

# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND  
SPRING 2021

**GARY  
HALPIN**

1966-2021



#BEKIND  
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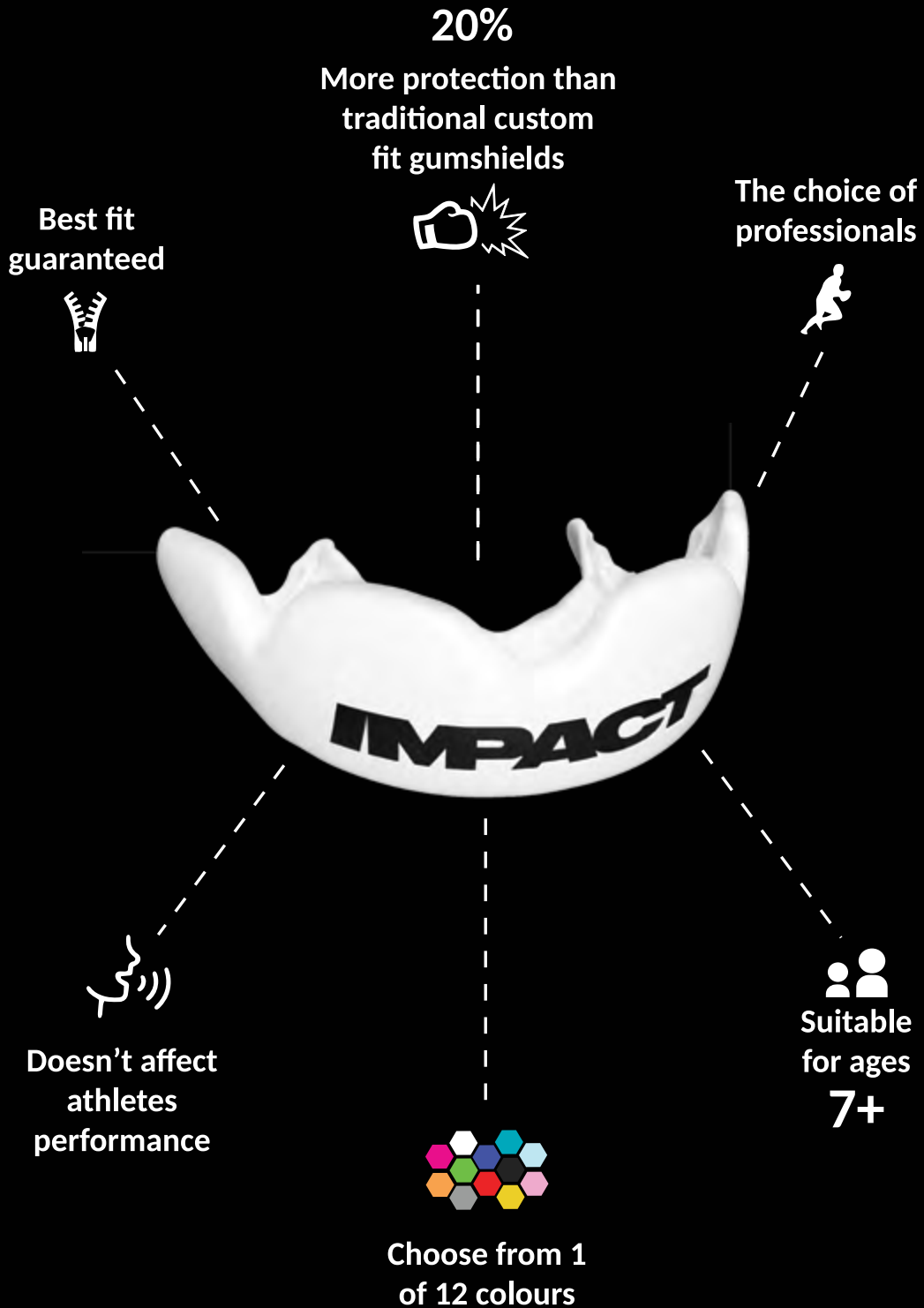
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RUGBY PLAYERS  
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# CEO ADDRESS

SIMON KEOGH





**It's hard to believe that it is a year since the Covid-19 strain first landed in Ireland. I still remember sitting in the office with the staff at Rugby Players Ireland as Leo Varadkar addressed the country and thinking it might only be a few days before we'd be back again. Instead, it has been 12 months filled with unprecedented challenges.**

Thankfully, enabled by the support of the collective player group and our hard-working team, Rugby Players Ireland has been able to navigate many of these issues with assuredness and decisiveness. Our partners have also been instrumental in the way they have proffered advice from their own experiences of lockdown.

As an organisation we always strive to do the best by our members. The best way in which to achieve this is when all sides come together and work as one team. Over the past year we have been encouraged and emboldened by the active interest that our stakeholders have taken in the direction of the players' association.

