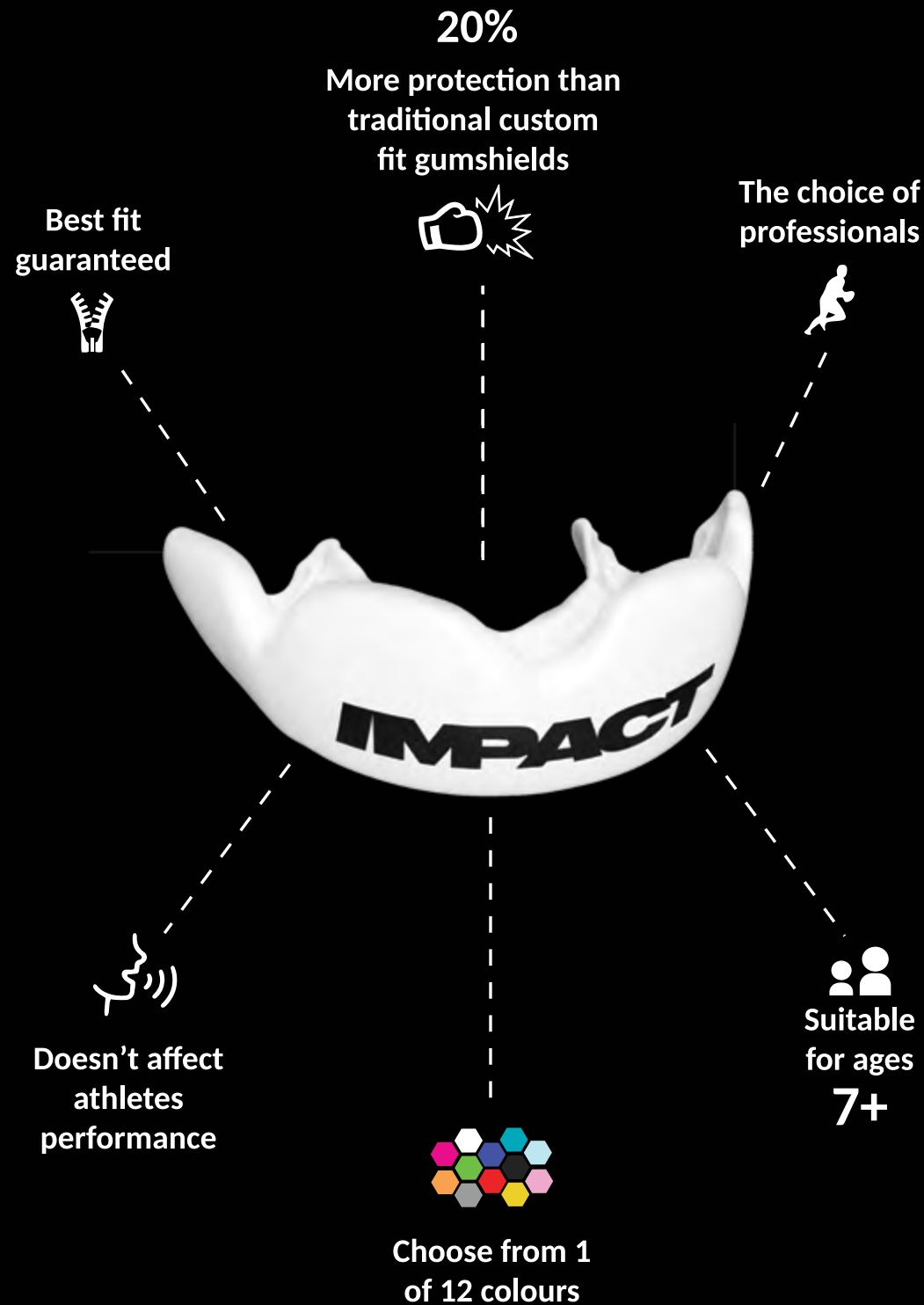
THE BIGGER
PICTURE
GARRY RINGROSE

A NEW
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CEO ADDRESS

SIMON KEOGH



As I write this it feels as though we can finally close the chapter on the 2019/20 season. Over the past number of weeks the Rugby Players Ireland team have been producing the Zurich Irish Rugby Players' Awards for broadcast and it has afforded me an opportunity to look back on the campaign.

When reflecting on the past 12 months, most eyes will naturally be drawn to the Rugby World Cup in Japan and the upheaval caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. In time to come I'd like to think that I will instead be able to remember 2019/20 for the right reasons.

Leinster Rugby's domination of the PRO14 is an obvious place to start but had Ulster Rugby's momentum not been stalled by the lockdown, they too could have gone the distance. There are also plenty of signs of encouragement at Connacht with seven players included in Andy Farrell's Six Nations squad, while Munster's dogged resilience has been there for all to see since the restart.

The inclusion of Will Connors, Shane Daly and Hugo Keenan in Irish camp reflects well on the Irish 7s programme. Although the World Series was cut short, the performances of the Irish Men's team were acknowledged in their award of the Capgemini Momentum Tracker Award. This analytical evidence demonstrates that the tools are and we have every reason to believe that the results will follow.

Looking back to the early part of the Women's Six Nations, it's hard not to be enthused by the energy in the camp especially as new and exciting talents are introduced. Over at the High Performance Centre meanwhile, the Women's 7s are also beginning to reap the rewards of growth and development in the women's game to the point that stalwarts like Louise Galvin and Hannah Tyrrell are now happy to step aside and allow youth to progress.

As a member of our Executive Board, Louise has made an impactful contribution to the game in Ireland. The same can be said of Eoin McKeon who also steps aside following his retirement. With Rob Kearney's move to Australia confirmed, the Board will have a new look and feel this season. I wish to thank them all for their unstinting commitment to their roles and to their peers.

Throughout his tenure as Chairman, Rob has been instrumental in overseeing the growth of the players' association to a position of great strength and much envied across the world of sport. Leading the way both on and off the field, Rob demonstrated the same consistency and conviction in decision making as he did in the backfield for Leinster and Ireland. One of the greatest exponents of the game, I wish him every success on his new adventure in Perth.



The importance of player input on the Executive Board was underlined throughout our recent negotiations with the IRFU. It is imperative that their voices are always heard on issues in the game. Allied to the experience of the players within the group, we could also count on the guidance provided by Ciarán Medlar, Michael Costello, Peter McKenna and Maura Quinn. I wish to express my gratitude to all for helping us to bring discussions to a satisfactory conclusion.

The Zurich Irish Rugby Players' Awards also enabled me to look a bit further into the archives as we sought to acknowledge Gordon D'Arcy's terrific career. The latest inductee into the Rugby Players Ireland Hall of Fame, Gordon's career highlights are so unimaginable that even his books would struggle to capture them. As a former teammate, it is a great personal privilege to be able to place his name amongst some of the most distinguished in Irish sport.

Whether we have to bring ourselves back to Gordon and Ireland's famous Twickenham victory in 2004 or a freezing Champions Cup outing against Gloucester for Connacht prior to the lockdown, it is important that we remember and celebrate the achievements of our members. Those moments have brought more to us than we may have realised.

Rugby and sport have been shown to be hugely important to people throughout the country, especially as they now provide us with a brief reminder of normality. However, with restrictions and regulations ramping up once again many are beginning to dread a long winter. It will be a challenge for us all, but we have learned that people turn to their role models in times of need or distress. Through your influence and initiatives such as the Tackle Your Feelings campaign, there is help and comfort to be found.

Though we may feel isolated at times, we are all following the same path. By coming together in the early stages of the Coronavirus pandemic, we managed to regain a semblance of normal life. We must now rally again and keep this show on the road.

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



A BITTERSWEET CONCLUSION

Our congratulations to our Leinster Rugby members on claiming their third successive PRO14 title (and fifth in eight years) following victory over Ulster Rugby. It was a 25th consecutive win for Johnny Sexton and his teammates, who bestowed the honour of lifting the trophy upon the departing duo Rob Kearney and Fergus McFadden.

Despite both finalists going into the Heineken Champions Cup knockout stages battle hardened, two European giants awaited them in the form of Saracens and Toulouse. While there would be no Irish presence in the latter stages of the competition, the fact that any side had the opportunity to contest for their place is an achievement in itself.

Though the break has been brief, all squads will feel a little short-changed from the final weeks of the 2019/20 season

and all were ready to kick-on when the 2020/21 season began in early October. Needless to say, we wish all our members every success in the year ahead!



A UNITED FRONT

Ahead of the resumption of games in the Guinness PRO14, our members took the opportunity to mark the loss of life suffered during the Covid-19 pandemic, honour those who worked on the frontline to protect us and demonstrate a united front against racism.

