

# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF  
RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

WINTER 2020

## LOOKING FORWARD

KATHRYN DANE



LESSONS FROM  
THE BIG MAN

CJ STANDER

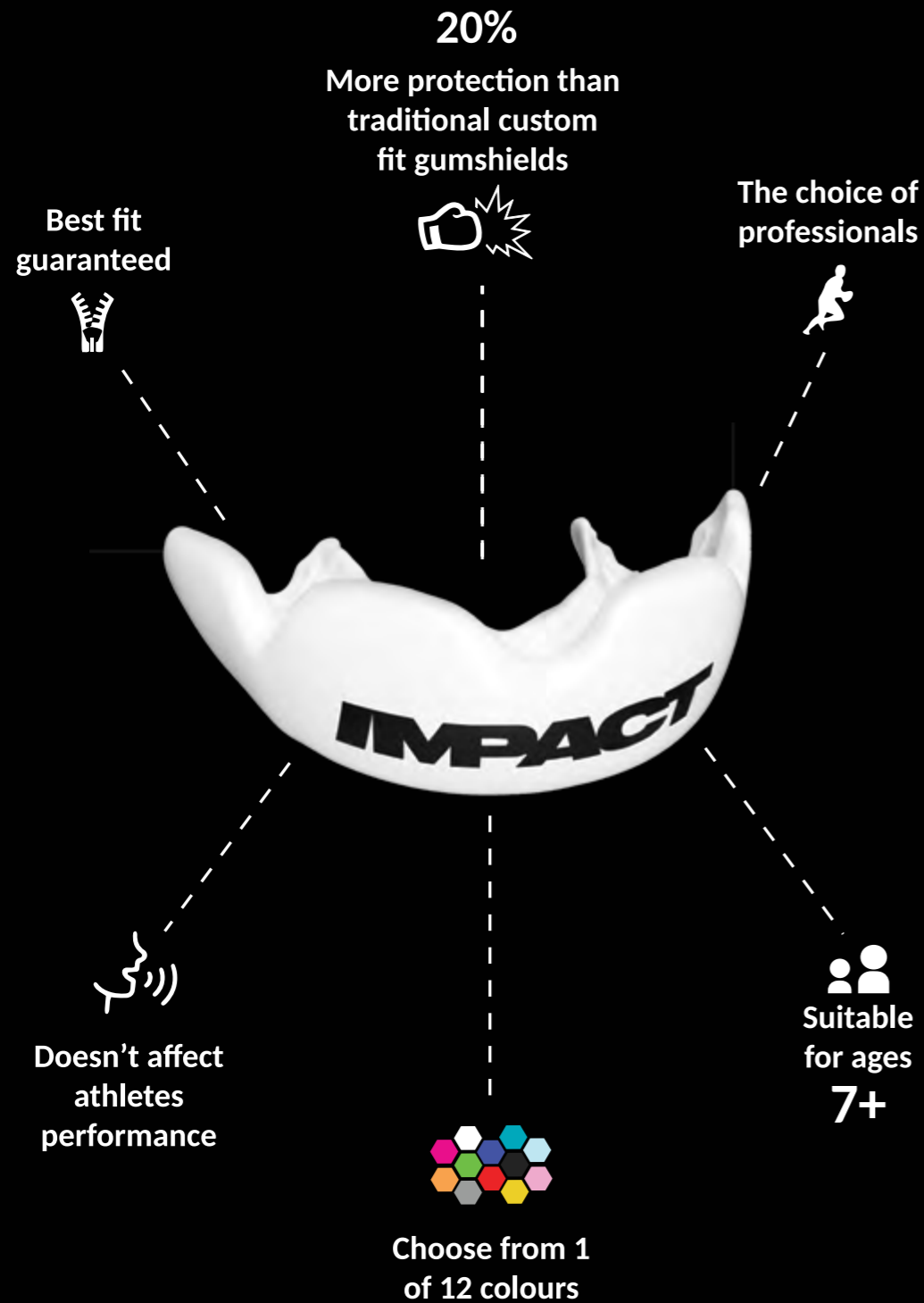
THE GOOD  
DOCTOR

ANGUS LLOYD



RUGBY PLAYERS  
IRELAND

# IMPACT GUMSHIELDS



## WORLD'S FIRST 3D PRINTED GUMSHIELD



10

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# CEO ADDRESS

SIMON KEOGH



Following a disappointing Rugby World Cup campaign last year, it was always envisaged that there would be a significant response in 2020. However, I don't think any of us could have foreseen the battle we ultimately had on our hands.

At Rugby Players Ireland, we often extol the resilience of our membership. While their capacity to overcome non-selection, to fight back from injury and to transition out of elite sport might not always be recognised, it is certainly valued by our players. As Covid-19 wrought havoc and the future remained unclear, they each resolved to keep the show on the road.

It speaks to the professionalism of our members that when rugby was finally able to return, they hit the ground running. I'll always remember their excitement in the days leading up to those games, while their enthusiasm was matched in homes throughout the country. In many ways, rugby has carried a lot of us through the final months of a unique year.

Thanks to a cooperative approach, we were able to facilitate a safe and successful return to rugby. Yet while this represented a considerable feat for all sides, it also laid bare the challenges we face as a sport until Covid-19 is firmly under control. Tough times are an inevitable consequence. Thankfully, Rugby Players Ireland is equipped to guide our members through as best we can.

Everything took a technological twist in 2020. From virtual consultations to an extensive array of educational webinars, screen-time increased exponentially. While we look forward to re-establishing personal connections in time, it has been shown that our programmes and services can adapt to the needs of our membership in even the most extreme circumstances.

Furthermore, in addition to establishing a dedicated Mental Wellbeing Service for our players, the Tackle Your Feelings campaign, run in partnership with Zurich, took on even greater significance this year as the wider public turned to their heroes for guidance and inspiration. To see our main ambassadors supported by so many of their peers, in turn strengthened those looking in.

This was further evidenced in the way our members rallied the country and focussed the minds on defeating Covid-19. By lending their voice to initiatives being rolled out by the public health authorities, they helped to galvanise Irish people at a low ebb. Similarly, they have enabled numerous businesses and charitable organisations back to their feet in the aftermath of the initial lockdown.

Our members were also centrally involved as we engaged in discussions with the IRFU on the



immediate future of the professional game in the country. Through their experience of these negotiations added to the strong evidence of their wider influence they can assert, I don't think we'll ever have a clearer example of how powerful and influential the collective voice of our membership can be when we all have the one goal in mind.

At this juncture I would like to acknowledge the IRFU and their continued support for Rugby Players Ireland and its members. Thanks to our good working relationship, we have managed to overcome many of the unprecedented challenges we have faced in 2020. By continuing to work together we hope to return rugby in Ireland to the stability and success of recent years.

A little closer to home, I wish to thank our staff and our corporate partners at Rugby Players Ireland for the ways in which we have all supported each other through the year. It has been a demanding and testing time for our organisation but we have risen to the challenge as a team. With such uncertainty we have had to constantly adapt and think on our feet. It is my hope that our learnings and experiences will stand our organisation in good stead for the future, whatever it may bring.

We have faced down many challenges in 2020 and with a vaccine imminent, the biggest one of all is set to be overcome in the months ahead. In time they might realise the significance of their input but for now it falls to me to commend rugby players across Ireland for all they have done on and off the field throughout 2020.

“  
At this juncture I would like to acknowledge the IRFU and their continued support for Rugby Players Ireland and its members.

# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



## NEW BEGINNINGS

Even with several postponements, owing to the amount of games scheduled for our men's sides over the past few months, there was always going to be plenty of opportunities for players.

While it was a mixed few months for Ireland in the rescheduled Six Nations and newly devised Autumn Nations Cup, there was a fresh look to Andy Farrell's side with several players getting an introduction to Test level rugby.

James Lowe, Billy Burns, Shane Daly and Eric O'Sullivan followed hot on the heels of Ed Byrne, Will Connors, Jamison Gibson-Park and Hugo Keenan in making their international bows while Harry Byrne was called into the squad in recent weeks. The past few months were also notable for James Ryan being handed the captaincy for the first time in the absence of Johnny Sexton.



Despite several absentees from their respective PRO14 campaigns, the Irish provinces have made an all-conquering start to the 2020/21 season with many new faces similarly getting a chance to show their hand.

Highlights have included a simultaneous return and debut for David Hawkshaw, who has followed Dan Leavy's lead in overcoming long-term injury. Leavy was named Player of the Match in only his third game back following an 18 month lay-off. Colm Reilly was given the same acknowledgement in what was only his second start for Connacht, proving he is up to the task at professional level. Meanwhile, Ethan McLroy, Aaron Sexton (both Ulster) and Sean French (Munster) managed to notch tries on their respective debuts while Thomas Ahern also scored on his first competitive start! An exciting time!



## BREAKING NEW GROUND

Sadly, it was a frustrating few months for the Irish Women's squad with the cancellation of their outstanding Six Nations tie against France in addition to the postponement of the European qualification tournament. The squad continue to train and will hope to let fly in 2021 from where they left off following a highly encouraging display against Italy in Dublin.

Despite their own rugby being in short supply, the continuation of the men's season meant that our female members remained part of the conversation. Indeed, as Leinster Rugby faced Cardiff Blues at the RDS in November, TG4 broke new ground with an all-female broadcasting team that featured Eimear Considine, Deirbhile Nic a Bhaird and Jenny Murphy. It was the first time in the history of Irish sports broadcasting that a game was fully voiced and analysed by a female panel.



# TRANSITION

While the past few months have given plenty of young players ample reasons to be optimistic, they have also been encouraged to keep an eye on the other side of the tracks.

Following the release of his book 'When the World Stops Watching', we were joined by RTÉ sports journalist Damian Lawlor and several former players for a discussion on the various challenges and opportunities they encountered upon retirement.

Eoin Griffin, Jonny Holland, Marcus Horan, Shane Jennings, Paul Marshall and former Galway hurler Tony Óg Regan all shared their experiences of the transition and stressed the importance of being prepared to current players across the four provinces.