If anyone was to typify the importance of teamwork, Gary Halpin would fit the bill. As has been widely echoed across the rugby community both in Ireland and in England, I was saddened to learn that someone who brought so much joy and energy to life could be taken away so soon. I've heard Gary be referred to as one of life's great enhancers and I couldn't agree more.

I played alongside Gary as he was enjoying the final years of his storied career and I was setting out on my own. Yet despite the gulf in experience,

Gary saw no difference between the young lads out to make their mark and the old wily operators likely to put their own stamp upon them. Both were his teammates and were treated equally. Indeed, his greatest respect was reserved for you as a human.

Gary was a tremendous character. A ferocious competitor on the field, he was always the first to shake hands and share a joke with his opponent at the final whistle. He was greatly respected by all within the rugby world for the manner in which he drew people together and for making each individual he engaged with feel like the most important person in the room.

Gary's death has served as a reminder to me about how lucky we are to be part of the Irish rugby community. It was through rugby that I had the great privilege of meeting him. He loved the sport and all the people in it yet having also experienced the game in its amateur days he never lost sight of life outside the game and the things that really matter.

While the wider rugby community was part of Gary's great family, those closest to him meant the world to him. I wish to extend my sympathies to his wife Carol and his children, Bentley, Leonie and Lenka. Gary's memory will live long in the fabled history of Irish Rugby.

Gary's death has also prompted us to acknowledge that even from behind closed doors, the world keeps turning outside. From assuming we'd return to the office in a matter of days to playing out an entire season in empty stadiums, it has been a whirlwind. Injuries have still been happening and contract deals have been expiring.

By now, many players will have learned where their immediate futures lie. Whether that is in rugby or not, there are many opportunities available to you to make a success of whatever direction you ultimately want to go. That's where Rugby Players Ireland can help. Just remember that to have played professional rugby in Ireland is no small achievement and you'll always be able to fondly recall these days.

Yet while rugby will always be important to us all, the experiences of lockdown and the past few weeks has taught us to appreciate the smaller things too, especially the people beside you. Your teammates.



# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



## ON THE FIELD

The 2020/21 season has been a remarkable test of the professionalism of our members. While women's rugby fell foul to the escalating coronavirus crisis at the turn of the year, the men's game has moved into 2021 with limited impact. Indeed, thanks to extensive logistical and operational work, rugby has been coming thick and fast for both our men's provincial sides and men's national team since last October.

While the compacted season presents undoubted challenges, it has also been an example of the dexterity of our sport. Despite an unfortunate start to the Guinness Six Nations, Ireland finished out the Championship in good form. Meanwhile, Leinster Rugby and Munster Rugby contested the PRO14 Final before they recommenced their Champions Cup journeys. In finishing top of their respective PRO14 Conferences, the finalists beat off the advances of Ulster Rugby and Connacht Rugby who both enjoyed strong PRO14 campaigns.

The 2020/21 campaign has also seen many new faces enter the fray. Following on from several debuts in the Autumn Nations Cup, Ryan Baird and Craig Casey have become the latest fully fledged Irish internationals. On the domestic stage meanwhile, plenty more have shown they are up to the task prompting great excitement for the years ahead.

Unfortunately, our women's side have been unable to kick on in a similar guise as yet. While training has continued throughout the lockdown, the amateur status of most



female players posed problems for the organisers of the Six Nations. A revised schedule of fixtures in April will now be the primary focus for the squad this year as the Rugby World Cup has been postponed until 2022. Next year will also see the introduction of an exciting global calendar for the women's game.

Our sevens squads meanwhile are beginning to look forward to a shortened World Series schedule. The condensed 2021 Series includes five women's and four men's rounds, with the addition of a further two potential men's events under discussion.



## SPREAD THE LOVE!

As charities and businesses seek to rebuild, many have come to Rugby Players Ireland to seek the assistance of our membership. Most recently, Rugby Players Ireland were delighted to help facilitate a relationship between Shane Daly and the Irish Heart Foundation.

Shane linked up with the well-known charity ahead of Valentine's Day to raise awareness of their 'Heart Card' campaign in support of people who live with heart conditions and are at an increased risk during of Covid-19.

We are in regular contact with numerous organisations who are keen to work with our members, however for any such relationship to work, we believe that a connection should be built upon the initiative of the player.

# THE ACTION PLAN

Over the past few weeks, Billy Holland and CJ Stander have announced that they will be retiring from professional rugby at the end of the current season. The Zurich Contribution to Irish Society Award winner in 2020, Holland began his career in 2007 and has gone on to become the second most capped player in Munster Rugby history. Stander meanwhile has become one of the country's most loved competitors.