Facilitated by Rugby Players Ireland, the IRFU and the four

provinces, the players observed a 'Unity Moment' to emphasise rugby's core values of solidarity and respect. Players stood in a circular formation and were free to express themselves in a manner they deemed appropriate.

In a joint statement, Irish Rugby and Rugby Players Ireland said that both organisations believed that rugby can transcend barriers and difference of race, gender, religion and sexual orientation and sought to underline their on-going commitment to offering a game for all.



TYF TMO

While people have grown accustomed to watching football being played behind closed doors, rugby was always going to be a different experience. To get a sense of what that might feel like for former players, we invited Mike Ross, Barry Murphy, Darren Cave and Eoin McKeon to watch the first games of rugby's return with Tackle Your Feelings.

Having previously spoken out about the trolling of players on social media, Ross and Murphy discussed how they dealt with criticism on and off the field during their careers. Referencing online platforms, the duo explored why negative comments hold greater weight despite being vastly outnumbered by positive contributions. "If you wouldn't take advice from someone, why take their criticism?"

As Ulster and Connacht clashed the following day, Cave and McKeon chatted about the challenges posed by the transition out of the game. McKeon, who has since formally retired (check out page 14) described how it has been difficult to come to a decision in light of the Covid-19 situation. Cave also shared how

it still feels strange returning to the Kingspan Stadium and not being part of the playing group. Nevertheless, he feels grateful for being able to leave the game on his own terms.



TICKING OVER

While rugby took a back seat during the lockdown, several members of Rugby Players Ireland availed of the opportunity to push on with their studies. Our congratulations to all those who have graduated in recent weeks! Nice too that many of them acknowledged the role of their Player Development Manager in their respective academic journeys.

Over a number of years, our PDMs have established strong relationships with many colleges and universities throughout Ireland. With their help and extensive experience, they can help our members achieve your goals through our world renowned Player Development Programme.



IRISH MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE SCHOLARSHIPS



Yvonne Comer, Cathal Sheridan and Eoin Sheriff have been announced as the recipients of an IMI/ Rugby Players Ireland scholarship to participate in an upcoming IMI professional diploma.

Stretching back to 2014, the scholarship aims to help bridge the gap between the end of an athlete's sporting life and their professional career. To date, 21 rugby players have participated and completed IMI professional diplomas through the scholarship.



ZURICH IRISH RUGBY PLAYERS AWARDS 2020

Check out interviews with winners' Garry Ringrose (page 10), Clíodhna Moloney (page 26), Caelan Doris (page 32) and a tribute to Gordon D'Arcy's career (page 38)!



ZURICH IRISH RUGBY PLAYERS' PLAYER OF THE YEAR

WINNER: Garry Ringrose
NOMINEES: Andrew Conway, John Cooney, James Lowe, Garry Ringrose



WOMEN'S XVS PLAYER OF THE YEAR

WINNER: Clíodhna Moloney
NOMINEES: Linda Djougang, Edel McMahon, Clíodhna Moloney



TRY OF THE YEAR

WINNER: Andrew Conway (v Ospreys)
NOMINEES: Andrew Conway (v Ospreys), John Cooney (v Clermont), Robin Copeland (v Gloucester)



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND HALL OF FAME

WINNER: Gordon D'Arcy



ZURICH CONTRIBUTION TO IRISH SOCIETY AWARD

WINNER: Billy Holland
NOMINEES: Ultan Dillane, Billy Holland, Andrew Porter



MEN'S 7S PLAYER OF THE YEAR

WINNER: Jordan Conroy
NOMINEES: Jordan Conroy, Terry Kennedy, Harry McNulty

NEVIN SPENCE YOUNG PLAYER OF THE YEAR

WINNER: Caelan Doris
NOMINEES: Ryan Baird, Shane Daly, Caelan Doris



WOMEN'S 7S PLAYER OF THE YEAR

WINNER: Louise Galvin
NOMINEES: Kathy Baker, Louise Galvin, Amee-Leigh Murphy Crowe



GOODBODY RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT BURSARY

Through Rugby Players Ireland's partnership with Goodbody – Ireland's longest established stockbroking firm – the 'Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary' aids the development and progression of players' off-field

careers and academic studies. Since 2018, over 24 players have benefitted from the Bursary while the firm's market-leading team have also worked with Rugby Players Ireland to provide career, business development, retirement transition and financial guidance to its members.

The eight successful applicants this year are:



BILLY DARDIS



AOIFE DOYLE



LEWIS FINLAY



KATIE HEFFERNAN



PADDY KELLY



RHYS MARSHALL



DARRAGH MURRAY



HUGH O'SULLIVAN

Check out our interviews with Rhys Marshall (page 20) and Aoife Doyle (page 22) to see how some will be putting their Bursary to use!

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THE BIGGER PICTURE

GARRY RINGROSE

The Zurich Irish Rugby Players' Player of the Year is taking it all in his stride



The makings of Garry Ringrose's year were there for all to see in Japan. Oddly enough, against Japan. On the night Ireland's Rugby World Cup fate irrevocably faltered, Ringrose stood tallest. While Irish lungs could barely breathe in the humidity of Shizuoka, he played like a man possessed as he marshalled the Irish defence and probed in attack.

Unsurprisingly, Ringrose played more minutes across the tournament than any other player in the Irish camp. Where in the past we looked to O'Driscoll to get us out of a World Cup hole, this time it was to his successor for school, club and country that we turned.

Demonstrating remarkable consistency over the 12 long and demanding months since, Ringrose's growing stature was further evidenced in his appointed captaincy duties for Leinster's PRO14 final victory over Ulster. He admits it was a highlight of his young career but overall he looks back on the season with mixed feelings.

"You can look at it on an individual level but I would always look at the trophies that were on offer and whether we won them or not," Ringrose says as he chats to Joe Molloy having been revealed as the Zurich Irish Rugby Players' Player of the Year.

"The World Cup didn't go the way we'd have liked. Thankfully we get another crack at the Six Nations over the next few weeks. At Leinster we finished up with one trophy but there was potential for two. I've enjoyed the moments that went well but there's definitely a chip in the shoulder for the ones that didn't."

“

At Leinster we finished up with one trophy but there was potential for two. I've enjoyed the moments that went well but there's definitely a chip in the shoulder for the ones that didn't.



Suitably honoured by his award, the 25-year-old is also quick to assert that he believes individual awards don't carry too much merit in team sports. Certainly, his appreciation for those around him has grown in the past months as leadership roles have come his way. There's a bigger picture to be considered.

"A few weeks ago we played Treviso and I talked to Leo who obviously captained quite a few games in his day. We talked about the decision-making process around penalties so I got his perspective on what he might have done in my different positions: do you kick for three here? Do you kick to the corner there? Or do you take a scrum?"

"It's the same with individual moments. In every moment you can make multiple decisions which all have an impact... what you did, what you could have done differently, what could have led to a better outcome for the team. There are always individual learnings to take from a game irrespective of the result but the coaches can give a team perspective. That balance certainly helps."





Being named captain on the week of a final is Gordon's Game stuff. Ringrose certainly didn't see it coming. Though buoyed by the appointment, his evident maturity helped him to process the news before he reverted to type. There was a match to prepare for after all, albeit with some additional responsibilities. He took it all in his classy gait and wasn't going to make any sudden changes.

"There's a lot of stuff out there on leadership – not even from a captain's perspective but from a leadership perspective. During the lockdown I learned that there's no one type of leader or definitive type of leader. There will be overlapping characteristics, but no two people are the same. I don't know if I'm a natural leader or captain, that's for others to say.

"Everyone is different," Ringrose continues. "Johnny [Sexton], Isa [Nacewa], Rory Best, Pete O'Mahony, I've played with some great leaders. You find it's not how they say something, it's whether they say the right thing or not. The captain has to have a feel for saying the right thing at the right time. Individuals will deliver that message in different ways."

In namechecking some of the biggest names to play rugby in Ireland over the years, you realise that Ringrose has been exposed to the highest of

“There's a lot of outside voices and opinions in today's day and age. For me, you've got to listen to the ones that matter.”

standards throughout his young career. It wasn't much of a gradual process either. A Leinster duo synonymous with success quickly brought him up to speed when he first joined in 2015. He therefore counts Rob Kearney and Fergus McFadden amongst the most influential players he has played with.

"Rob and Ferg are probably the first guys I would have considered good teammates to retire or move on. I played the last five or six years with them and when I came in those two would've been big influences on me.

"In them you had two guys who had performed at the very top level. At every training session I would have learned and taken advice from them and even when they didn't know it, I watched how they carried themselves, what they did, saw how they performed under pressure. You've got to look to the guys who've been there and done it.

"There's a lot of outside voices and opinions in today's day and age. For me, you've got to listen to the ones that matter. Coming off the pitch you have a good sense of what you've done right or wrong. Getting another perspective can prove you wrong or change your opinion, but they have to be the right voices.