Additionally, Dr Deirdre Lyons and Marcus Horan presented at the Olympic Career Support Symposium on 'Supporting Athletes Before, During and After Athletic Retirement.' The event was organised by Sport Psychology & Mental Support research group of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) with the support of the Advanced Olympic Research Grant Programme of the IOC Olympic Studies centre.



SUPPORTING ATHLETES  
BEFORE, DURING AND  
AFTER ATHLETIC  
RETIREMENT

CAREER  
SUPPORT  
SYMPOSIUM

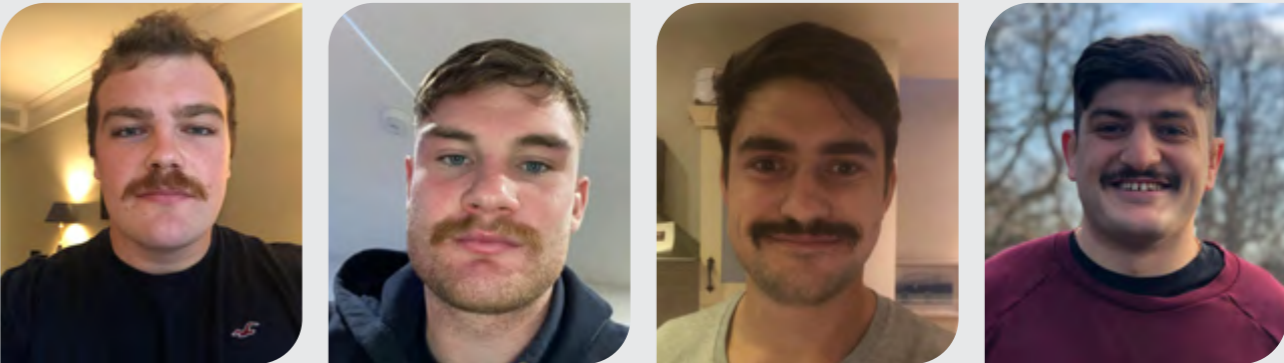
# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

As the Covid-19 restrictions continue to impact on communities across the country, Rugby Players Ireland has been working to support our corporate partners and charitable organisations through a difficult time.

In November, Rugby Players Ireland rowed in behind the #Generation Pandemic campaign. The initiative put a spotlight on Ireland's biggest ever crisis for the country's most vulnerable children and young people who have been more negatively affected than any other group. Almost 100 rugby players from across the country joined other sportspeople and personalities in sharing their childhood photos on social media in an effort to raise awareness of the campaign and encourage funding for the Irish Youth Foundation.

Furthermore, the Tackle Your Feelings team have been busy facilitating a series of wellbeing workshops for companies while several members used Movember once again to raise awareness of men's health issues. Rugby Players Ireland was also delighted to facilitate a relationship between Down Syndrome Ireland and Conor Murray, who becomes an ambassador for the charity.

It has been heartening to see our members take a lead within their communities in helping to get others back on their feet once again. In the months ahead we hope to further enhance these qualities by working with EU Athletes on PROLead which aims to enhance the leadership skills of athletes, as well as volunteers and staff of player associations, by designing and implementing leadership courses at the European and national level.



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND ARE DELIGHTED TO JOIN THE IRISH YOUTH FOUNDATION IN STANDING UP FOR IRELAND'S HIDDEN CHILDREN AND OUR STARS OF THE FUTURE THROUGH THE **#GENERATIONPANDEMIC** CAMPAIGN

**SIMON KEOGH**  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, RPI

# TYF PRO AIMS TO SUPPORT PLAYER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

In November, CJ Stander became the latest player to get behind the Tackle Your Feelings (TYF) campaign. Amidst renewed restrictions, Stander called for people to rally around their loved ones and support one another as Tackle Your Feelings launched TYF Pro as part of the #ImTakingControl campaign. The importance of community was further endorsed by the Irish international's animated video which explores how he felt when he first arrived in Ireland in 2012.

TYF Pro is an add-on to the existing Tackle Your Feelings App and has been designed specifically for members of Rugby Players Ireland (RPI). Through TYF Pro, Players will be able to access sections that cover resources unique to the rugby playing environment: injury, transition and managing life in a high-performance arena are included as well as the existing TYF resources to help maintain their positive mental wellbeing. TYF Pro aims to support the RPI Player Development Programme by pooling a multitude of resources in one easily accessible place and provides information on contacting both internal (to RPI) and external resources for additional advice and information.

Player wellbeing is hugely important to Rugby Players Ireland and recent research carried out by the University of Limerick and administered by RPI as part of a wider survey into Irish athlete's mental wellbeing during Covid-19 revealed:

- 70% of our respondents had good or very good wellbeing scores
- Most players received support from friends and family, teammates and managers
- Emotional intelligence was higher than the team sports norm
- Those surveyed coped with the period through physical exercise, self-distraction and humour
- Almost 90% found this period moderately stressful

**TACKLE  
YOUR  
FEELINGS  
PRO**



“

IT IS GREAT TO SEE OUR MEMBERS BACK UP AND RUNNING, ALBEIT IN RATHER STRANGE CIRCUMSTANCES. WHILE RUGBY PLAYERS ARE THE LUCKY ONES TO BE BACK IN WORK, MOST DID FIND THE PERIOD WITHOUT RUGBY MODERATELY STRESSFUL, IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THAT OUR MEMBERS ARE NOT IMMUNE TO FEELING THIS WAY AND CAN ADOPT NEGATIVE COPING MECHANISMS JUST LIKE ANYONE ELSE. THE VAST MAJORITY OF OUR MEMBERS DO UTILISE THE SUPPORT THEY RECEIVE FROM RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND, FRIENDS, FAMILY, TEAMMATES AND MANAGERS AS WELL AS POSITIVE COPING STRATEGIES AND WE HOPE CJ'S STORY ALONG WITH THE TYF PRO ADD ON WILL ENCOURAGE MORE OF OUR MEMBERS TO DO THE SAME.

Dr Hannah McCormack  
Tackle Your Feelings, Campaign Manager

“

IT IS IMPORTANT, NOT JUST FOR RUGBY PLAYERS, BUT FOR EVERYONE TO RALLY AROUND EACH OTHER DURING THIS FRUSTRATING AND TROUBLING TIME. WHEN I FIRST MOVED TO IRELAND, MY WIFE, COACHES, TEAMMATES AND LOCAL COMMUNITY MADE THE TRANSITION SO MUCH EASIER. TALKING TO LOVED ONES AND FRIENDS, EVEN ON THE PHONE, ABOUT HOW YOU'RE FEELING CAN MAKE THEM MORE AWARE OF WHAT YOU'RE GOING THROUGH AND, ULTIMATELY, THAT CAN ONLY BE HELPFUL.

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# THE GREAT DANE

The Ulster & Irish scrumhalf on a personally momentous year

KATHRYN DANE



**From her Enniskillen home, Kathryn Dane would always hear the studded boots of her classmates making their way to the local rugby club on a Saturday morning. While many of the boys had barely tied their laces before launching into tacklepads, Dane noticed others were a little more hesitant.**

As their freezing fingers poked out from underneath the cuffs of an oversized jersey, they waved yearningly to their parents who merely fumbled with their camera in return. They might have been better served calling out to Dane to take their place.

Even at 8 years of age, Kathryn Dane had a keen rugby sense. Ulster Rugby's European success of 1999 heralded a new wave of popularity for the sport that was embraced by the Dane household. When they weren't at Ravenhill or Lansdowne Road, Dane and her father were on the sideline at Enniskillen RFC.

At other times, the rugby club wasn't really her place. Yet as the din from the rugby club faded each evening, a quick glance across the road confirmed that her stage would soon be set. With only the trees for atmosphere, Dane was free to throw a rugby ball about like Isaac Boss and David Humphreys. Sadly, she didn't know any female rugby players.

"One day we were looking out at the U8s and my dad decided to bring me across to the coaches and ask if I could play," Dane recalls. "I remember it being a really tense situation actually. They'd never had any young girls play with them before and there was definite apprehension but Dad wasn't taking no for an answer. Eventually we got our way and I was able to muck in!"



Already a soccer player of some promise, her ability to read a game and work in a team - rare attributes at such a young age - pleasantly surprised the naysayers. Though she punched above her weight in the physical stakes she was happy to assume the role of little corporal as she ordered her teammates about the pitch.

However, it wasn't long before Dane was entirely dwarfed by her pubescent teammates and removed from the action. Nevertheless, her sporting ambition continued to belie her size. With no apparent avenues to progress her rugby, Dane returned her focus to soccer, representing Northern Ireland at underage level for several years. Yet even in her football kit, Dane's love for rugby remained undimmed.

"When the Irish U18s Sevens programme was starting up and there was a call out for players," the Irish scrum-half says. "I hadn't played in ages other than a bit of tag rugby but it caught my attention. I would have thought about it but I didn't have a great deal of self-belief at that age so somebody must have encouraged me because I landed down to the trial in DCU.

"It was such an intimidating place," she recalls. "I felt completely out of my depth. There were all these inter-county players and girls who looked like Olympic sprinters and there I was in my grubby wee rugby shorts."

Whether she looked the part or not, she certainly performed and duly received an email from the IRFU inviting her to an U18s Sevens tournament in Sweden. The very same day a letter from the NIWIFA informing of her selection for Northern Ireland also landed into her inbox. Both events were due to take place on the same weekend. There would only be one outcome.

Fast forward to 2020 and Kathryn Dane has spent the intervening years unlocking the vast potential many could see in her. Having established herself in Adam Griggs' Irish side during her physiotherapy finals last year, Dane has gone on to secure a grant from the Irish Research Council for a fully funded PhD. She has also landed a season-long internship with Leinster Rugby.

"In the space of a week I got these two massive offers - life-changing, really," Dane says. "I had to contemplate whether I'd be able to perform to the same standard, my best, if I took everything on. Some people might say that you should only focus on one thing if you want to give it a proper shot but it was clear to me that these weren't the kind of opportunities I could pass up.