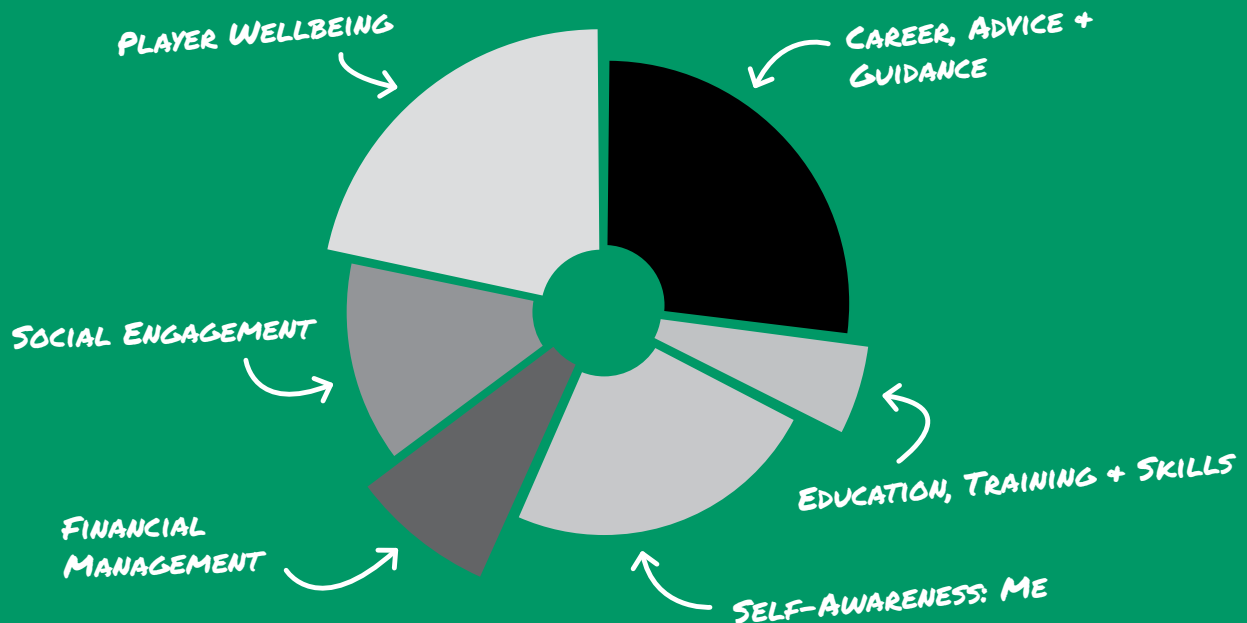
While both players have made plans to move on from the game on their own terms, the nature of professional rugby is such that there will be some who won't be afforded a similar privilege. In late 2020, Rugby Players Ireland ran a series of Transition Workshops for our members using the experiences of former players to highlight some of the challenges they faced in adapting to a new identity.

While players who prepare for retirement from sport rate their transition more positively, solely focusing on retirement planning can be a barrier to engagement in personal development? activities for many, especially younger players.



Therefore, conversations around personal development also focus on maximising the opportunities that a rugby career can provide, so that players can take advantage of their time in the game.

Based on international research and evidence-based practice, the newly devised Player Development Action Plan focuses on developing players' resources in key areas. The skills, behaviours, competencies and relationships acquired during their sporting careers can ultimately lay positive foundations for their lives beyond sport.



## LYNNE CANTWELL

Former Ireland international Lynne Cantwell has taken a new high-profile role with South Africa Rugby, becoming the union's first High Performance Manager for Women's Rugby.

Capped 86 times for Ireland and a member of the 2013 Grand Slam winning team, Cantwell's appointment comes as part of what SA Rugby describe as a re-focus of its approach to women's rugby.