"Before I went to the World Cup I'd obviously been through Six Nations and Autumn Series. There's always a bit of a media buzz but I'd heard that it always steps up before the World Cup so I muted a lot of accounts that would have anything to do with rugby. I haven't changed it back."

For Ringrose it has never been about the plaudits or the social media validations. It's the bigger picture he's interested in.

As we went to print, Garry sustained an injury that rules him out of action for the rest of the year. We wish him well in his recovery.



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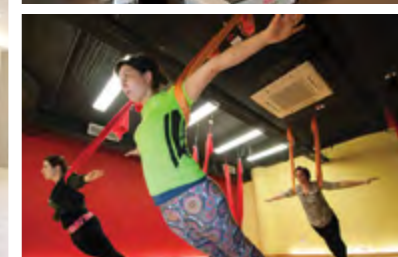
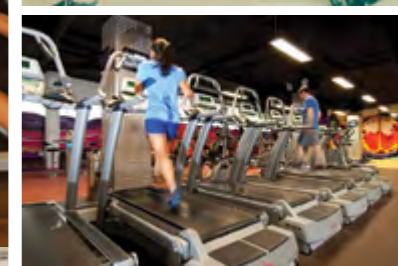
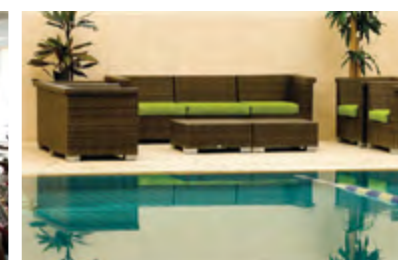
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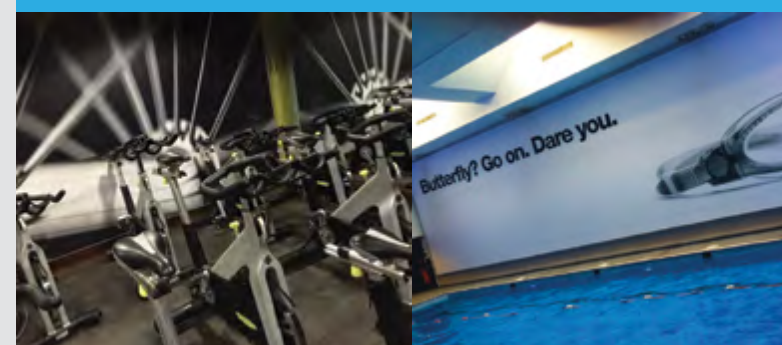
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EMBRACING THE NEXT STEP

EOIN MCKEON

Having announced his retirement from the game, The Connacht Rugby stalwart is also stepping down from the Executive Board at Rugby Players Ireland.

After their meeting, Andy Friend shook Eoin McKeon's hand. They didn't know it at the time, but the moment signalled the end to the Galway man's rugby journey. Spanning a decade, McKeon earned 137 caps for Connacht Rugby. 137 special memories.

Announcing his retirement several months later, McKeon was at pains to thank the Connacht Rugby community. From the groundsman to HR, to the CEO and every devil in between, McKeon was grateful to them all for his 'amazing experience.' While his beloved club had effectively closed the door on his career, there were no hard feelings.

"It was a peculiar situation in that I had been playing games," McKeon muses. "There was talk of a contract but Colby Fainga'a's move to Lyon didn't bode well for me because it changed the dynamic in the backrow and then there were a few lads being moved around the provinces. I knew it was 50/50 and I felt I was losing control of my future.

"At the beginning of March I went to Andy Friend and we decided to call it. I initiated the conversation because I couldn't plan anything. In fairness to Friendly, he was very transparent. 'Look mate,' he said, 'this is where we're at and it's kind of out of our control.' That was that. I dwelt on it for an evening and the next morning I was onto the next step."

For McKeon, the next step was not as daunting as it might have been. Heavily involved in Rugby Players Ireland for several years, McKeon knew better than most about the importance of preparing for the future. He practised what he often preached and last month concluded his MBA from Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh. In the same week he also began work with BMC Software, the seventh biggest tech company in the world.

"It was a nervous process. I was a bit naïve to begin with because I assumed I'd get whatever came my way but the landscape completely changed with the influx of talent let go through Covid-19 cutbacks. I knew the pressure was on and in a few interviews I ended up reverting back to type, discussing how all my rugby skills would transfer over.

"One of the interviewers took me aside and he said 'I know you're a competitive, I know you can work in a team but you need to focus on other things you've done.' He referenced my charity work, my involvement in start-ups, my role on the Executive Board at Rugby Players Ireland and the MBA. My rugby experiences are invaluable, but I had business acumen and other things to bring to the table."

A recipient of the Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary, McKeon enrolled on the Heriot-Watt MBA in September 2018. Taught through Griffith College in Limerick, he attended online in an effort to balance his study with his wholehearted commitment to Connacht.

"It was intense at times but the material wasn't as daunting as people think," he reveals. "You see a lot of it again and again so that it almost becomes ingrained in you. You can almost imagine yourself recalling formula for certain situations.

"Of course, you're not the finished product when you come away from it. You can't expect to walk into the big positions. I'm only starting out in this world so I'm going in at entry level and while the MBA might not mean much to me in the here and now, in years to come it'll stand to me when I go to climb the ladder.

"In the meantime I can have a chat with HR, understand the accountants or have an ability to discuss company strategy with the CEO, CFO or MD if the opportunity comes up. I know several people on the course found the material directly applicable to their current jobs and while I couldn't do that with mine I know that it'll all play back into my hand."



While balance sheets and marketing theories mightn't have seemed relevant on rainy mornings in the Sportsground, McKeon found that his new learnings were related in other ways. Although he knew he would be stepping away from the game, McKeon was centrally involved as the IRFU and Rugby Players Ireland engaged in discussions during the lockdown.

"When I first joined the Board I remember being very nervous because I was conscious of all the experience in the room with Pete McKenna, Johnny [Sexton] and others there but then it was all pretty quiet on the western front. Credit to Rugby Players Ireland and the IRFU, they have cultivated a good working relationship over the years, so we didn't have much as a Board to provide input on.

"I guess it was inevitable that things were going to change a bit in the current climate. It ramped up to the point we were on calls to Simon [Keogh] several times a week with updates on how discussions were going.

"From the Board's perspective a lot of it was about communicating the appropriate message to the squad groups and ensuring they understood the steps that were being taken. As a Board we knew that common sense on certain things had to prevail. Personally, I felt I could approach it quite rationally and objectively. As a business I could see where the IRFU were at and the level of understanding came from my studies.

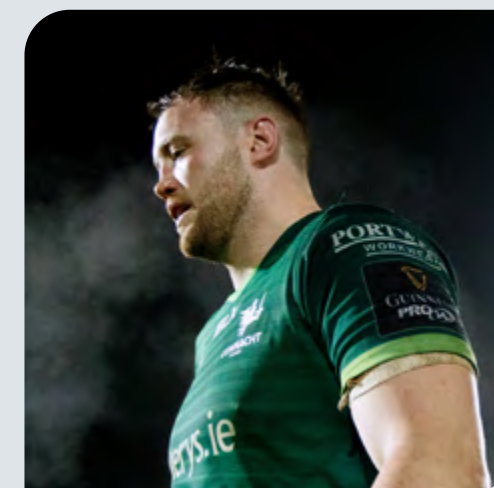
"I knew all along that the cuts weren't going to affect me personally but I felt I had a responsibility to the lads I was representing so I put my best foot forward. Naturally, some players got a bit wound up about things in the early stages but that was expected - it's their livelihood. I'm glad we came to an agreement and got the lads back to their rugby."

Albeit without him.

Though he has been approached by several clubs to dust down the scrum cap, McKeon has pinned his colours to the mast. He continues to train but no longer feels pain on a Sunday morning. A niggling neck injury has also finally recovered. The body is in good shape and he'd rather keep it that way, as much as he can.

"I play in a Wednesday night soccer league," he says. "Recently enough we played this big team of hefty lads who were throwing their weight about a bit. There were a few scuffles. Next morning I woke up with a busted lip, a bang on my head and a dead leg!

"It's good to get the competitive juices flowing but at no point have I watched the rugby lads and been dying to get out there. That told it's own story. I've made my decision so let's see where this takes me."



MOVING ON

Rugby Players Ireland would like to extend its gratitude and best wishes to our Executive Board members Rob Kearney, Eoin McKeon and Louise Galvin who have all made transformative decisions in their respective careers of late.

With both Eoin and Louise announcing their respective retirements, they will also be taking their leave of the Executive Board of Rugby Players Ireland, while Rob Kearney's tenure as Chairman will come to an end with his impending move to Australia.