"It would have been very easy to say, 'nobody else has to juggle all these things so why should I have to put myself under any more pressure?' I also felt I had a responsibility to make the most of an opportunity to get more women involved in sport at an elite, professional level.

"I'm in such a fantastic and fortunate position, but I have my wobbles too!" she adds. "I can sometimes feel overwhelmed by it all. I worry about things and wouldn't have the greatest self-esteem in the world, but I do have the most supportive people around me like my family, my boyfriend John and Dr Fiona Wilson. They have helped me to see what I could achieve."

Dane frequently refers to her support network. Indeed, she believes it is the people around her who have enabled her to flourish. She namechecks the likes of Nora Stapleton, Sophie Spence and Jenny Murphy in helping her to settle in Dublin. As her lockdown buddy, Murphy (alongside their rugby-mad roommates Darragh Mullins and Mark Donoghue) also gets a nod for helping Dane to fine-tune aspects of her game, namely her physical conditioning which has led her to 'feel twice the woman' she was last season.

"Without those friendly and encouraging faces along the way, I'm not sure where I might have ended up. When you're younger you take a pat on the back for granted but I look back now and they're the moments that have stuck with me. The times when referees or coaches give you a nod and say: 'brilliant game, keep it up!'

"I fed off those pleasant moments, when people made me believe what I could achieve rather than what I couldn't, especially as a young girl in sport. As a result, I'm very conscious of what I say to children no matter what their ambitions are. You can build them up or break them with a few little words."

For those who inevitably follow Dane's lead into rugby, the hope is that their safety will be further protected on account of the Ulster player's ongoing research into the tackle area, its characteristics and how it impacts performances and safety outcomes such as injury.

"There has been a large body of work on the men's game so far but I felt it would be unfair to assume that female rugby players are impacted in the same way," Dane surmises. "In fact, in some preliminary research it has already been shown that there are different injury presentations between male and female rugby.

"I thought it'd be interesting to take a closer look and see if we can help to inform policy makers in terms of tackle safety and injury prevention. With better video analysis and data available to us now we should be able to establish whether there are any patterns."



Technology coupled with Dane's own experience should make for a comprehensive study. She acknowledges that she regularly observes a collision on the field with her physio hat on. Further perspectives from Leinster Rugby's medical staff will also enhance her research. Yet despite being complimentary disciplines, there remains a significant juggling act.

"It's something I've grown used to. I remember submitting my finals thesis on the morning of my debut against France last year. Leading up to a game like that everything paces through your mind in terms of systems and plays but when you have your a thesis hanging over you, you have to learn to compartmentalise your time and mindset.

"At first I used it to fend off any self-doubt that might creep in in idle moments, but now I find that switching my focus allows me to pour myself into each pursuit and do them all to the best of my ability. It comes back to those people around me, the people who told me I was capable of these things because without them I'd never have thrown my hat into the ring for these opportunities.

"Some people will always find it hilarious because I'm a wee scrum-half and we're not supposed to know much about tackles or rucks or anything, but I'm used to proving people wrong. The hard yards will have to go in to get there but it's a journey I'm going to embrace."

**"I fed off those pleasant moments, when people made me believe what I could achieve rather than what I couldn't, especially as a young girl in sport."**

PREMIUM HEALTH CLUBS IN DUBLINS  
PREMIUM LOCATIONS

# ICONIC

## HEALTH CLUBS

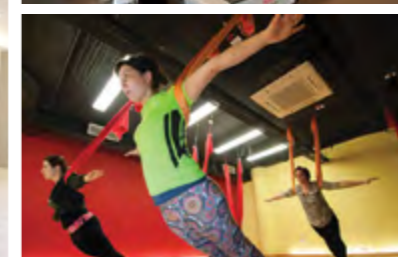
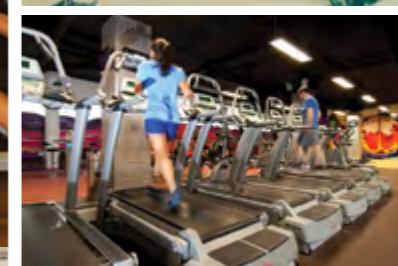
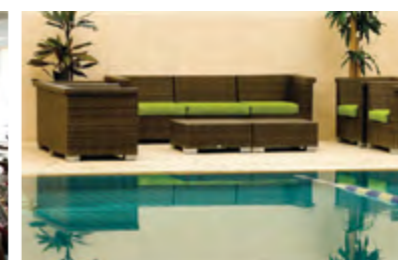
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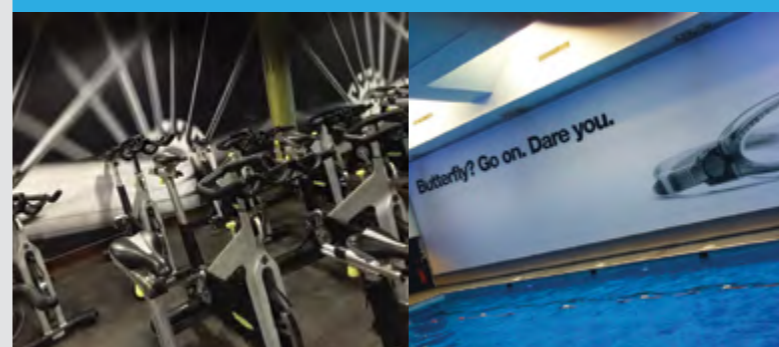
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# WHEN THE WORLD STOPS WATCHING

Damian Lawlor's new book examines how elite athletes cope in the sporting afterlife. Writing in The42.ie, Garry Doyle looks at how some of the rugby contingent have fared.



*When the World Stops Watching* by Damian Lawlor is out in all good Irish bookstores now.

**Donncha O'Callaghan was struggling with his adjustment to freedom. It was a little like that scene near the end of *The Shawshank Redemption* when Red, the character played by Morgan Freeman, was released from prison but couldn't find his place on the outside.**

Inside Shawshank, Red was the go-to man – 'I hear you're someone who can get things' – but all of a sudden he was an old man incapable of filling bags of groceries or filling time. That was O'Callaghan in 2018, months after retiring. In fact, it's pretty much the fate every sports person suffers when the curtain falls and the lights go out.

The walls of a dressing room may be gentler than the towering, concrete ones depicted at Shawshank, yet once the rugby player walks out that door one final time, a form of mental anguish travels with them. "These walls are funny," Red tells Andy Dufresne in the film. "First you hate them. Then you get used to them. Enough time passes, it gets so you depend on them. That's institutionalized."

It was only when he had retired from the game and was back home in Cork, surrounded by his wife and children that O'Callaghan realised he had his own psychological chains to break. "Lack of purpose after retiring? I was actually fine with that," O'Callaghan says in a newly published book. "It was the routine I was missing."

He gives an example. Shortly after he had returned from Worcester – where he'd finished off his career

in 2018 – Jenny, O'Callaghan's wife, told him that her mother had invited them down for dinner. The conversation took place on a Monday; the dinner date set for Thursday.

O'Callaghan picks up this story. "I showed Jenny my weekly plan, showed her where I had food laid out, the calorie intake already counted, and asked did she mind if I brought my own food down to her mam's house?"

"Jenny looked at me in bewilderment and sighed, 'Will you just come for some fucking dinner?'"

O'Callaghan's post rugby life is brilliantly chronicled by Damian Lawlor in his new book, *When The World Stops Watching*, published by Black and White. Across 20 chapters, the author speaks to the superstars and the nearly men, the heroines who made it; the mind-gurus who helped them cope when it was over.

It is meant as a celebration, commiseration, commemoration. In their careers, they shared our hopes as well as carried them.

Now – their playing days over – they are left to carry their burdens alone.

They don't all find it easy. There's Marcus Horan, who now works as a player development manager with Rugby Players Ireland, his job spec centring on helping rugby players with this sporting afterlife.

"I know of at least two fellas, recently retired," Horan tells Lawlor in one of the chapters, "who have dropped out of social scenes simply because they didn't have an answer when people ask, 'What are you doing now?'"

**"I know of at least two fellas, recently retired, who have dropped out of social scenes simply because they didn't have an answer when people ask, 'What are you doing now?'"**



“In their own minds these guys want to be able to say, ‘I am Marcus Horan and I am a player development manager’ or ‘I am X and I’m an accountant’ or whatever. But not everyone earns the status they want straight away.”

It seems something of a curiosity that the better the player, the likelier it is that they will experience a tougher transition to the ‘real world’.

Some miss the game terribly.

“We had a tight bunch at Munster,” Horan says, “but once you are gone, you’re really gone.”

One player – not that long retired – had soldiered tirelessly for Connacht for years, a beacon of light in the dark years. When age caught up on him, he bade his farewells after a game on a Saturday and woke up on the Sunday to see his name had already been removed from the team’s WhatsApp group. Curiously, for this particular player, this was the part about retiring he found the hardest.

For others, it was the loss of camaraderie, the knowledge that the unbreakable bond that forged great days and big wins had disappeared. Once they relied on one another; now they’re just an image, pictured together inside a wooden frame.

“Maybe it’s a mid-life crisis or something but some of us met over Christmas of last year and it was so bloody hard to arrange,” Trevor Hogan the former Munster and Leinster second-row says in the book.

“  
**In their own minds these guys want to be able to say, ‘I am Marcus Horan and I am a player development manager’ or ‘I am X and I’m an accountant’ or whatever.**



“It shouldn’t have been like that. My wife seems to meet up her pals a lot easier than I do. Even on that particular night some lads couldn’t make it in. Maybe it was only then that I realised the group is never going to be as tight as it used to be.”

As it happens, the rugby players Lawlor spoke to have all bridged the gap to a new identity with a fair degree of success, Hogan working in Leinster’s academy; O’Callaghan and Tommy Bowe in media; Horan in his developmental work with Munster’s current squad.

But the grand slam winning prop delivers a warning. “Some lads leave this sport and they feel useless,” he tells Lawlor.

It’s more than just a few. A 2018 survey by Rugby Players Ireland, where 160 former professionals responded, discovered that 54 per cent of retirees felt within control of their new careers and lives within two years of hanging up the boots. Some 23 per cent said it took them up to five years to get to that point.