TACKLE  
YOUR  
FEELINGS



# #BEKIND

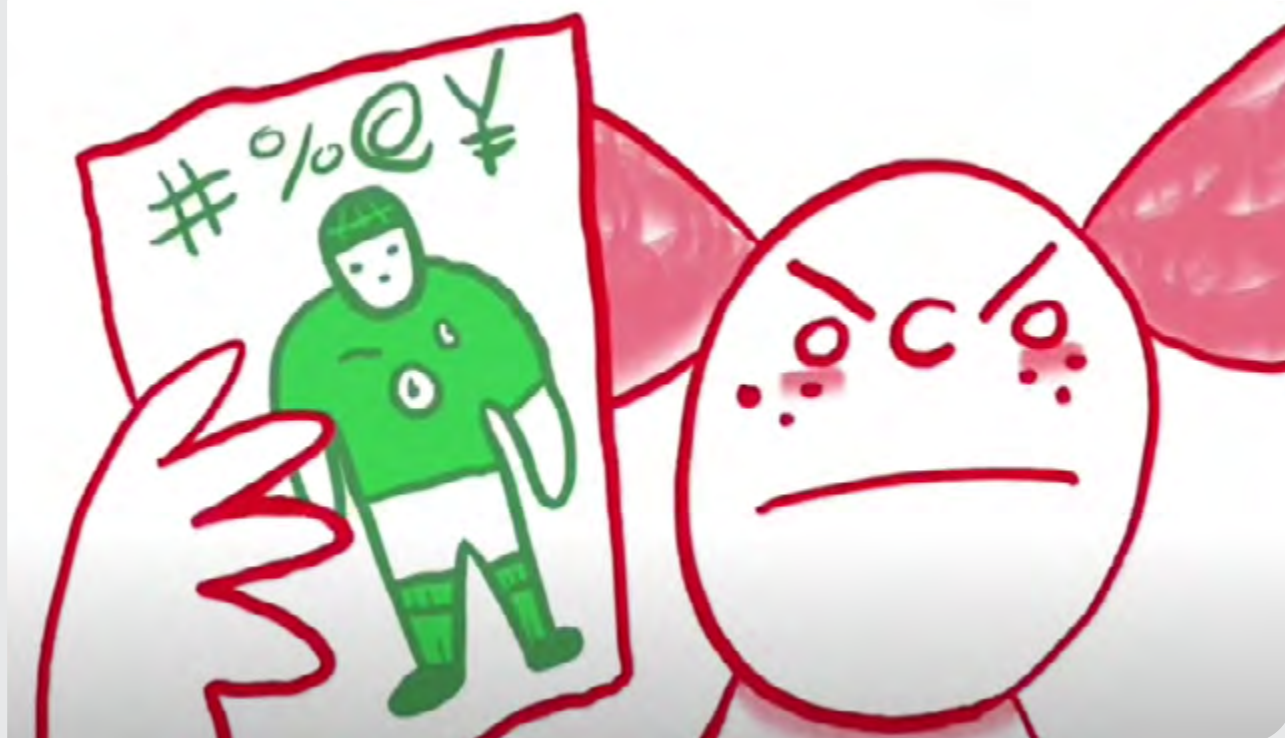
Throughout the Guinness Six Nations campaign, Tackle Your Feelings released a series of animated videos to highlight online abuse. Using the theme of reverse role-modelling, the script for each video was compiled using comments directed at Irish rugby players and ultimately poses the question whether any adult would be happy with a child speaking about the players in the playground as they do online?

As we faced into the final round of the Championship, Irish International and Harlequins Rugby player Anna Caplice (see page 20) and former British and Irish Lions, England and Harlequins winger Ugo Monye linked up with TYF to encourage people to #BeKind online.

At a time when fans are desperate to return to stadiums, many have decided to turn to social media to enhance their matchday experience and feel a sense of community. Social media has the power to bring people together, especially when we have to stay apart. But we are also aware of the harmful and negative effects that social media can have on the mental health and wellbeing of all its users.

Unfortunately, some profiles have taken this too far by directing toxic abuse towards players, coaches and media personalities during the course of this year's Championship. Athletes, match officials and coaches are in the spotlight and are often the target of social media abuse, but they are not the only ones who receive it.

By holding up rugby and the abuse directed at members of the rugby community as an example, we hope that people will adopt more positive behaviours online across the board. Indeed, for the final rounds of the Guinness Six Nations, Tackle Your Feelings tackled online trolling by responding to toxic tweets and focusing in particular on those tweets in which rugby players are tagged.





Speaking about his support for the campaign, former England & Harlequins winger Ugo Monye said:

**“As a pundit and as a player before that, I’ve been tagged in numerous tweets and posts, and some of the content has been really shocking. It’s time to tackle this behaviour and recognise how damaging it can be for wellbeing. Whilst the content pieces for this campaign were scripted using abuse directed at Irish players, I could write the same scripts for England and my former teammates. I’m delighted to be lending my support to The Tackle Your Feelings campaign urging people to #BeKind because we need to take action and be proactive around trolling in rugby, wider sport and society as a whole.”**

Speaking about the campaign Tackle Your Feelings Campaign Manager, Hannah McCormack said:

**“Whilst social media can be a very positive force, as we have seen particularly during the Lockdowns, rugby players have been tagged in some toxic abuse on social media and through DMs. By showcasing some of the content that has been directed at players and calling out trolling behaviour during the final stages of the Guinness Six Nations, we believe we have taken an important step in building awareness around online trolling in rugby, and its negative impact on mental wellbeing. With the Tackle Your Feelings campaign, we are urging people to be kind online.”**

Anthony Brennan, CEO, Zurich Ireland said:

**“We at Zurich are proud to support this latest initiative from Tackle Your Feelings which aims to highlight how online trolling effects our mental wellbeing. We all know social media can have both positive and negative impacts on our wellbeing but in recent weeks we have seen some unacceptable, unnecessary, and hurtful commentary on social media directed at players, pundits and across the rugby playing community. Of course, people are entitled to express an opinion about on-pitch performance, but many of these comments cross the line between criticising a performance and making personal attacks. We hope that Anna and Ugo’s experiences will highlight why people need to be kind online and think before they tweet on all topics, using the rugby community as a real life example.”**



# INTER NATIONAL RUGBY PLAYERS



## STAFF APPOINTMENTS

Sene Naoupu and England's Rachael Burford have joined the staff at International Rugby Players. Naoupu, who has 38 caps for Ireland, takes up the position of Head of Strategic Projects and Research with Burford assuming the role of Head of Women's Rugby.

From New Zealand, Sene Naoupu has played for Ireland since 2015 at both 15s and Sevens and has experience in sports strategy consulting with unions and federations. She also represents players on World Rugby's Women's Advisory Committee and is relishing her new role with the global player's representative body.

"I've worked with Omar and the team on several projects before and I'm really looking forward to this new role," said Naoupu.

"I will focus on a range of projects, including the global personal development program for players, establishing minimum standards for players in emerging nations and I'll look at ways to better assist retired players around the world.

"I'll also work with Rachael on the growth and commercialisation of the Women's game. It's a hugely exciting role at a time when rugby is developing as a professional sport and we need to look at new ways to face those challenges."



## RWC EXTENSIONS A 'FAIRER DEAL' FOR PLAYERS

International Rugby Players has welcomed a "ground-breaking" development that will see three and four-day match turnarounds removed from the next Rugby World Cup.

Represented by its recent appointees to the Rugby World Cup board, Brian O'Driscoll and Melodie Robinson, the global players body promoted the need for rest periods to be extended in light of the ever-increasing physical demands in the game.

Conversations with Rugby World Cup led to a schedule that will now see a minimum of five days' rest between matches at the pinnacle event, resulting in player welfare benefits as well as greater competition integrity.

"This is a very positive move for the game and one which has been endorsed by all our member player associations from across the globe," said International Rugby Players CEO, Omar Hassanein.

"I also applaud all Rugby World Cup board members and World Rugby management for supporting this move and for adapting the schedule accordingly."

Former Lions and Irish captain O'Driscoll said: "The game has become too physical and competitive for short turnarounds. All teams have found it tough, particularly those without the squad depth of the major nations. This is a positive step forward for the game and further demonstration of how International Rugby Players and World Rugby can work together towards better outcomes".

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# GIVING IT ALL

Once a Munster flyer, the winger has found a  
new home at Connacht Rugby

ALEX WOOTTON



**Ordinarily, integrating into a new club also means integrating into an entire community. In Galway, most new faces to the region are welcomed by a few pints laid on by the regulars in O'Connells on Eyre Square. A couple of local yarns are told before the player is left to enjoy the place howsoever they please.**

Alex Wootton will have been at Connacht Rugby almost a year by the time he is afforded that particular privilege. Indeed, he has yet to sample the vibrant atmosphere of Shop Street or wander along Salthill promenade making small talk with the natives. Having moved from Munster Rugby, Wootton looks forward to the day he gets to shake a hand and be taken in as one of their own.

While the Macclesfield-born winger acknowledges the unique charm of life out west, he has had to put his own embracing of it on the back burner. The idyllic setting of Wootton's rented home in Barna has shed new light on the potential to experience different worlds, but he never strays too far from why he landed there in the first instance. He has a job to do.

"A few people have said to me that it was a brave move which is an insight into the Irish psyche about moving between Irish clubs," Wootton begins. "Certainly, it was a little different for me having been brought up in England but I could see that... I wouldn't say it's frowned upon, but I can see where a stigma attaches. You're from one province and no other province.

"I became a little guilty of the same thought processes myself. I was at Munster for 8 years and I became very narrow-minded in terms of looking beyond Limerick and Thomond Park. I put all my efforts into the cause there and felt that because I'd started some big matches, it was where I was meant to be.

"It was when I was coming back from injury and, let's face it, I wasn't getting games, that I realised I had been putting my sole focus into re-establishing myself at a club that had moved on a bit in the time I was out. Clubs can't afford to stand still. I had to try and remove myself from the situation.

"I came here to play rugby. My end goal is to play for Ireland. When those objectives began to stall, I had to make myself see that there are other ways to get to there."

Wootton's prolific form this campaign will have undoubtedly moved him up the international pecking order. Andy Friend has furthered his cause by categorically stating he should be involved at a senior Irish level. While Test honours evade him for now, Wootton's displays have been rewarded with a two-year contract at Connacht. He can now set his sights on the next steps in the ladder.