When Ronan Loughney stepped down as the Connacht Rugby representative in 2017, Eoin McKeon was an obvious candidate to take on the position and he was duly nominated by his teammates. Always willing to help and a pleasure to work with, McKeon even put his own personal

circumstances to one side as negotiations with the IRFU took hold in recent months.

Louise Galvin joined the Executive Board alongside Ciara Griffin, Greg O'Shea and Maura Quinn (Non-Executive Director) in 2018. Already a strong and respected voice within the women's game, Galvin's was determined to leave the game in a better place for the talented youngsters set to take her place.

Since his appointment in 2013, Rob Kearney has made a steadfast commitment to the Executive Board. In that time he has overseen the growth of Rugby Players Ireland working alongside Omar Hassanein and Simon Keogh. The most decorated player in this history of rugby in Ireland, Kearney has announced that a further adventure awaits him in Perth. While he will continue to help and assist the Executive Board from afar, his successor as Chairman will be announced in the coming weeks. In the meantime, we look forward to continuing our work with him to ensure he is ready for his trip to Australia!

We owe them all a debt of gratitude for their immense contributions throughout their time, particularly as we navigated a way through recent issues.

Good luck to all!



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PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTION PLAN

96% OF PLAYERS NATIONALLY AGREE THAT HAVING AN INTEREST OUTSIDE OF RUGBY IS GOOD FOR THEIR GAME¹

Developing the person behind the player has real benefits and is both good for the player and for the game.² At Rugby Players Ireland, we have found that when conversations with players around off-pitch development have been individualised, holistic and meaningful to them, engagement increases, and players feel motivated for action. Engaging in personal development (PD) activities alongside sport, whilst sometimes difficult to balance, can bring a sense of wellbeing to players by helping them to develop a more well-rounded identity, and provide an alternative focus and positive distraction from the pressure of sport.³

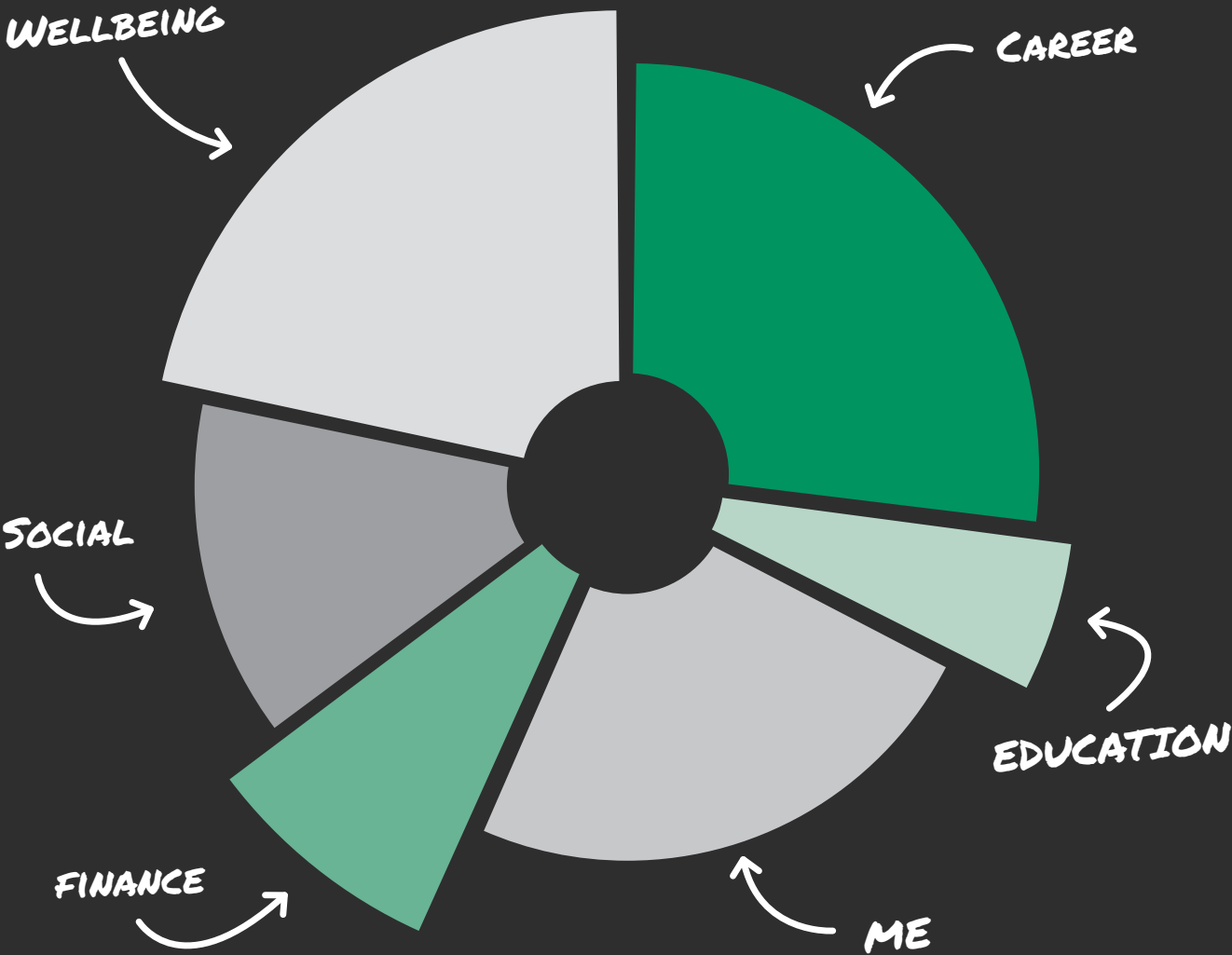
While players who prepare for retirement from sport rate their transition more positively⁴, solely focusing on retirement planning can be a barrier to engagement in PD activities for many, especially younger players. Therefore, conversations around personal development should also focus on maximising the opportunities that a rugby career can provide, so that players can take advantage of their time in the game.

A player's career should be viewed as part of, and contributing to, their life career.⁵ Players can develop many resources (skills, behaviours, competencies, relationships) during their sporting careers that can lay positive foundations for their lives beyond sport.⁶ The PD Action Plan focuses on developing players' resources in key areas, based on international research and evidence-based practice, linked to the RPI/IRFU PD Programme.

Benefits of the Personal Development Action Plan:

- It is available to all current RPI members, and provides a visual, individualised PD plan.
- It promotes greater ownership by the player by focusing on what is important to them.
- It sets the foundations early and simplifies how progress is tracked.
- It shifts conversations from ad-hoc and informal, to structured and on-going.
- Goals and actions can be managed, recorded and tracked.
- It is developed in conjunction with International Rugby Players so there is a level of consistency between nations, which also helps players who relocate country/club to play.

¹ Rugby Players Ireland, Current Member Survey, 2018/2019 season.
² Park et al. (2013) <https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2012.687053>
³ Ryan (2017) <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2017.1399923>
⁴ Lavallee (2019) <https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2018.1516916>
⁵ Stambulova et al. (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2020.1737836>
⁶ Henriksen et al. (2019) <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197x.2019.1570473> and Wylleman & Rosier (2016) <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-803634-1.00013-3>



THE KIWI SHEPHERD

RHYS MARSHALL

A love for rugby is not the only thing Irish people and New Zealanders have in common. As a Bursary recipient, the Munster Rugby hooker/farmer is making the most of his time on the far side of the world



People would take any type of sport they could feast their eyes on over the lockdown. Competitive marble racing was a notable favourite, while renowned commentators sustained their craft by depicting the ordinary events of the day.

Escaping to South Africa prior to the restrictions, CJ Stander found great amusement on his family farm using feed as weights and sheep as opposition. Looking in from Ireland, Rhys Marshall was probably envious of his Munster Rugby colleague.

Just a few years ago, Marshall was a shepherd who used to round up 28,000 sheep spread across 5,500 hectares of New Zealand farmland. Life was simple then. Early starts, late evenings, local rugby and a few beers with the boys, Marshall describes it as the best time of his life.

It told in all that he did. He was an honest worker and his diligence was much appreciated by the other farmhands. His rugby was good too. So good in fact that he came to the attention of the Junior All Blacks. Having scarcely visited a gym, Marshall was on his way to the 2012 Junior World Championship in South Africa. Then as he prepared to return to the hills, the Chiefs came calling.

It wasn't completely unfounded. There had been a few admiring glances from elite sides during his time at school in New Plymouth, but for the most part all the swooning was in the direction of his schoolmates. Remarkably, as his peers pinned their hopes to a rugby dream, it was the farmer who emerged with the career. A career that would take him across the world.