It’s an issue that is applicable in other sports as well. In 2018, a separate survey conducted by the English soccer body, the Professional Players Association (PFA) revealed that over half those former professionals who responded had concerns about their mental or emotional well-being after retiring.



“Most of these lads are not prepared and, once they go, they have little or no support from the game to which they gave their lives,” Niall Quinn tells Lawlor.

Horan is aware of those pitfalls. Hogan, too, had an IRUPA poster plastered across his wall at home, warning him of what was to come after he hung up the boots. Denial. Depression. Anger. Space. The Future.

If it all sounds scary, there is hope. The current generation of players, Horan says, ‘find it easier to talk freely (about emotional issues) than we did’.

O’Callaghan ended up talking to Roy Keane of all people, as part of a television documentary he was putting together. “I told him that when it came to my exit medical at Worcester, I had been asked to list my occupation and that I had to pause as I didn’t know what to write down,” O’Callaghan says in the book. “I didn’t even get to finish the sentence.”

Keane did so, on his behalf.

“Unemployed,” Keane said.

“There’s nothing wrong with you writing down that you are unemployed on that form. Don’t identify yourself as an ex-rugby player; you are unemployed right now and it’s fine to say that. To say you are an ex-rugby player is not. That’s done man,” Keane told him. “Slam the door on that and get going again.”

O’Callaghan has. He’s the voice of RTE’s Game On; has worked with Bowe on eir Sport; wrote a superb column for The Times; is a brand ambassador for Centra.

It’s a common enough theme, the ex-player finding some form of work in the media. You only have to look at Ireland’s grand slam winning team in 2009 to realise that, 14 of them jumping over the fence to offer an opinion on the game they recently played.

They do other stuff, too. Luke Fitzgerald is a treasury dealer with AIB; Ronan O’Gara is head coach of La Rochelle in France’s Top 14; Jamie Heaslip has invested in pubs, restaurants and a sporting start-up Kitman Labs, while David Wallace is chief commercial officer with i3PT in the construction sector.

From their 2018 survey, Rugby Players Ireland discovered that 94 per cent of past players are in full-time employment. Meanwhile of the current generation of players, 63.5 per cent of Academy players in the four provinces are continuing their studies, with previous research by RPI indicating that 80 per cent of players aged 30 or over have a third level qualification.

Better again, 77 per cent of current players are actively seeking to develop a career outside of rugby. The most striking figure, however, is that 90 per cent of players now believe team management supports them developing a career outside of rugby. Back in 2014, when a previous survey was taken, that figure stood at 55 per cent.

It all sounds perfect. But of course it’s not. “Great players,” the American sportswriter Mark Kram, wrote, “die twice, once as players, once as men.” The God given gifts that allowed them reach a level of privilege later become a curse when the legs slow and the music stops.

Those are the terms and conditions of becoming an athlete.

No one can complain.

If they do, it is because they didn’t bother to read the small print.



“

I found it hard to articulate and get across how my skills would transfer into the working world. Just like I'd no experience of the office, there is also a massive misconception out there about what we do as professional rugby players. Most people consider it a hobby. You need to have other strings to your bow.

EOIN GRIFFIN

“

You don't have any choice. You have to leave it behind you. The team moves on. Your teammates move on. You have to be mature about it. I felt comfortable with it. I wasn't fully prepared, you never are but putting a bit of plan in place and talking to people like your parents, your ex-teammates or Rugby Players Ireland will help.

SHANE JENNINGS

“

It's important to get out and try things. Sometimes ruling something out can be just as good as finding what you're good at. It'll pay dividends later on.

PAUL MARSHALL

“

As rugby players we knew what was to happen in every minute of every day. We knew the game plan and set very high standards in executing it honestly. What struck me most was the amount of bluffers out there - people who talk as if they're running the country! People don't have their lives together as much as you think. You're not expected to have it all sorted either. It takes time.

JONNY HOLLAND

“

I was heavily involved with IRUPA and in driving lads towards preparing for the transition, but I wasn't looking after it myself. I've regrets that I didn't adhere to the advice I was getting. Declan Kidney had a very holistic view but I always tried to avoid him. He was either talking to me about doing some study or telling me I was dropped! I only realised the importance of what he was saying when the end crept up on me.

MARCUS HORAN

“

A successful transition is about three things. You have to be in control of your timing, you have to be able to plan for it and you have to be able to recognise your career.

Everyone handles it differently. There will be bumpy moments along the journey. Sometimes we over-identify with being a sports person. You have to learn to separate from your performance. Who you are is not what you do.

TONY ÓG REGAN



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# LESSONS FROM THE BIG MAN

TYF's latest ambassador on leaving South Africa and integrating into an Irish community

CJ STANDER



**There was a stage when I wasn't enjoying my rugby and that wasn't a good place to be in. Everybody goes through it.**

By the time I realised, it was already too late. There had been a few weeks of bad performances and doubts began to creep into my head. I began to resent the game and I always said if that happened I would take my boots and leave.

I'm lucky to have a great support structure around me. At that time I had conversations with my wife and family that I didn't think I'd be having at 29.

Lockdown helped me to remember how much of a privilege it is to play rugby and be fit. I'm not the big part in this game - the game is the big part - but as long as I can add value to my teammates, the young players and the supporters, I'm happy.

A lot of it is about being kind. Axel taught me that. We became very close when Pete was out injured and I became captain at Munster. They were tough times for both of us because we weren't performing. Axel and I both felt the pressure.

Back then I spent a lot of time in his office talking about rugby and about life in general. We had a great connection and I think he saw something in me.



He'd often send me a message out of the blue. Sometimes I didn't know I needed it, but it could change my day completely.

It was hard walking by his empty office in those first few weeks. Even now I still think he's going to walk into the room. I often think about him.

He was a class act and a class man. He left a void that will never be filled. His knowledge and love for the game was unmatched, but his main concern was always for his players and their families.

We need to be kind to each other, that was the greatest lesson I learned from the big man.

I'm a social person so I miss the social aspect of rugby at the moment. I miss the dinners with the opposition after a game or having a few drinks here and there.





In Irish camp we were assigned friends to sit with at dinner. If we wanted to talk to someone else, we had to shout across the room! It makes it harder for me because they couldn't understand me even before I had to wear a mask!

Walking down to the pitch for training is a great time to get a few chats in. The social part is very important to keep your head in check and to check-in on other guys too.

It's very easy for someone to feel alone at the moment. Whether you're at home or in camp, it's very easy to shut the world out and binge on Netflix. Nobody knows what goes on behind closed doors.

It's very important to reach out and build good relationships with your support structure. For me that's my wife and family. I always make sure those connections are strong. If something is on my mind I will always pick up the phone to them no matter where I am in the world.

You need to play your part too. Someone might just need a smile, hug or a 'good morning' to put them on a different route for the day. Anyone can be vulnerable at some stage in their life and they need to be able to talk about it.

One thing I've always noticed is how the Irish community are very good at asking how you are. They look after each other.

Leaving my family behind in South Africa was a big decision for me. I thought it was the end of the

world. It's nice to look back now at how I dealt with it and how everyone supported me through it.

Even if they didn't like me or the idea that a South African was playing for Ireland, they put things to one side to ensure I was ok or acknowledge that I'd had a good game. They still do.

Irish people worry more about the person than the player. I guess they know that if you're in good form as an individual, you will do better at the day job!

It's not easy for anyone to be vulnerable in the workplace. Mine happens to be male dominated, macho and full of craic. It's not often we talk about our feelings but in a squad of 40 personalities, people tick in 40 different ways and not everybody is going to be on top of things.

I'm glad all the protocols are there so that we can play at all. It's important for us as players but it's even more important for the nation, to have something to look forward to at the weekends, to have something to talk about.

Because people need to talk to each other. The world is a difficult place at the moment and plenty of us don't feel good. Even if you feel great, it's always worth checking in. You won't feel on top form all the time.

Be kind to yourself and other people. That's what the big man taught me.

CJ

“  
**Leaving my family behind in South Africa was a big decision for me. I thought it was the end of the world. It's nice to look back now at how I dealt with it and how everyone supported me through it.**

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# TAKING THE POSITIVES

The Irish Sevens captain has been making the most of the Lockdown

**BILLY DARDIS**

**It struck us as Billy Dardis spoke to his Bearing Point colleagues as part of a Tackle Your Feelings webinar, that the Irish Sevens captain has never actually met any of his co-workers. Having joined the firm in June, Dardis has been retained beyond the requirements set out by his MSc in Management Consultancy course but all communication throughout that time has been virtual.**

Despite speaking at length about the importance of being in tune with people and understanding their triggers, Dardis remains at a remove from the Bearing Point office. Nevertheless, the company has been suitably impressed by his application to his role within the People & Strategy unit.

"I was just saying on a call the other day that I'd love to get into the building and really get stuck in," Dardis begins. "It's nice to know they have been pleased with what I've done but I think I could also bring so much more in terms of sharing what I've picked up through rugby or just by having people feed off my energy and willingness to get involved."

"Anything I've done up to this has been quite personable in nature," he notes. "It seems mad but what strikes me on our videocalls is that I have no idea of the height or posture of the person I'm talking to! Those physical things and their engagement on a personal level can tell you a lot about someone and what makes them tick."

By now, Dardis is quite accustomed to the restraints brought about by Covid-19. More than most Irish sports, the Sevens game has been dealt numerous body blows by the global pandemic. Following several months of frustration and uncertainty, Dardis was accepting of the decisions that had finally been taken to cancel the remainder of the World Series and postpone the Olympic Games.

Though it hasn't been a seamless acquiescence, Dardis has sought to take positives out of the situation and encourages others to do the same. He points out that he has been able to spend more time with his girlfriend and his family, while he has also learned to prioritise his own wellbeing by grounding himself through yoga and meditation or by simply taking walks in the Kildare countryside.



On the business end meanwhile, doors have been opened through the diversion of his energies. When it emerged that the rugby calendar was being cut short, Dardis contacted his course co-ordinator at UCD Smurfit School who advised that he should consider an early placement and thereby free his calendar next summer to concentrate on Tokyo. Bearing Point were happy to oblige.