**I became a little guilty of the same thought processes myself. I was at Munster for 8 years and I became very narrow-minded in terms of looking beyond Limerick and Thomond Park.**

"I'm thrilled to have committed to an exciting project in Connacht and set up a life here. I've been commuting from Limerick where my partner and I and our two dogs are very settled. It will be a difficult to leave our community because we feel very comfortable there. In other words, it would have been very easy to stay at Munster.

"I've known some players who have found that comfort zone and even if they aren't playing, they're reluctant to leave it. They're happy to live week by week, happy with what they've done. If that's the way they choose to play it, fair play to them. They aren't necessarily chasing anything.

"I was never unhappy but not playing put a different slant on things. I moved to Ireland to see where the journey could take me, see how far I could go. Even when I wasn't playing, I was quite content but it was increasingly obvious that the situation was moving in a direction I needed to take control of. There was always an underlying acceptance that I'm here to push on."

Wootton finds it strange that it is Connacht who are reaping the rewards of lessons learned at Munster. He notes that his breakthrough season in 2017/18 was a steep learning curve while subsequent stints of injury rehabilitation prompted plenty of reflection. From lining out against Europe's elite to the outer cusp of the Munster squad, Wootton was forced to reconsider his true purpose in the game.



"From a very young age I wanted to be a professional rugby player so when I had a run of games a few seasons ago there was a sense of relief. I had sacrificed a lot to get there. I'm very much a family guy so leaving home to move to a different country was a big step. I felt justified in a way.

"But then there was also sense of 'well, is this it?!"

"I had to regather my wants and needs. That was even before injury and some days of doubt crept in. You need to have the fuel and determination to drive you out of that space and onwards. I learned a hell of a lot about myself as a person at Munster and yet it's at Connacht where those hard yards are paying off."

There's plenty more besides his neighbours that Wootton will miss about Limerick. He has made many lifelong friends in red and leaves behind the ultra-professional set-up at UL, arguably one of the best in Europe. He also has a close connection with Garryowen stemming from how the club welcomed Wootton and his family with open arms.

"I've always loved the community feel of a rugby club," Wootton says. "Over the past few years the game has become increasingly sophisticated. Clubs have world-class training environments and I felt the amateur ethos or community spirit of the game was something that professional rugby was trying to leave behind. Thankfully, I get those community vibes at Connacht."

"It's a very different beast to Munster," he continues. "As you come through the gates at the Sportsground each morning, you see people walking their dogs on the racetrack. You pass by the sheds. There's a rustic feel to the place. It's a world away from some of the places you go to."

“

**From a very young age I wanted to be a professional rugby player so when I had a run of games a few seasons ago there was a sense of relief.**

"I think of that game against Racing 92 earlier in the season. They're a club that have been building a stable of the best players in the game to play in that amazing stadium. To have brought that game so close in Paris, it showed us that we're not far away at all. That excites me.

"It's the people and the camaraderie that make the difference. You saw it with Leicester City in the Premier League. You saw with Connacht in 2016. We might not have the financial clout of certain teams, but we have an enviable character. It's not what surrounds you, it's what's within you."

Having known several players from his days playing for Irish representative sides, Wootton figured the Connacht group would be a welcoming bunch. Nevertheless, for anyone starting in a new job there is always some trepidation as to how you might fit in. Especially having come in from a rival side.

"I'm not a shy person so I don't necessarily find going into an unknown environment to be that intimidating. If someone didn't like me, yeah it might piss me off, but it wouldn't affect the reason I was there. I know that's not going to be the same for everyone.

"In any walk of life there's the potential to face those issues. You can't let it affect your purpose. I am very tunnel focused. I have goals and targets that I want to tick off and everything around that is outside of my control.

"I put all of my cards out on the table and everything led to Connacht. It was this or nothing as far as I was concerned. That's why I want to give it all I have."



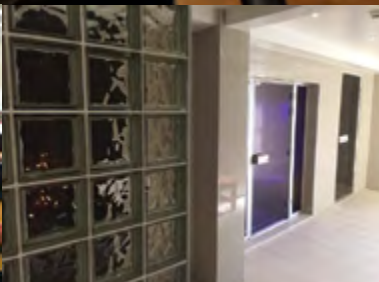
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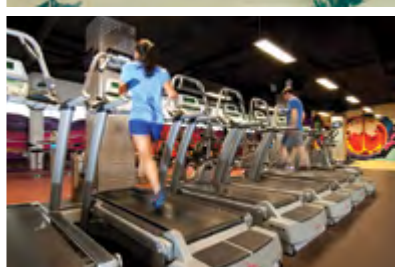
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# TO GARY!