"Ever since Munster beat the All Blacks, it has always been the stuff of legend at home," Marshall informs us. "So when they rang we knew the enormity of it. My Grandad was speechless! Things had cooled at the Chiefs so he gave me his blessing to get over here. I'm not sure I'd properly considered it a career before!

"I've never been one to think I'd be in this profession forever," Marshall clarifies. "There were a few people I met at the start of it all who said that I'd blink and I'd be at the end of it and that I'd better have somewhere to turn. There are certainly a few lads I've come across in the game who don't think that applies to them. Their sole focus is on having a rugby career and that it'll kick on forever. Unfortunately, that's too late.

"The way I see it, it's going to be a tough career anyway so why not push a little further? We all struggle with the concept of study or sitting in an office, but we can't keep running away from it."

Marshall doesn't have any great intention of sitting behind a desk in the longer term, but he appreciates that the ends justifies the means. When he first arrived in Limerick, he was already enrolled in an Agricultural Commerce degree course from



Massey University back home. Marcus Horan managed to liaise with the college to facilitate long-distance learning and this year Marshall enters the final year of his course with assistance from the Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary.

"The way farming is going, the smaller farms are on the way out. The big companies want the best people running and managing their properties and books. Without a proper education you don't stand much of a chance. A lot of shepherds end up doing 10/20 years in their trade before they get to manage a block. The reality is that it's important you have a good understanding of things from a commercial point of view.

"The plan has always been to get back into farming. When I started the course, I actually bought 100 acres at home. I plan to go back and if it turns out that I can't get a sustainable business going, the curriculum is wide enough to give me alternative options from where I can try to climb the ladder pretty quickly."

Though learning from a distance, Marshall is never found wanting in terms of hands-on work. Indeed, many Munster fans have extended invitations to their farms which inevitably consist of a visit to a grandparent for a scone and copious amounts of tea.

"The connectivity of Munster means I've met plenty of good farmers who I help out with when I can," Marshall says. "It's also great to have plenty of people to bounce ideas off or have their support when push comes to shove and I have to scramble. That's the thing, while it's nice to get stuck into something I'm passionate about, there's also the accounting or legal papers that are a right pain in the ass!"

Study was never meant to be easy. He equates it to a bill coming through the door. You have to deal with it and get on with things, just like Marshall did as lockdown took its hold in Ireland. It's been quite some time since he has been able to make it home but there's nothing he can do about it.

"My folks are pretty rural so there's not much mingling going on. It has been a sense of comfort to know they're safe, ticking away and happy enough. It's definitely on my mind how susceptible we can be when people are around, so even though Thomond Park is going to be empty for the next while I understand the reasons why.

"It's a different buzz but it's a chance to grow different aspects of how I approach a game. I can't rely on somebody else or the crowd to get me going for a game. It's all in my control."

So too is his future.

A NEW TERM

AOIFE DOYLE

Having dedicated several years to rugby, the Irish winger is doubling down on her studies



You had to spare a thought for those returning to school in September. After months at home, it might have been conceivable to many that they may never need to return at all. Alas, as per Malcom X's quote that adorns the classroom at Rugby Players Ireland HQ: "Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today."

A number of years ago, Aoife Doyle briefly sampled college life. Already an Irish international when she left Limerick for Dublin, it was inevitable that her focus was more likely to veer towards playbooks rather than textbooks. Now though, having given her all for the Irish Sevens, she is ready to return to her studies.

"I never really felt I missed out on college," Doyle admits. "I started out in St. Pat's in Drumcondra. The first few days were great but then Freshers week started and you realised you couldn't get involved. On top of that I was doing a course I didn't really want and we'd arranged to spread it across six years. That meant that any friends I'd bother to make would move on!"

"All of my best friends were involved in rugby. Some were doing bits and pieces, but for the most part we were all consumed by rugby and I couldn't see past it either. I dropped out. I've no regrets about it but I guess as I've gotten older, my eyes have been opened a bit."

Still only 25 years old, Doyle has accomplished enough to put any academic misgivings at bay. Having won a Six Nations title with a Niamh Briggs-led Ireland in 2015, she spent the next five years travelling the world as part of an evolving Irish Sevens programme. She believes many of the lessons learned therein were invaluable.

"Amee-Leigh [Murphy Crowe] and I joined the Sevens at the same time. The two of us were scared of our own shadows at that age. We were young and new to Dublin so to suddenly land into a high-performing environment was quite a change for us. In the first few days we used to cling to each other but the other girls used to split us up to force us to branch out!"

"We weren't that quiet after all. It turns out that nobody in the squad is and I'm not sure you can be. It's quite an exposed environment on and off the pitch because there aren't many involved. Everyone has to give their all so you have to be able to stand on your own two feet. I think I became a little more resilient and confident in myself because of it."

"Obviously, we did a lot of travelling and met plenty of people too. I began to really enjoy that part of it. At every destination we'd also visit a school in the locality and teach them a little about rugby and where we were from. That was something I really looked forward to. It all brought me out of my shell."

“It's quite an exposed environment on and off the pitch because there aren't many involved. Everyone has to give their all so you have to be able to stand on your own two feet.”

Hailing from a family of teachers, it should come as no surprise that the school visits resonated with Doyle. Neither should the fact she is now embarking on teaching career at the Marino Institute of Education with help from the Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Bursary.

It'll be another significant change of pace for the former full-time athlete who leaves a permanent job with the Drug Treatment Centre to facilitate her studies. In her capacity as Irish Women's XV's Player Development Manager, Aoife Lane acknowledged the potential difficulties that lie ahead and directed Doyle towards the Bursary application form.

"It was always my plan to go back to college. I took on a job last year primarily to see if I could survive in Dublin and support myself away from the programme. It was mainly clerical work but it was absolutely brilliant for me because I had no work experience and I needed that reality check.

"Obviously, I'm now giving up full-time work and pay to become a student. Living and working in Dublin is one thing, living and studying in Dublin is something else. My parents have been hugely supportive of me but I didn't want to turn to them and expect they foot the bill so I looked for additional help. It'll be a massive adjustment on many levels but the Bursary will go a long way."

Though keenly aware of the challenges to come, not least by the Covid-19 pandemic, Doyle is nevertheless happy with her lot. She continues to live with her former Sevens teammates and plays her rugby with many of her XV's colleagues at Railway Union. She will also have plenty of opportunities to add to her tally of Irish caps, the first of which she earned in 2015.



"That first cap was against France in Ashbourne. It really stands out because I had never been so nervous in all my life! It was freezing and the pitch was in darkness too... I think the floodlights went out about three times! I remember two of my friends came to support me and their cars got stuck parking in a nearby field. Not sure I've seen them at a game since!

"There has been so much change in terms of infrastructure," she continues. "I was lucky enough to start my first game back earlier this year against Scotland. There was a big promotional drive, RTE were covering it and Energia Park was packed so the atmosphere was great! It was like our own little place to share with our own fanbase. There's no comparison to the set-up a few years ago.

"The main difference for me personally though was how I was able to savour it. You have more experience and a greater understanding as an older player. Making my debut at 18 was definitely an achievement I'm proud of, but back then you think you're already a well-rounded player and know it all. Far from it.

"I realised I've learned a lot over the past few years. I want to keep that going!"



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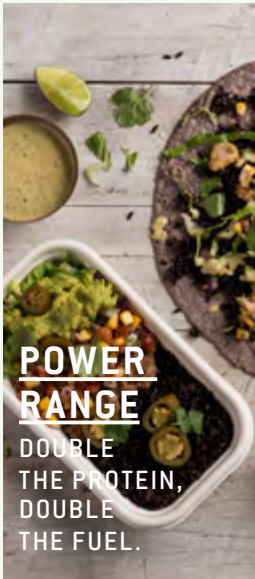
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A PERCENTAGES GAME

CLIODHNA MOLONEY

The return of the Women's XVs Player of the Year has coincided with an upturn in form and energy for Ireland



They say that bad news travels fast while good news takes the scenic route. Clodhna Moloney might tend to agree. Recently crowned the Irish Women's XVs Player of the Year, the London based Moloney was too wrapped up in conversation with some of her Irish teammates back home to pay much heed to the impending news.

"It was funny the way it played out," Moloney says when we ask her how she heard the news of her nomination for the Irish Women's XVs Player of the Year. "We were at training and Edel McMahon saw me walking down from the pitch on my phone. She'd just been told by Simon [Keogh] about her nomination so she thought I was on a call with him too. I was actually listening to some windy voice note from Lindsay Peat! When I landed down, Edel congratulated me. I didn't have a clue what the girl was on about!"

When word of her candidacy and ultimate success in the category finally reached her, Moloney was humbled. Her modest acceptance at odds with her abrasive performances for Ireland. Indeed, having acknowledged the award she immediately paid tribute to fellow nominees McMahon and Linda Djougang.