"I wouldn't call myself a go-getter," Dardis points out, "but I've learned that if you don't ask, you won't get. It has worked in my favour because working with Bearing Point has allowed me to keep my head in the here and now. There is still a huge amount of uncertainty in terms of Sevens so I've learned not to look too far ahead in those terms anymore."

"I'm trying to stay fresh so I've flipped it a bit and am seeing my rugby as a hobby for the moment – a chance to get away from my work and study. I'm not dwelling on the cancellations and instead I'm seeing it as a massive opportunity to get stuff done and have my ducks in a row before the inevitable end to my playing career comes to pass."

While Dardis has been familiarising himself with the working world, his former teammates have been earning plaudits with their performances for Ireland in the rescheduled Six Nations fixtures and subsequent Autumn Nations Cup. Will Connors, Hugo Keenan and Shane Daly have all seen Test action in recent months.

"It's been brilliant for us as a Sevens squad because from our point of view it shows that the system works and that we are churning out good players," the Irish trio's former captain admits. "For instance, a lot has been made of Hugo's workrate. Yes, he has always been a bit of a workhorse, but the demands of Sevens rugby pushed that capacity on. In some of those Irish games it seemed like he was everywhere!"

"Sometimes you can't help but feel a little jealous when guys get the break that you'd love to have had but Hugo, Shane and Will are such good guys who have come through so much that it's not possible to begrudge them. My only disappointment was that nobody could be at the games. I mean, as mates we were all so proud of them. Can you imagine how their families felt?"

While Connors, Daly and Keenan will be hoping for several more years of rugby at the highest level, Dardis remains pragmatic about his own future in sport. The lifespan of a Sevens player can be shorter while the recent academy tournament run by the IRFU was another reminder of the array of talent in the country. It will keep Dardis on his toes.

"I'd be interested to hear how the academy lads found it," he muses. "I'm sure they realise now that Sevens is much harder to adapt to than they'd realised but it was good to stoke our competitive juices again. A few definitely fit the mould of a



typically sharp and quick Sevens player, then you had others who are clearly going to be capped in the PRO14 this year.

"There just seems to be an endless amount of talent coming through the provinces. I guess they are being exposed to better standards earlier and earlier in their careers. As a rugby fan it's good to see them coming through the ranks but as a rugby professional you do wonder about the price that some of them will have to pay to get ahead."

"I get a bit of slagging for being the father figure in the Sevens squad," he admits. "I wasn't great with the study myself but I've realised the importance so when lads come into the team I usually get onto them to make sure they have things going on. I've seen plenty of lads go into the academies thinking they're made up and assume they're on their way to a senior contract and 15 years of earning at the top level. That's the exception rather than the rule."

"When I was at Leinster I used to look up to someone like Eoin Reddan. He was busy in the background keeping the non-rugby side in check, yet he nailed it on the field. In the end his transition was relatively seamless which was really admirable and set a good example. It showed me that I should be looking after myself and that it was ok to do so."

"I'm not spouting a defeatist attitude. I have aspirations to go to the Olympics and have Ireland become a top tier World Series side. I'll do all I can to make that happen. However, the reality is that no matter how good you are at rugby, one day you will have to find a job."

"I read an interview with Eoin McKeon recently about his experiences of the interview process and having to accept that he had to go in at a lower entry-level than he might have anticipated. Ultimately, people in business aren't going to bring someone into a managerial role because he or she happened to be a good rugby player. Rugby caps are not the currency of the office."

# THE GOOD DOCTOR

Dr Angus Lloyd on why professional rugby should not be a barrier to an education

ANGUS LLOYD



**Sitting in his scrubs, Angus Lloyd puffs his cheeks as he brings another long day in surgery to an end. After a brief pause to gather himself, he removes his facemask and takes other utensils from his pockets. His weary limbs are aching but he chooses to ignore them as he reaches for his gear bag.**

His days are nothing like what he had become used to. And yet, so much of it is the same.

"On one level there's no comparison," Lloyd tells us, having left Connacht Rugby in May to qualify as a medical doctor from the Royal College of Surgeons (RCSI) in Dublin. "On another, they go hand in hand: the pressure, the mental challenge, the interactions.

"As much as I enjoyed that challenge, when push came to shove, the most important thing for me was getting my degree finished."

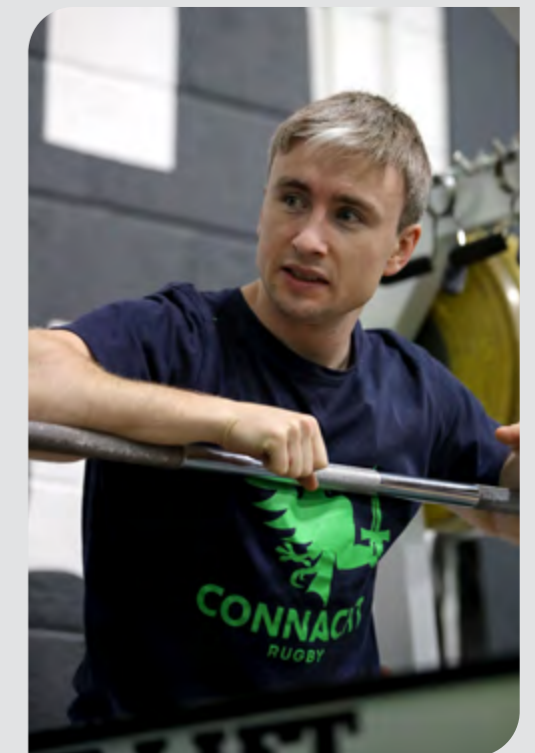
Thrust onto the frontline at the height of the pandemic, Lloyd has had little time to reflect on a nomadic rugby career that took him across the country and back again on an almost daily basis. Indeed, throughout that time, his studies were facilitated by the sides with whom he played – an indication of the high esteem in which he was held.

Andy Friend was one such admirer. Despite being aware of the Dubliner's extensive commitments, Friend sought him out and offered him a deal to return to professional rugby following brief stints with Ulster and Munster. Desperate to take up the offer yet unwilling to postpone the final year of his studies, Lloyd set out a plan and had both RCSI and Connacht Rugby meet in the middle.

"Friendly just gets it," Lloyd says. "His own life experiences have enabled him to appreciate the bigger picture. He takes a keen interest in what was going on with people away from the game and is a believer that if things are going well off the field, they will go well on it. He knew giving me some leeway was important.

"I never felt that people begrudged me for that or felt that I was getting special treatment," Lloyd notes. "If anything, I'd like to think I was respected for what I was doing. I still put in the hours and never missed a pitch session. If I missed a gym session in the afternoon it was because I'd done it at 7am and was already on my shift in hospital.

"I really believe that where someone has aspirations for elite sport, they should always be given the avenue to pursue other interests because that's where they'll be heading. Personally, there was an escapism to it all too. I didn't have the time to dwell on either. I got away from one to do the other and avoided being consumed. Unfortunately, that's what happened to me in Limerick."



It was following a 2016 trial game for Munster that Lloyd signed his first professional contract, albeit with Ulster. Yet, just a few weeks later Anthony Foley was shorn of options and put in another call to Lloyd who had only been capped once by the northerners.

Having postponed his studies at RCSI, Lloyd was desperate to make the season count. While he kept things ticking over with a postgraduate course, his energies were almost entirely focused on his game. However, already some months into the campaign and without a senior appearance, Lloyd was beginning to lose faith.

"You can end up going through the motions when you're not a first-choice player and sadly holding out for someone to get injured to get your chance. I went from months without being involved and losing complete interest to getting a shot near the end and doing quite well. Frustratingly, it was too little too late and with James Hart coming in I wasn't offered a contract.

"Everything weighed quite heavily on me during that season at Munster. Anthony Foley had just passed away too and it became very easy to be consumed by all things rugby. Just like how you can lose the run of yourself when things go well, you can get caught up in it all when it's going badly and I started obsessing over small things.

"People tend to forget about the guys who aren't on the teamsheet every week. They're arguably under as much pressure as the guys who are. They are lads who go into training every day thinking that any mistake is going to put an end to your hopes to being in the team at the weekend. Imagine putting yourself under that much strain?"



Although disappointed to be out of the professional game once again, a run of matches towards the end of the season meant Lloyd was relieved to have finally proven to himself that he could cut it at senior level. He returned to RCSI with renewed focus having turned down approaches from abroad. Medicine remained his ultimate goal, for others rugby would always be the final destination.

Yet when Andy Friend came calling 18 months later, the chance to show his hand again proved too hard to ignore. However, this time he was determined to carry his medicine studies through with him upon moving to Galway. It was a costly way of doing things but helped by the Goodbody Personal Development Bursary, he was ready for the challenge.

“Doing flat-out medicine while playing rugby is not possible without concessions and sacrifices. It was a challenge, no doubt about it. I remember going to Moscow with Connacht last year and we were given time to explore, see the sights and enjoy the local coffee. I had quite a bit of work to do so I stayed in my room to study.

“It was a little tough. In another world I would have loved to embrace it all and give of myself in every way. Unfortunately, the demands of my course meant it simply wasn't possible. There are moments I reflect upon but now that I have the degree, I don't regret my choices. Those little sacrifices add up.”

He recalls several conversations with teammates over the years in which he found himself pleading with them to pursue other goals. While some have since scaled the heights for club and country and will argue justification, he knows of several others who have been released in recent seasons with nowhere to turn.

“To be honest, I was taken aback by how little some lads had going on,” he admits. “What are the odds of carving out a proper career these days? To me it's such a gamble. Rugby players are young lads who have so many opportunities available to them through the like of Rugby Players Ireland and yet they choose to shut them off.

“Why did I bother? Well, like any young lad playing rugby had always been a dream of mine so I wasn't going to let it go easily. If anything this whole pandemic has taught me that I won't be giving rugby up anytime soon. It plays such an important role in my life, irrespective of the level.