Trevor Brennan pays tribute to his former  
teammate Gary Halpin

GARY HALPIN





**I remember the first time I met Gary Halpin. I'd just come back from a tour to South Africa where I'd won my first caps for Ireland. I came back into the Leinster squad and Gary had joined after a few years in England.**

Victor Costello filled me in on this lad who threw the hammer at the World Championships and gave the All Blacks the finger at the World Cup, so I knew he'd be a character.

"Ah, Trevor!" Gary says to me when we first met, "you're the lunatic! Punching and firing lads up! Sure, you shouldn't be playing rugby at all. You should be locked up!"

As most people know, I wouldn't be one to hold back. It didn't take much for me to tear into someone back then. There'd be punches and sparks flying.

But Gary got away with it. Gary always got away with it.

Gary was unique. He was the kind of person who'd walk with kings and queens and never lose the Gary touch. You could put him in a room with Nelson Mandela, Diana and Mother Teresa and he'd have something to talk about. He's probably up there telling them stories right now!

He was a bit of a father figure to that Leinster squad. The professionalism was a big change for us all. I sometimes struggled to motivate myself for



all the training sessions but I looked forward to seeing Gary because he had a way of reading people and saying something that would change the course of your day.

When I came home from school as a kid, the mother would always have a sandwich ready for me and the brothers. She'd ask us how our day was and we'd tell her the good, the bad and the ugly. Even as grown men we used to get home after work but it was harder for me to put a gloss on things with stitches, a broken nose and dislocated shoulders.

There was always a story to be told over the pot of tea and no matter what, Gary was always in the middle of it. My family never met him but they felt as though they knew him well. Mam would always start by asking how Gary was and a good yarn always followed. We left the house in good form, ready to take on the next day. How he made people feel really sums him up.







I first played rugby at Barnhall and Gary's cousins were a big part of the club there. Derek 'Big Red' Halpin was one of them and when he rang at 7am a few weeks ago I picked up the phone and asked him who in the club had died this time.

"It's our Gary," he says to me.

I was in a daze for a few hours after that call. I had to ring Big Red back to make sure it was true. I couldn't believe it. I rang Liam Toland, Malcolm O'Kelly and Denis Hickie. We all agreed that if anyone deserved a send-off, it was Gary.

I was home a few years ago for the funeral of another great man, Anthony Foley. I stayed in Limerick with Peter Clohessy. We dropped into a few pubs, met others as we went. As sad as we were, we sat around telling stories, laughing and singing songs. It was our way of saying goodbye.

This time we've all had to reflect on it all from wherever we are in the world. Victor Costello is stuck in New York, Gabriel Fulcher is in Canada and I'm here in France. We've all promised to get home when all of this lockdown craic lifts and get together. That'll be important.

When you get to our age, you start to see more years behind you than in front of you. Our generation of rugby players has seen a lot of loss recently: Gary, Axel, Jonah Lomu, Joost van der Westhuizen, Chester Williams. It's a wake-up call for us all. Don't take anything for granted.

One of my favourite memories of Gary was when I got my ban and finished playing in 2007.

**“ Gary was multi-talented. He was very well educated. He could sing songs and tell all the stories. It turned out he was a great cook too! ”**

Gary called to say he was passing through Toulouse with the family for a night. He said he'd drop by to say hello once he'd checked into his campsite.

He reversed up my driveway later on and asked to plug in his van. 'Jesus Trev, that campsite isn't what I was expecting. Not sure we fit in!' he says to me. It turns out he'd parked up in a Roma Gypsy site. We went and collected his trailer and he stayed for a week.

Gary was multi-talented. He was very well educated. He'd take out the guitar and tell great stories. We found out he was a brilliant cook that week too! We had to invite the neighbours because we knew he'd create a lot of noise but by the end of the week they were queuing up to join us. He entertained the neighbourhood. That was that and then off he went.

Very few people could make you feel as important as Gary Halpin could make you feel. At Leinster, the likes of Gordon D'Arcy and Brian O'Driscoll were coming through. They were as important to him as any of the older fellas.

It didn't matter to Gary if you were the milkman, the breadman, the butcher, the baker, the solicitor, the doctor or the judge. It didn't matter if you were the President of the IRFU or the Leinster coach. He treated everyone exactly the same.

I can only imagine him as a teacher but I think the way he treated people was why he became so good in education. He'd also frighten the shite out of ye! He had the respect of his students because he understood how to have a laugh. He also knew

when to knuckle down. If you did wrong by him he could cut you in two with a look.

I often wondered how he got all of these great jobs. Turning up for an interview with those cauliflower ears and the big bald head on him. But then he opened his mouth and it all made sense.

I'd consider my wife very well educated. Whenever Gary would call over they'd go off talking about things I'd no idea about. Communism or something. I'd just sit back and crack a beer. It was way out of my f\*\*king league. I was only the milkman from Leixlip! But they were happy times.