"Up until she joined Wasps I had only really known Edel as an opponent for Galwegians," Moloney says. "She was always someone that you could see was lining you up, phase after phase, until she'd eventually smack you. She's a terrier in defence. Always gave a good game. We're probably kicking ourselves that she wasn't involved with Ireland a bit sooner."

"We really see the value she brings to the squad. She has made huge difference in terms of driving standards and making sure everyone knows their roles and that if we're all on the same page, we will all be better together. She typifies our #mewe culture – everything she does is for the benefit of the team."

"Linda is such a powerhouse of a young player," Moloney continues. "She would know herself she has so much more to give to the game. Her commitment to her rugby has been very impressive considering that she has been on the frontline. The girl has buckets of potential and we will be seeing her name involved with Irish Rugby for a long time to come."

Moloney has long been associated with the Irish Women's team in her own right. Now 27, she is on the brink of senior status within the squad. Having made her debut in 2015, you'd assume this automatically comes with the territory but injuries



put paid to her involvement in both 2017 and 2019. Determined to reassert herself in 2020, it's probably no surprise that her return coincided with better Irish performances.

"I could only look in from the outside and I didn't want to impose, but I was very aware that everyone was quite upset particularly with how the 2019 Six Nations went. The girls didn't need anybody to tell them, they knew the performances were below par for what is expected of an Irish international side."

"Coming back in, it felt like we took a big step up as a team this year. It's a reflection of lots of things. Kieran Hallett has made a big difference in terms of our defensive organisation, while Stephen McGinnis has been putting in a lot of time with the exiles. It's been nice to have someone on this side of the water to keep us in tune and involved."

"There has also been an injection of younger players too who have now been exposed to that level on a few occasions. They demonstrated their capacity to compete and showed that they are ready. They'll only get better and better and that all adds to our squad depth which bodes well for the future."

Moloney's obvious determination allied to her ability to speak with clarity of thought and assuredness certainly identifies with that of a leader. Though she laughs off suggestions that she must now be considered one of the older guard, she admits that has developed an awareness of those around her.

"It's a weird circle. When I think of my first Irish camps in 2015 when we trained in Johnstown House and we'd have challenge games in Ashbourne, those feel like different days. I look back and think of some of the older girls telling me what to do and others trying to help me along, and I laugh! I suppose it's where I'm at now only I can't be as tough on the younger girls because they're not half as bad as I was!"

"I was just a big GAA head in a Galway jersey landing into camp, not having a clue about being on time or about any etiquette at meetings. I thought I'd always be the rogue on the edge but at some stage you end up being the one putting an arm around the shoulders of the younger player and pulling them along with you."

"As bad as the injuries or lockdowns are at the time, there is opportunity to learn a lot. It gives you the time to reflect on where you're really at as a player and person. It also gives you the chance to work on things without the immediate pressure of getting it right. Giselle Mather at Wasps is always making a point about all the 1% things you can do. When you add them up, they make a huge difference."

Clodhna Moloney always gives her all for Ireland. Don't bet against her giving 101% next time.

TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS | RETURN TO WORK RESEARCH

Rugby Players Ireland and Zurich have revealed new research for the Tackle Your Feelings mental wellbeing campaign, funded by the Z Zurich Foundation, on the Irish public's attitudes and perceptions towards their return to their workplace, and their mental wellbeing. This week many workplaces are set to welcome staff back for the first time since the outbreak of COVID-19, with staff and employers adapting to new working conditions.

The research revealed some two in five Irish people are anxious about returning to their physical place of work, with women more likely to state they are anxious than men (47% vs 38%). Furthermore, one in three people reported they are concerned they won't have the mental wellbeing support they need when returning to their workplace. This increases to half (49%) of 18-24 year olds.

The research, commissioned by the Z Zurich Foundation & Rugby Players Ireland and conducted by iReach highlights the significant issue of mental wellbeing for Irish people as a result of COVID-19;

- Over a third (39%) state their current working situation has had a negative impact on their mental wellbeing,
- 40% of Irish people are unsure how to manage their mental wellbeing, and this rises to 57% of 18-24 year olds, and 55% of 25-34 year olds. Just 3 in ten people are using online resources or Apps to support their mental wellbeing,
- For over a third of people (38%) their work-life balance has negatively impacted on their mental wellbeing, and the 25-34 year olds were most likely to experience this at 53%,
- Six in ten people state the outbreak of COVID-19 has impacted on their mental wellbeing, with 49% stating their mental wellbeing has diminished. 62% state they have been proactively looking after their mental wellbeing during the pandemic.

The research also revealed some of the supports that employers have put in place with 46% stating their employer or line manager has provided additional mental wellbeing resources as a result of COVID-19.

Over half (54%) of Irish people believe returning to their physical place of work will positively impact their mental wellbeing, with 6 in ten people (62%) reporting they have a good team in work who help them maintain their mental wellbeing, and this increases to 74% of 25-34 year olds. 68% of Irish people believe seeing their work colleagues again will have a positive impact on their mental wellbeing.

However, half of the respondents don't think their manager or line manager provides adequate mental wellbeing resources for them and their colleagues and four in ten people state they are hiding a lot of issues and challenges they are facing from their employer.

Commenting on the research, Tackle Your Feelings Campaign Manager, Hannah McCormack said: "The research also revealed one in ten Irish people had to take time off work due to their mental wellbeing during the pandemic and this rises to one in four 18-34 year olds. It highlights the significant impact this pandemic has had on people's mental wellbeing, and that many are anxious about the supports from employers as they prepare to return to their physical place of work. With more and more people returning to workplaces over the coming weeks and months, we believe

the Tackle Your Feelings programme and other wellbeing initiatives will be a critical resource as people begin to adapt to their new working environments and try to Take Control of their mental wellbeing despite the uncertainty we are all facing."

The TYF [Tackle Your Feelings] App and website encourages people to be proactive about their mental wellbeing. Users can choose the Tackle Your Feelings resources they feel they need at the time. The app and website also feature sections on Relationships, Confidence, Happiness/Sadness, Sleep, Self-Care, Resilience, Anger, Relaxation, Optimism and Self-Awareness. It also has a Mindfulness section where users can select from several mindfulness exercises.



Anthony Brennan, CEO, Zurich Ireland commented: "The lessons we have learned from the last number of months about the challenges that many of our staff, and people in Ireland and globally have to deal with have been very important. Now as we begin to plan our own journey back to our physical office, we believe that the Tackle Your Feelings programme is more relevant than ever before. At a time when health and safety are at the forefront of all of our minds, we need to remember that our mental wellbeing will also play a vital role in our recovery. We at Zurich are proud to support Tackle Your Feelings and hope it is a valuable resource for many in the coming months."

Simon Keogh, CEO, Rugby Players Ireland commented: "The rugby players returned to work in July and many were experiencing similar concerns to those of the general public. We, along with the provinces and IRFU, have worked closely with the players throughout the lockdown and since they returned to play to ensure they are aware of all mental wellbeing resources available to them. We're delighted that a number of the players have shared their own stories of resilience to spotlight the importance of mental wellbeing and offered insight into how they coped during the pandemic to inspire and support others."

The research also highlighted concerns around the potential for a second lockdown, with almost two thirds (63%) of Irish people concerned about the impact a second lockdown would have on their mental wellbeing which rises to 72% of 18-24 year-olds. One in four people stated they don't think they would be able to manage a second lockdown rising to half of 18-24 year olds.

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INTER NATIONAL RUGBY PLAYERS



A range of player appointments to new World Rugby decision-making groups has been welcomed as a step in the right direction for the global game.

International Rugby Players has made 14 appointments to different boards and committees, aimed at giving players a greater voice in the professional game.

Players were appointed by the global representative body with the view to combining direct rugby experience with various areas of expertise.

Among the player appointments, backgrounds exist in legal, medical, high performance, broadcast, digital media and other areas – all set to benefit World Rugby’s decision-making process on a number of levels.

Chief Executive Omar Hassanein said: “The players we’ve put forward for the board of Rugby World Cup Ltd., and the various committees will better equip World Rugby to make the right decisions for the game on a consistent basis. They each possess a unique combination of business and practical rugby understanding which all stakeholders are starting to recognise as essential to have at the table.

“From an International Rugby Players perspective, we are pleased that World Rugby has recognised and acknowledged this value, with these committee appointments forming one aspect of a greater commitment to putting players at the centre of the game”

Among the appointments, Brian O’Driscoll and Melodie Robinson will join the board of Rugby World Cup Ltd while Bryan Habana, Conrad Smith, Rachael Burford, Jamie Roberts, and Dr. Araba Chinto join the newly formed High-Performance Rugby Committee alongside some of the world’s top coaches.