“I've a lot to thank it for. It exposed me to some of the best minds in the game. People who are used to dealing with high pressure situations, people who can communicate effectively, lead and influence others. Some of those who I've met through rugby have left the greatest impression on me.

“I used to be very nervous before games. It didn't matter if it was the Champions Cup or Clontarf J1s. I think it's the times when you're most vulnerable that the real leaders are made known to you. They know what to say to you in those moments. Jarrad Butler was incredible, Conor Murray and Felix Jones helped me out a lot, while Keith Earls was always a good man for a quiet word before a game.

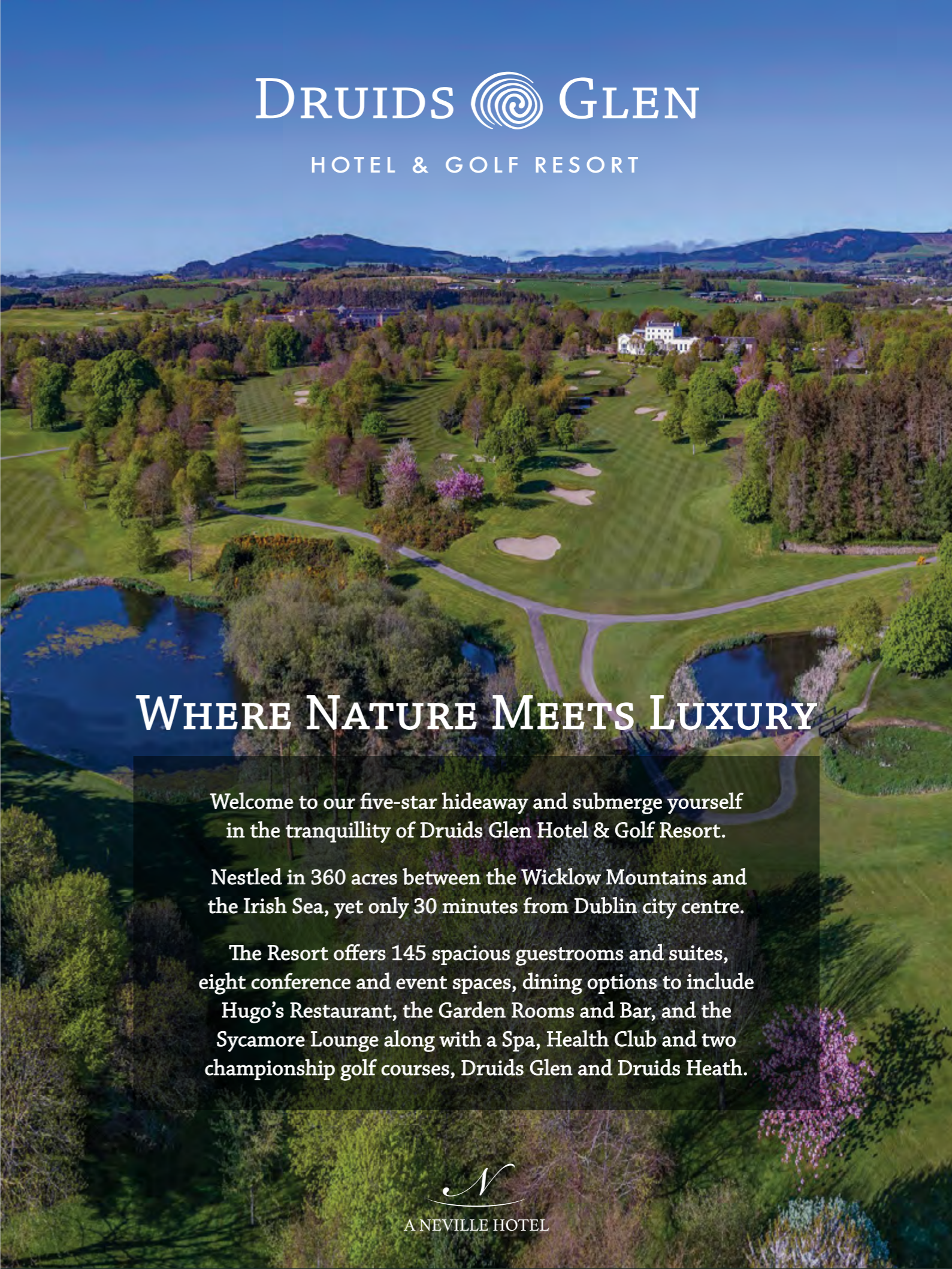
“They are small moments, but they are impactful moments and I have them in my current career too. Patients are extremely vulnerable. They don't know what they're facing into and when I go to have a quiet word, I'm always brought back to those moments before a game and what I'd like to hear.

“While you can't compare medicine with rugby, I found it complimented my sporting career and vice versa. I wouldn't have got to where I am without the other.”

“**Doing flat-out medicine while playing rugby is not possible without concessions and sacrifices. It was a challenge, no doubt about it.**”

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# SHINING A LIGHT ON RECOVERY

Ulster & Ireland player creating a home from home on his travels

WILL ADDISON

**Dedicated athletes are always seeking an edge. Looking in from the outside, many people fail to recognise the lengths that elite sports people go to find their point of difference. Reading, listening, researching, it all forms part of their preparation. Only now, with the proliferation of materials in circulation, the competition to find the edge is ever greater.**

Like many of his peers, Will Addison often finds inspiration in the experiences of other athletes. Travelling from Belfast to Irish camp at Carton House ahead of the 2020 Six Nations, he found himself listening to a podcast with LeBron James. The discussion explored various aspects of the NBA star's preparation and touched upon the importance he places on his sleep.

"There are certainly different challenges you face when you're continuously travelling for games and training," Addison concedes. "Those challenges might be small by comparison to those of NBA players but their ability to play at such a high level despite their heavy travel schedule was fascinating. Listening to the podcast with LeBron, it was clear to see the focus and importance he puts into maximising his sleep no matter where he is.

"When you're on the road, you have to adapt your habits. The lack of continuity is obviously a bit of a hindrance to a good night's rest, so in an effort to make his environment consistent from hotel room to hotel room, LeBron brings a little bit of home with him. Lighting a candle before bed seems so simple, but when someone like LeBron identifies it as having performance enhancing benefits, you sit up and listen."

This new found interest in candles came as a bit of a surprise to Will's partner Emma Sharples. However, Will's belief in a candle's alternate benefits was both intriguing and hard to ignore. As a lover of candles and a fitness enthusiast, Emma was ideally placed to combine her passions. Having graduated from Loughborough University with a Masters in marketing and management, she was keen to put her skills to the test.

"Most people wouldn't associate candles with blokes and performance," Emma begins, "but seeing Will travel up and down to camp and making sure he packed his candle, I began to wonder whether there could be more to them than just a nice scent!



"I always try to my best to support Will and his career, so considering the niggles and injuries he's had I began to read up on aromatherapy and essential oils. It was clear that consistency is important for healing and recovery. Creating a home from home for Will whilst combining the health benefits of essential oils was part of the initial goal."

Just 11 months since plans first started taking shape, Recover Scents officially launched in early December. Initially, Recover hit the market with four unique aromatherapy candles with an emphasis on improving sleep, relieving stress and anxiety, restoring motivation and repairing muscles. Already the candles have quickly been moved on from the initial research and development laboratory/kitchen in the couple's home.

"The spring lockdown restrictions proved to be a motivator to starting the business," Will says. "To begin with, Emma works in Northern Ireland's tourism sector which was badly hit, while I was getting through my rehab at home. Emma was placed on the furlough scheme which really gave her the time and opportunity to develop the company and product further.

"The other motivating factor was witnessing the effect that the lockdown has had on people's mental wellbeing. I think what Rugby Players Ireland and the Tackle Your Feelings campaign have achieved is helping to open up the conversation in this space. Players might still be internal beasts, but we are starting to pay more attention to it.

"Whether it's doing home workouts or taking the time to ground themselves, we are all looking for ways to escape for a few moments. It has been



great to see people taking pride in their own health and wellbeing and we felt that the product was well placed to help them both physically and emotionally during these uncertain times."

Emma was methodical in her approach. Following her initial research, she successfully applied to Northern Irish small business support initiatives such as Go For It and Kick Start. These programmes provided her and other budding entrepreneurs with access to mentoring support. The business plan began to put a bit of commercial structure around what was otherwise proving to be a creative enterprise.

"We've only a small kitchen and at one stage Emma was backing herself to do all the production!" Will tells us. "We bought a makeshift candle kit but Emma also hijacked a few kitchen utensils. I'd be having spag bol and I'd be tasting a bit of a candle! I was lucky to survive!"

Emma jumps to her own defence. "I had to experiment!" she exclaims. "The objective was to identify the candles and essential oils that lend themselves best to sports recovery. I also used paraffin free soy wax and other more holistic ingredients. Then I had to figure out how these ingredients mixed together! The consistency wasn't always perfect in the kitchen, but once I was happy with the blends I found a local candle manufacturer who could help us take it from there.

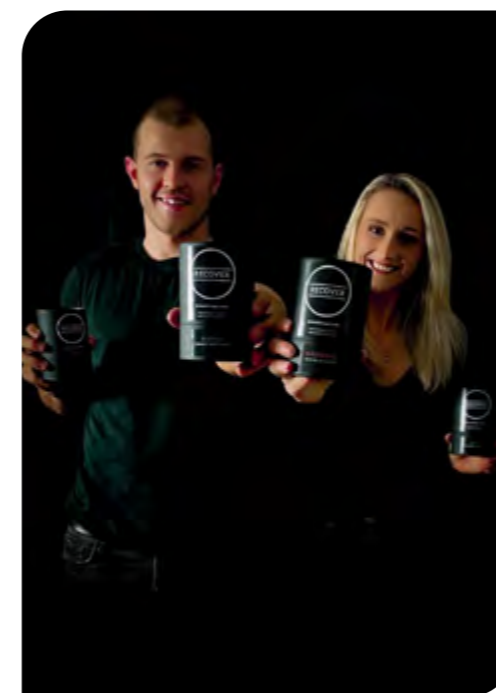
"We also had a few Ulster players and their partners do some smell testing for us. They gave some valuable input into our branding too. Aesthetically, I wanted the candles to have a masculine look to allow us to reach into a slightly different market. The aim was to create not only a luxury candle but one that had specific physical and emotional benefits."