The Sevens Strategy group will benefit from the experience of former player Josh Blackie and the medical experience of Dr.Sharron Flahive while Sene Naoupu takes over from Rachael Burford on the Women’s Advisory Committee. Italy’s Leonardo Ghiraldini will join USA’s Kate Zackary on the Anti-Doping Advisory committee.

Melodie Robinson said: “I’m excited to be the International Rugby Players representative on the Rugby World Cup Limited Board alongside Brian and I’m extremely optimistic that bringing the players’ interests to the table around decisions for Rugby World Cups will have extremely positive knock-on effects for teams and players.

“While a massive piece of work is the landmark future host awarding process for the men’s and women’s Rugby World Cup, personally I’m excited that there is also a focus on the broadcast rights and commercialising the women’s Rugby World Cup, shaping it so that it attracts even more players, new fans and big sponsors which then has a knock on effect for all women’s competitions.”

The positions will be officially confirmed after a governance review by World Rugby is complete.

“
The players we’ve put forward for the board of Rugby World Cup Ltd., and the various committees will better equip World Rugby to make the right decisions for the game on a consistent basis.

APPOINTMENTS

Professional Game Committee:

Omar Hassanein
(CEO, INTL RUGBY PLAYERS)

Regulations Committee:

David Quinlan
(HEAD OF LEGAL, INTL RUGBY PLAYERS)

Rugby World Cup Limited Board:

Brian O’Driscoll

Rugby World Cup Limited Board:

Melodie Robinson

High Performance Rugby Committee:

Conrad Smith

High Performance Rugby Committee:

Bryan Habana

High Performance Rugby Committee:

Jamie Roberts

High Performance Rugby Committee:

Rachael Burford

High Performance Rugby Committee:

Dr. Araba Chintoh

Sevens Strategy Group:

Dr. Sharron Flahive

Sevens Strategy Group:

Josh Blackie

Women’s Advisory Committee:

Sene Naoupu

Anti-Doping Advisory Committee:

Leonardo Ghiraldini

Anti-Doping Advisory Committee:

Kate Zackary



NO COMPETITION, NO PROGRESS

CAELAN DORIS

Although Mayo is in his blood, the Nevin Spence Young Player of the Year is already getting used to picking up silverware



With all the time that has passed since Caelan Doris' first international cap, you forget that he has just a few Test minutes to his name. Under ordinary circumstances, he might have 10 caps already. Withdrawn after four minutes against Scotland, Doris returned to action a few weeks later with a brief cameo in a game already lost to the English before everyone retreated to their homes for the rest of 2020.

"I've been really looking forward to getting back into a green jersey," the Nevin Spence Young Player of the Year admits. "I got a taste of it prior to the lockdown which was pretty special. It was a bizarre Six Nations to be involved in, but it was incredibly cool to be there."

"Obviously from a personal perspective it wasn't what I hoped for to begin with. Having got a bit of a taste for it has spurred me on over the past few months, to get a few extra percentages out of myself. Playing for Ireland is addictive, so I want to give myself the best chance to get back into it as soon as possible."

Returning home to Lacken in Co. Mayo, Doris sought refuge in the surrounding beaches and countryside. Undoubtedly recharged by time with his parents and the fresh western air, he set about his training with renewed focus. While many things remained unknown, Doris was certain of the challenge awaiting him back in Dublin.

"The competition at Leinster is insane. Look around the team and there's two internationally capped players in almost every position, not to mention the backrow. It's a great strength of ours. In training, you've to perform every day. If you don't perform in training you won't get an opportunity in a match. Even when matches come around, there are always two or three guys breathing down your neck."

"It serves as a great base for international rugby. I only have a few minutes under my belt at that level so I might not be the best to speak on it, but you notice that there's a definite step up. The main thing is probably in the accuracy of the decision making. Guys are more than likely going to make the right choice. If you don't you'll be found out in defence or attack very quickly."



"Having such a high-level at Leinster on a daily basis drives the standards and that's only a positive thing. You have to get your stuff right, take any opportunity you get and perform on the day. You have to be at the top of your game."

To this end, Doris looks to the likes of Kieran Read and Jamie Heaslip. Both were consistently excellent performers throughout their respective careers and remain the standard bearers for the No.8 position. Incidentally, Heaslip recently stated that he believes that Doris has all the tools to go a similar distance. However, with Jack Conan and CJ Stander also in the frame for that much vaunted jersey at club and international level, Doris has had to adapt his game to the blindside flank.

"I've said that I want to be an '8' who can play '6', rather than a '6' who can play '8' but I'm happy to play wherever," Doris asserts. "Like any young lad I just want to be in the team and playing games. Over the years I've modelled my game on the likes of Kieran Read in terms of balancing a power game with good feet, agility and ball skills. There are different aspects to being at '6' but getting some exposure to them will only benefit my game in the longer term."

Of course, competition in the Leinster and Irish backrow is not the only contest he's faced this season. Alongside Doris, the meteoric rise of Ryan Baird and the transformation of Shane Daly into an international level fullback were also acknowledged in their recent nominations for the Nevin Spence Young Player of the Year Award. Meanwhile, fellow Blackrock boy Garry Ringrose took home the prestigious Zurich Players' Player of the Year Award.

"When I was in 3rd year, Garry was in 6th year," Doris notes. "We won the Junior Cup and they won the Senior Cup against St. Michael's. I remember he stripped the ball off Josh Murphy that day and ran the full length of the field. There were a few guys in that team I would have looked up to and wanted to follow their tracks, so to win this in the same year that Garry is Player of the Year is pretty cool."

"The Nevin Spence award is a nice recognition of the hard work that's gone in over the years, all the support I've had from friends and family. It's also a credit to the environment we have in Leinster, the team as a whole, how well we've gone and how we're developing. It's a nice recognition of all that."

Hopefully Caelan Doris has many more achievements to come.

RELISHING A NEW CHALLENGE

CONOR MCKEON

From European rugby to County Hurling finals, the former Connacht Rugby player has done it all but it hasn't been without its difficulties



For a few short minutes it was a new dawn in his rugby career. As ever, his father was on the sideline vicariously kicking and passing every ball with his son. His mother was there too, momentarily squinting out from behind the safety of her hands before seeking refuge again. Even Ray McKenna, his old hurling coach at Ballyboden St. Enda's, had made the trip to Galway.

All there to witness a big step in his rugby career. All there to witness the end of it too.

October 13 2018 will always rankle with Conor McKeon. After a tough slog over the previous few years, opportunity finally beckoned at Connacht Rugby. Kieran Marmion was being primed for the All Blacks leaving McKeon and Caolin Blade to fill the roster against Bordeaux Bègles in the Challenge Cup. Game on.

Entering the fray with 12 minutes to go, a feisty McKeon sized up his gigantic Gallic opponents. "I was a small lad but I always gave it my all," McKeon notes. "The way the game had gone I was always tackling absolute animals, so when their backrower ran at me I just thought I'd fly at him and go really low. I chopped him but he landed on my shoulder and then everybody else piled on."

It was agony he recalls, and it was also his last act as a professional rugby player.

Back home in Rathfarnham and all but bed-bound following shoulder surgery, a glum McKeon had barely ventured out of the house in days. There

were safety concerns but mainly there was a lack of interest. Eventually, Ray McKenna called by and enticed him out to the Dublin Senior County Hurling Final. Ballyboden were playing Kilmacud Crokes in Parnell Park.

"I remember sitting in the stand and I had a clear moment of reflection," he begins. "It struck me that all my mates were out there playing the sport I loved. They were all living in the same community, being cheered on by family and friends, winning a county title together, having the craic. It might seem bizarre coming from a professional rugby player, but I was envious of them."

"There I was sitting there in a sling, not knowing what the future held. I didn't know if I'd have a contract coming my way. If there was, I didn't know if I'd ever make the breakthrough. I didn't even know if my shoulder would recover. The only thing I knew was that if rugby wasn't going to work out, I was going to get back home and go hurling again!"

Forced to retire in April 2019, McKeon was true to his word and rejoined his boyhood GAA club when his shoulder allowed. Starting with the Junior D side, he began to work his way through the Ballyboden ranks at a rate that surprised even him. His progression was such that in September he was part of the senior championship squad that lost out in the county final to Cuala by two points.

"Hurling was always my first love," McKeon confesses. "When I went to Gonzaga the rugby just snowballed. I made a few Leinster underage teams

“There I was sitting there in a sling, not knowing what the future held. I didn't know if I'd have a contract coming my way. If there was, I didn't know if I'd ever make the breakthrough.”



and suddenly the dream of being a professional sportsman became very real. I went with it. I gave it 100% every day and so while I was disappointed when it came to an end, I knew I couldn't have done any more. That gave me great peace of mind.

"Even though I'm still young, I feel I've played enough rugby. I've been through so much with it. I won the AIL with Lansdowne, went to a World Cup with the Ireland 20s and gave the professional game a good crack. The hurling represented something fresh: a new team to make, new things to win. I know lads really struggle to fill the competitive void but getting into a Ballyboden side with the likes of Simon Lambert, Shane Durkin and Paul Ryan driving standards meant that it has never been an issue for me."

Given the severity of his injury, it's remarkable that McKeon has fought his way into the plans of one of the foremost hurling teams in the country. Certainly, the resilience and drive he has shown in getting to the top of another elite sport are character traits that bode well for his future. Indeed, almost a year into his role with BDO he has already faced more challenges than most might expect in their trainee year.

"I was lucky that my first few months were onsite before the lockdown happened. I still had a lot to learn because I hadn't served a regular internship. I might have been lacking in some areas, but I have always had strong initiative to improve and that's what got my foot in the door. I'll back myself when making a decision and if there's something I don't know I'm not afraid to put my hand up and ask the questions others might be too nervous to.

"You could never hide out on a rugby pitch, especially as a 10. I found that out in my second year in the Connacht academy. Pat Lam was just in the door and he never really fancied the look of me. I was too small in his eyes and that was that. The day he called me in and told me I didn't fit into



his plans; I was upside down. All I wanted to be was a professional sportsman and here was someone saying I wasn't able to."

With his future at Connacht was out of his control, he upped the ante with Dr Deirdre Lyons and doubled down on his commerce degree, just as he had promised his parents. Then, as he began to stare into the rugby abyss, Nigel Carolan and Willie Ruane offered him a lifeline by suggesting he switch to scrum-half. The Dubliner didn't need a second invitation.

At the Connacht Rugby awards night the following year, McKeon was named academy player of the year. He was also rewarded with a senior contract.

"I had nothing to lose so I went after it. I worked with Mossy Lawler on the basics and John Cooney was so good to me. I enjoyed learning a new trade and it was similar the challenge to that hurling presented. I worked extremely hard but having come so close to the edge I had a far healthier outlook."

Although injury would ultimately have its say, McKeon is satisfied that he did all he could in his final months as a professional player.

"I was pretty relentless but what I'd been through taught me to enjoy it too. There's no point in getting bogged down in stuff you can't control. Knowing I'd the work done, I went out and enjoyed my game like any game is supposed to be enjoyed. I'm glad I did the way things turned out.

"I still place emphasis on enjoying myself. I'd been looking at the lockdown in a positive light: there's no commute or rush to training, I've been eating well, and I can rest up and relax. My energy levels are good so I can get stuck into the hurling or my work. There's no hiding behind a computer screen.

"I've overcome a few challenges but I'm sure there'll be plenty more to come. I'll be ready for them when they do."



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THE GREAT HOPE

GORDON D'ARCY

The former Ireland, Leinster and Lions centre joins an illustrious list of names in the Rugby Players Ireland Hall of Fame

At about four o'clock in Lansdowne Road on March 17th 1998, little troops of students swirled around like the faithful who had received news of the second coming.

In fact it would be unfair to apportion all the excitement to the young boys; Ireland coach Warren Gatland similarly embraced the hysteria.

Clongowes Wood College had just defeated Terenure in the Senior Cup final and at full back was Gordon D'Arcy – the most talked about schoolboy in Irish rugby. Indeed such was D'Arcy's dominance of the competition that in the aftermath of the semi-final against a much-fancied St. Mary's College, The Irish Times reported that his performance made the fixture 'seem like a personal benefit match.'

Beyond the expert analysis and opinion, it was clear for all to see that D'Arcy was primed for a future in the game. What a future that was.

When D'Arcy landed at boarding school in 1992, the Irish sporting landscape was somewhat different. While Jack Charlton's footballers had failed to qualify for the European Championships, they remained proud ambassadors and comprised some of the best talent from the inaugural Premier League season. By contrast, Irish rugby was doing little for the soul – Ireland conceded 116 points as they stormed to the Wooden Spoon in the Five Nations that year.

As he and his new pals dashed about the rugby pitch like moths trapped under a lampshade, nobody could have foreseen that the little portly hooker would represent the great hope of Irish rugby. Victor Costello and Denis Hickie were shouldering much of that burden, but following several explosive performances as a fearless 15-year-old, all eyes turned to the young Wexford man.



As a youngster, D'Arcy played the game as though he had read every schoolboy story ever written and believed every word. A good many people duly proclaimed him to be the greatest exponent of the schools' game. Understandably, with Irish rugby in the midst of a torrid decade, Warren Gatland was like an eager valentine. But for a time his admiration was unrequited and Mr. D'Arcy assumed the role of the aloof romantic hero.

In a few short months following his Leaving Cert., D'Arcy was lining out for Leinster at Llanelli alongside wily amateurs that even the Internet would struggle to remember. It was not quite the Promised Land, but when he departed the scene some 261 games later having garnered more caps and medals than any other before him, the RDS represented the utopian home of European rugby.

Thanks to success on the pitch and astute management off it, Leinster Rugby has flourished in the professional era – the fanbase has grown exponentially, so too the trophy cabinet and it is now the strongest rugby franchise in the Northern Hemisphere. But as the club embarked on this exciting adventure with a young D'Arcy in tow, it was evident that raw talent alone would not guarantee survival.

Much of D'Arcy's early career was pockmarked by injury, disappointment and criticism. Although he made his international debut against Romania in the 1999 Rugby World Cup, Gatland turned to an array of others to address yet another faltering campaign a short time later. A few brief cameos in green aside, D'Arcy was left to fill the gaps created by the Test season.





As he watched his peers pack their bags for the 2003 World Cup in Australia, his morale was at an all-time low. An injection of that potent drug called confidence was badly needed. Yet while he might have questioned his own international credentials, Gary Ella remained a fan. D'Arcy soon began to revel in the faith and freedom afforded to him by the Leinster coach and when he was entrusted with the midfield against Sale Sharks in the Heineken Cup the following January, he would never look back.

It had been a tumultuous six years but once again D'Arcy's name was on the lips of every man, woman and child as Ireland claimed their first Triple Crown in 19 years in 2004. His international redemption was complete and his rampaging jaunts finally had the audience they deserved. Having advocated his cause over many Diving D'Arcy cocktails at Kiely's of Donnybrook, his school friends were finally vindicated as he scythed through defences at Paris, Twickenham and Lansdowne just as he had done against Blackrock College down the road. No longer did memories of his schoolboy heroics have to seem so distant.

Given that his debut came in the last century, it is no surprise that D'Arcy became Ireland's longest serving international on his final outing in August 2015. Some of his teammates that day were probably just out of swaddling clothes in 1999. In the intervening 16 seasons, D'Arcy bellowed Ireland's Call on 82 occasions and Ireland became a team that could compete with the best. He also provided the Irish people with some indelible memories: the brace against Scotland, the record-breaking partnership with Brian O'Driscoll and... well, the beard might be best forgotten...

Although the Grand Slam decider against Wales in 2009 will forever be etched in our minds, one of the special moments of that campaign came some weeks earlier. Complications with a broken arm precluded D'Arcy from playing for almost a year prior to the championship. So when he entered the fray against the French, Croke Park stood to attention. In unison everyone applauded a man that many thought would never wear the green of Ireland again. Inevitably, he capped his return in true D'Arcy style, spinning and twisting away from three would-be tacklers to steer Ireland to victory at what was a crucial juncture of the game.

As D'Arcy emerged from the try-line, he was mobbed by his teammates. When the cameras caught a glimpse of him, the look of pure elation on his face told its own story. It also convinced us all that our fantasies can become a solid reality. Dreams of an Irish Grand Slam duly swept the country at a time of great need. D'Arcy disproved many doubters that day (something he would do throughout his career) and earned his place back in a team that was on the brink of glory. Had he not lined out at the Millennium Stadium he would have seemed like the good peasant who had planted and cared for the vine but had not been around long enough to enjoy the vintage. But he did, and the windfall of revenue from the consequent celebrations undoubtedly helped to bridge the budget deficit.

D'Arcy's influence has not just been felt on the field of play. In his early school years, bedrooms throughout the land were adorned by posters of messrs. McGrath and Keane. Yet as he took to the field for the Lions, triumphed in Europe with Leinster and inspired his country to a Grand Slam, hundreds of Irish children went to their beds in their shoulder pads to dream of glory under portraits of Ireland's rugby stars.

Both on and off the field, D'Arcy represented Leinster Rugby, his country and his family with distinction. He is one of Ireland's greatest. The slalom breaks, the driving feet, the breakdown expertise, the low centre of gravity, the subtleties of his work – they all gave us myriad moments of delight and caused many an opponent to wonder if the laws of physics had been changed overnight.

Upon announcing his retirement, D'Arcy proclaimed that "it has been an honour and I have loved every minute".

In fact, that honour was all ours.


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