With more products currently in development, Recover Scents is set for a big 2021 from both a commercial and individual perspective. Back at work with Visit Belfast, Emma is busy developing ideas in her spare time. Meanwhile, Will is making good progress following an injury setback that has thus far precluded him from rugby action since the sport's return.

"My recovery is going really well," he tells us. "I'm almost at the stage where I'll begin running soon, which is great. I've been very well looked after by the medical team at Ulster with some great input from the guys with Ireland. Of course, we have candles burning everywhere to help me along!

"Heading into the New Year, my goal is to get back to full fitness. Everything else will follow on from that. We don't know what the rugby landscape will be like in 2021, so I don't have target dates in mind at the moment. Once fit, I hope to get back into the team at Ulster and play week-in week-out, with the ultimate goal of getting back into the Irish picture."

Both Will and Emma are doing all they can to ensure that happens.



# YOU HAVE TO BE WHO YOU ARE

The former Connacht Rugby player is acting on his passion

PETER CLAFFEY

**Throughout Galway, the hulking figure of Peter Claffey can often be observed furiously scribbling away in his withered notebook. There's an intensity to it all as his pen keeps pace with the internal musings of his brain.**

"If I don't write down everything I experience in those moments," the budding actor tells us, "then I'll lose something in the sketch."

Though stopping and whipping out a notebook in the aisle at Tesco inevitably draws bewildered gawks, Claffey is unfazed. His art relies on moments of inspiration regardless of where they occur. He's an actor now, not a Connacht Rugby player. What people make of how he goes about his business is of little concern, he has a job to do.

"In his podcast, Blindboy was speaking about artists starting out and he said that once they start making stuff for other people they're screwed. Social Media is the best example. It's easy to fall into its trap just to please people and see how many likes, shares or follows you can get.

"Building a presence is obviously important in today's world, I just think you can see through anything fake. You have to make stuff for yourself, stuff you enjoy and find passion and value in. It makes it more authentic and you get a better result because of it.



"Once I put my sketches out into the world, I don't give a shit. It doesn't matter what people make of it. Like, a lot of people don't like dark humour and if I had to filter half of my stuff through my family, they'd probably call the guards on me! It's just my thing."

Following a year in Dublin's Bow Street Academy for Acting, Claffey's talents stretch far beyond comedic roleplays. He is a keen musician, thespian and dramatist. Yet, despite his multi-faceted skillset he wonders whether he was pigeonholed throughout his rugby career.

"I've been an attention seeker my whole flippin' life!" he candidly admits. "I was the jester in any team I've played in. I got a kick out of it and I really think some of my play-acting and skits helped to bond those squads. I look back on different teams and they were the special moments. They brought lads closer.

"On the other hand, not every squad I played in needed a joker. I see that now and respect it. I can't help thinking that maybe there were times when it held me back at a team on the up like Connacht because the lads might think 'hold on, this lad doesn't really give a shit about what's going on here.'

"But I did care. I worked my ass off and tried to prove myself every single day especially when it became clear that I was never going to be on the teamsheet for the weekend. That was tough. I definitely thought there was a cap in me. The fact I didn't get it was the hardest part of being let go last year. That's just the way the cookie crumbles..."

In Claffey's time at the Sportsground, Connacht Rugby made enormous strides. Following their PRO12 triumph of 2016, rugby was thrust into a new sphere in Galway. Suddenly the squad boasted several Irish internationals and many more with international aspirations. Unfortunately, Claffey was a victim of their new found success.

"There's a lot of phenomenal players and people in Connacht these days," he points out, "it just so happened that plenty of them were also in my position! You look at Ultan [Dillane], Quinn [Roux] and Gavin Thornbury, I mean, I couldn't have lost out to better men so I've no complaints. If anything, being surrounded by them helped mould me into a better person.

"That's not to say it wasn't a bit shitty having to leave. Nobody likes being shown the door but it doesn't leave a sour taste or make me resent my time at Connacht. People always ask me if there is anything I'd change if I went back. There isn't. You have to be who you are."

Although he doesn't hold any regrets, Claffey acknowledges that while he thrived in the physicality of rugby, he may have left the



technical and mental side to chance. It's a curious admission given how he has developed such a keen eye for both in his current guise.

"Acting is much more technical than you'd think but the thing I had to work on hardest was actually being 'in the moment.' By that I mean finding the point where you forget you're being filmed, when you're so enthralled by the scene that you forget everything else until they call 'cut!' When that happens it really translates to the camera. You can see it.

"I had to find my own way of being in the moment because while you're in a similar state of flow in a rugby game, it's completely different. When you're in the rugby zone, you're suppressing your emotions. If the referee makes a bad call or a teammate makes a mistake, you have to curb the emotion. The logical side of the brain has to take hold.

"By comparison, I have found that the best stuff I have come out with in my acting is when I find that flow, be in the moment and I let the emotions rule me. You let them run their course. It's a very personal experience."

Due to graduate alongside his class at a screening of their showcase sketches before several casting directors and agents back in October, Claffey had to settle for a virtual graduation in December. Back in Galway now, he is busy caring for his elderly grandparents and playing rugby for Corinthians where restrictions allow. However, acting remains the priority and the majority of his time is spent writing and shooting sketches.

"It's a difficult and small industry to navigate, especially in Ireland. Looking to 2021, it'd be great to be signed up and have some element of security but it's not the end of the world if I don't. I'll keep plugging away and learning my trade anyway because they say the worst thing you can do is wait, wait and wait for opportunities.

"It's an ideal time to be creative. This is what I want to do. You have to keep the faith!"

To be or not to be is not in question for Peter Claffey. He's figured that one out.



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# #GREENMILE

**The Rugby Players Ireland Foundation was established to provide support for struggling players and their families. As a registered charity, the Foundation assists applicants in the form of financial aid, help with medical treatment, rehab equipment, counselling and education.**

To round out the year, the board members of the Foundation (Simon Best, Shane Byrne, Ronan Loughney, Ruth O'Reilly and

David Wallace) sought to team up with ALONE Ireland and Age NI in tackling loneliness and isolation at Christmas, especially after what has been such a difficult year.

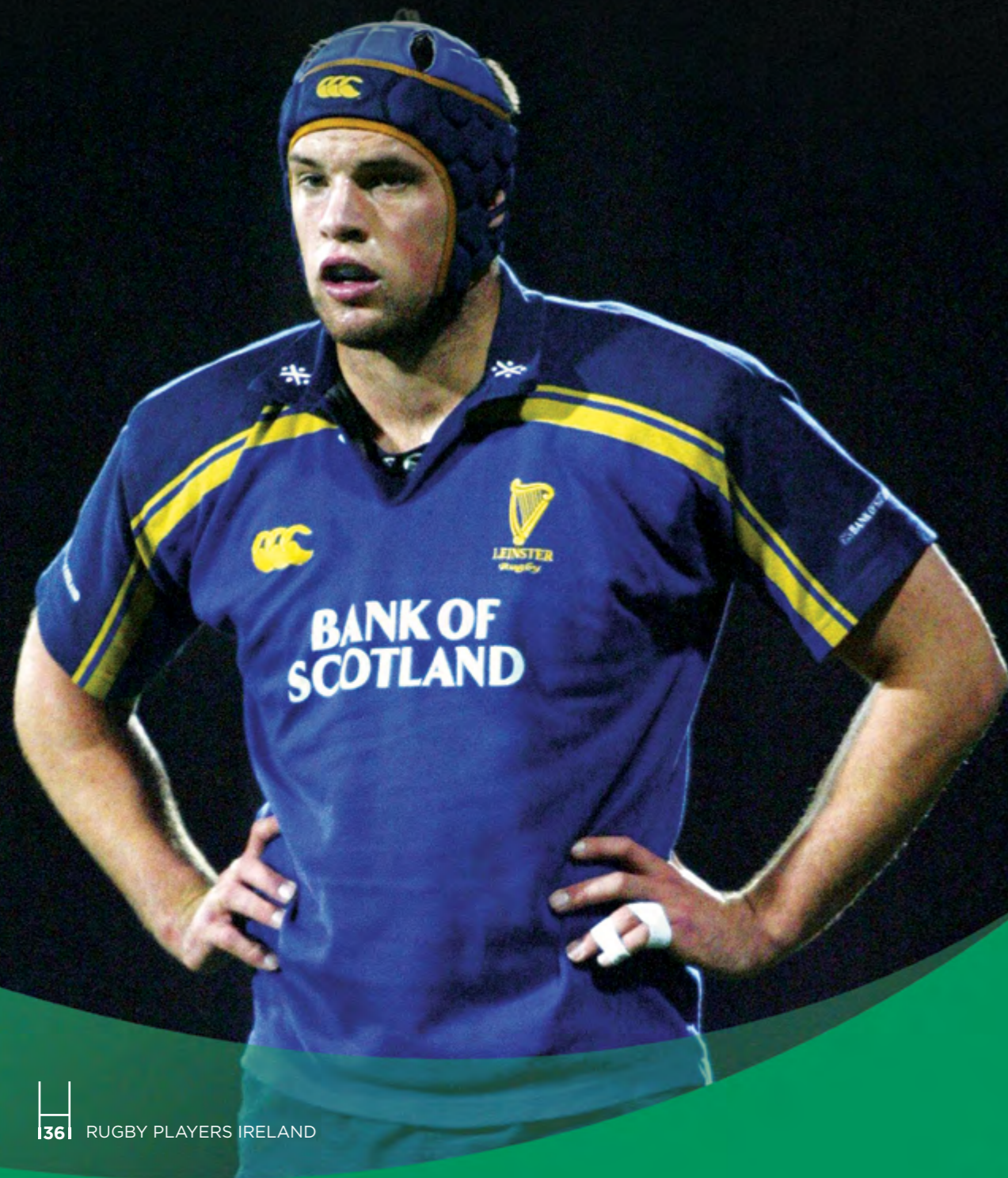
It is hoped that the event will be one of many to come over the next year as the Foundation seeks to help those who are vulnerable within the rugby community and beyond. Keep an eye out!



# PAINTING THE FULL PICTURE

Bressie on his experiences as a professional rugby player

NIALL BRESLIN



**Listening to Bressie, the last embers of an innocent youth flicker through the mind. The cinders are from a pre-Covid world of course and reignite memories of landing into a mobbed student bar to acquaint with eyes met across the lecture hall over the previous week.**

The best meeting place on campus was generally a live gig to see a band that was rapidly descending in relevance or one that was moving quickly in the other direction. Falling into the latter category, The Blizzards were always a good bet for a good night.

Their upbeat pop-punk made for a welcome distraction from any awkward chatter, while there was no guilt in timely jaunts to the bar. The sweat-strewn lead singer held the gaze of his many admirers, not least the athletes in the room who marvelled at his size and simultaneously considered how sturdy the stage was.

Though he already commanded their respect, the aspiring sportspeople in the crowd would have been suitably impressed to learn that Bressie's 6'5 frame had stomped across GAA and rugby pitches throughout the country. Indeed, just a few years previously he had been lining out in a Leinster side that was finding its feet in the professional world.

Despite the flowing taps, there was always plenty of aspiration in the student bar. Budding doctors, engineers and accountants mingled with ease as embittered students of the humanities sized them up. Yet despite their respective notions of grandeur, all bowed to Bressie who seemed to have figured it all out.

And yet, it was not all they would have made it out to be.

Writing in his book 'Me and My Mate Jeffrey', Bressie recalls a non-descript match-week, and the poisonous thoughts that came with it. Eager to escape, he began head-butting the concrete wall in his bedroom until a dull ache and dizziness brought about a sense of relief. Injury felt better than the mental torture of feeling completely unable (yet knowing that in the eyes of others he was fit) to play.

"Bressie was an incredibly physical guy," former Leinster coach Matt Williams recalls. "He was a bit like Trevor Brennan and we loved it. A hard dude. Sadly, when I think of about him I also remember Dave Fagan (Leinster Rugby coach) telling us before training that Bressie hadn't turned up again. We couldn't work it out.

"We rated Bressie as highly as Jamie Heaslip. In our ignorance we considered the obvious things like a lack of motivation or drinking. He just didn't seem to care. We were trying to work it out on our side, while on his side he was full of fear and all those difficulties."

In an effort to hide what was truly at play, Bressie made an artform of making excuses. At their weekly medical check-ups, he often had a new ailment to report. His numerous wisdom teeth became famous but Bressie had no qualms about phantom complaints. His prerogative was to keep his issues off the table, hide the Xanax in his system and avoid contemplating what they might really think.

**“We rated Bressie as highly as Jamie Heaslip. In our ignorance we considered the obvious things like a lack of motivation or drinking. He just didn't seem to care.”**





“When you’re in a professional set-up it can be an intense experience, especially for a young player,” Bressie recalls. “Before I signed with Leinster, I was at the U19 World Championships in Australia. I spent several weeks sleeping on a balcony in our Sydney hotel, because I didn’t want my roommate Gary Brown see me have these experiences and panic attacks that I was dealing with.

“When we got back to Ireland I found out I got a contract and then basically, we were playing Connacht the next Wednesday and I had no break. You need a break when you’re playing at that level, especially when you’re not used to it. In that game I got this dull feeling in my groins. I was one of those lucky players who never got injured but it felt like my body was disconnected from my legs.

“I didn’t know it at the time but it was the beginning of the end for my career, not just physically but there came with it a mental inability to cope. It was my body telling me to stop. I ended up demolishing painkillers and anti-inflammatories for a number months and then I found out I needed surgery. I remember one of the coaching staff walked into the dressing room and said to me ‘what a waste of a contract you are’ in a jokey, arsey kind of way... but it buried me.”

Whilst Bressie acknowledges that much has improved in the mental health and wellbeing space, namely through Rugby Players Ireland and the Tackle Your Feelings campaign, he believes there is some tokenism in other organisations. As the popularity of the game has increased, he believes rugby players have a key influence on Irish society. However, growing responsibilities off the field, coupled with the extraordinary pressures on it, make the profession an extremely demanding one.

“It’s almost 20 years ago now, but I look at what I was going through and the added pressure of people going: ‘why is he on the Leinster team? He is shit!’ I still feel that if I had said something, at that point, I might have been the person who let players open up and have these conversations.

“I always say Leo Cullen was the best player I played with even with all the superstars we had in that squad. He had something in him. I remember a game in some shitty backend of Wales in the Celtic League. I hadn’t slept for about a week. Kick-off came and Leo just screamed at me to run. I was asleep.

“He walked up to me on the pitch and goes: ‘Are you ok?’ and I went: ‘I don’t think so man.’ I couldn’t get into a conversation with him because I would have got my arse handed to me by a Welsh No.8 but I remember he was the first to ask. I hope that he still has that intuition.”

Following his hard-hitting podcast, Bressie has since opened conversation with Rugby Players Ireland in an effort to finally give something back to the game he chose to walk away from. Despite some bitter memories, he still admires the game and believes his exposure to that high-performance environment was a privilege.

“The worst part actually came when I felt, finally, I was getting closer to what I knew I could do. We were in pre-season and I was flying. I was fitter, faster, stronger and more skilful than I ever was. I finally felt that my time had come and I was ready for it.

“We were playing tip-rugby at the end of a session and I took off.... ‘Bang!’ It felt like somebody shot me in the leg. It turned out to be a serious rupture in my quad that stemmed from the fact I hadn’t rehabbed properly after a hernia. Johnny O’Hagan, all 5’3 of him, had to carry me to my apartment and I lay there for a week eating snack boxes and realising it was over.

“I thought I was failing and ultimately failed everybody because I didn’t get to show what I was potentially capable of because I was effectively broken by the time I got into Leinster. A second tier of darkness came over me.”

In setting his sights on a musical career, Bressie ultimately saw the light again. Even in his early Leinster days, the Mullingar man found new life in song. Williams recalls Bressie snatching a guitar from the chagrined grips of Denis Hickie and Victor Costello. 15 songs later, Costello turned to Williams and said he was glad the youngster could play, for his sake.

Yet despite his burgeoning musical career, it nevertheless took Bressie several years to shake off his identity as a ‘rugby player.’ He discusses his experience of the transition and how it can affect people. How running out in front of 80,000 people is the closest thing to the gladiatorial battles in Ancient Rome without risking a head chop.

How the highs and adulation of professional sport become distant memories when a kid is your boss in the office. Bressie also references both Christophe Dominici and Dan Vickerman, the Australian lock who took his own life in 2017.

“Modern sport is all about winning,” Bressie states. “It’s immensely competitive. The higher the stakes the more we are blinded by its perceived importance. As important as sport may be, it is not more important than the lives of those who are lucky enough to play it.

“This perception that they are beacons of perfection, invincible pillars of strength and power, may look good in some ad campaign but it doesn’t paint the full picture. Athletes are trained how to get faster, how to get more skillful, more powerful, agile and fitter but many are not trained how to deal with the inevitable adversities that they will experience.

“Vulnerability and adversity is part of the human condition. The hardest falls are the ones that teach us most about ourselves. We need to make real space in elite sport for athletes to share these experiences and support them. They have such an incredible influence, they are role models, heroes.

“The new generations need to be empowered to understand that we are all human and all face shit in our lives and many of us need help to face this stuff. I look back now on my time as a pro rugby player and how it could have been different. I have no regrets. I have a simple message: we are all human, we feel it all and at those times when we are shattered and fragmented, this shared humanity can hold us together.”

“The new generations need to be empowered to understand that we are all human and all face shit in our lives and many of us need help to face this stuff. I look back now on my time as a pro rugby player and how it could have been different. I have no regrets.”



# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND WELLBEING SERVICE

## What is the Rugby Players Ireland Wellbeing Service?

The Rugby Players Ireland Wellbeing Service provides our members with access to services which will help them look after their mental health and wellbeing. Whilst it is not an emergency service, players and former players are signposted to specialist supports via the Mental Wellbeing Services network. This network comprises a large number of experienced counsellors, psychotherapists and psychologists with expertise in a range of areas and based throughout Ireland.

## What do players need support for?

The issues and challenges our members face are varied and not always solely rugby related. Our Player Development Managers, who act as a conduit to the service, note that players have sought support for stress and anxiety, burn-out, adjustment and relationship difficulties, bereavement, addictions, coping with long-term injury and depression.

## Who can access the service?

All members of Rugby Players Ireland can access this service; provincial teams from academy to senior, Irish Women's XV, the Irish 7s squad, past players and overseas players.

## How does the service work?

Once there is engagement with the service, swift action is taken. The player is linked with Dr Mark Smyth, our lead Clinical Psychologist, who contacts the player to identify the main issues and assess the appropriate support required.

Depending on their location, Mark will make recommendations on which counsellor or psychologist would best suit the players' needs. The recommended professional will then be contacted by Rugby Players Ireland and connected with the player seeking assistance. Once a player is linked with their counsellor an appointment will be arranged.

The smooth running and administration of the service is coordinated by Aoife Lane, the Wellbeing Services Manager. She ensures that the confidentiality of the player is upheld (by assigning ID numbers to all cases), that players are referred quickly, and she ensures the player and the counsellor are working well together. In addition to Dr Mark Smyth, Aoife is also supported by Sporting Chance, a UK mental health charity who specialise in support for current and former professional athletes, who oversee the governance of the professional network and ensure that our systems and structures are clinically excellent and comply with GDPR guidelines and professional standards.

## How much does the service cost?

Players are allocated 5-6 sessions per season which are funded by the Rugby Players Ireland Foundation. Once these sessions are complete, the counsellor will recommend whether the player will require further sessions. If further sessions are needed, these will be self-funded. However, where the player is faced with financial difficulty, an application can be made to the Rugby Players Ireland Foundation for further funding.

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