We hit it off straightaway. When I was at Leinster not many of the lads had kids. Gary did. He lived in Rathcoole and I was in Leixlip so we'd be over and back with the children. Holidays too. We loved having him around. No matter what kind of day you'd be having, he always made you feel better.

I feel so privileged to have played with Leinster and Ireland. Even though I've been in France for 19 years, anytime I go home I can pick up the phone to any of them and they'd meet for a pint or a meal. Gary was one of those fellas. You could always pick up from where you left off.

The last time I saw Gary was at a past player event last year. Unfortunately, he had to leave early but while he was there he was in the thick of things. The same as ever! They're always great occasions to look back on the good days and I was reminded about the end of Gary's career.

He was about 35 and was telling myself, Vic and Reggie [Corrigan] that he was finished. Retiring from professional rugby was a new thing to us. The amateur lads before us just threw away their boots. He mentioned how he'd taken out some insurance policy. He explained to us that it was there incase he fell off a ladder, broke his leg or got hurt on the rugby field.

"Gaz!" I says, "I have an idea!"

I told him I'd do a job on him. I'd smash up one of his knees with a baseball bat! "Jaysis horsebox," he said, "that'd be fantastic!" He kept asking and asking when I was going to do it and I told him to get away, that I didn't want him to see me coming... he didn't sleep for a week!

“

**The last time I saw Gary was at a past player event last year. Unfortunately, he had to leave early but while he was there he was in the thick of things. The same as ever!**



A few days after we'd made the deal I arrived down at training on one of those dark, misty mornings. The toilets were locked and I needed to take a whizz so I went round the back of the portacabin at Old Belvedere. Next thing Gary's motorbike pulls up and I appear around the corner. "Oh Trev! Not today! Please! I'm beggin' ye! I've a parent teacher meeting!" The kids always came first in Gary's eyes!

Later on that same day he said he'd join us up at Kiely's for lunch. I drove on up and as he was on the bike he should have been there before us but there was no sign of him. We got our rock shandies and club sandwiches and then some lad came in and told us about a bad accident down the road. We rushed out. Sure enough it was Gary.

He was in bad pain and we were worried. I leaned over and asked him if he was ok. He opened one eye and gave me a wink: "ah horsebox! You won't get me with that baseball bat now!" It took two paramedics and four firemen to lift him into the ambulance and that was the end of his career. Just his luck that a genuine accident meant I never got to him!

It's mad to think that's 20 years ago. You don't notice the time go by. These days I see my young fella go upstairs and he comes back down 3 inches taller. The world keeps moving on.

Even as rugby moved on during his career, Gary never changed with professionalism. He was just Gary Halpin. He'd done it all. He never lost touch with where he came from. The privilege for him was not the money. It was always the people.

I can still picture him now walking through Donnybrook and holding us all up as he chatted to everyone along the way. It was an innocent time. There were no mobiles, no social media. We gave our all on the pitch but we were able to relax in other people's company afterwards without any hassle.

We knew the pubs of Donnybrook well. Everywhere we went Gary lit up the room. Even if you weren't part of the group, Gary Halpin made you feel a little bit better about yourself. I was always in awe of that.



At our age you don't laugh. Everything is so bloody serious. But you always came away from a call with Gary feeling better. You couldn't say a bad thing about him. If there was somebody over in the corner on their own he'd go over and bring them into the conversation. One of a kind.

**Nick Popplewell**

Shocked to hear of the passing of 1991 Rugby World Cup teammate Gary Halpin. One of those great characters that always made you smile.

**Donal Lenihan**

One of my favourite players when I was a kid. You need to be a bit mental to give the All Blacks the finger after scoring a try. Ballsy.

**Jerry Flannery**

Heartbroken at the news that Gary Halpin has died. A great athlete representing Ireland at hammer throwing & rugby. The best sense of humour & the funniest man I have ever coached. Off the field a gentleman & great family man.

**Matt Williams**



## TRIBUTES TO GARY

Our whole relationship was slagging. I described him as my hero recently, and he thought I was taking the mickey out of him. But he had literally done everything he could. All the best things he could possibly do for his kids.

**Keith Wood**

Anyone who was lucky enough to be in his company would have been the better for it. The world is at a big loss. He was one of the greats.

**Mick Galwey**

What a character he was. A hilarious storyteller and the life & soul of any team he was part of.

**Brian O'Driscoll**

What a lovely man he was and a wonderful character.

**Alan Quinlan**

If you ever met Gary Halpin, you remembered meeting Gary Halpin. He had a superb outlook on life. An all-round good guy.

**Shane Byrne**



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# BE WHO YOU WANT TO BE

Anna Caplice on perceptions of women's rugby and  
turning the tide on social media

ANNA CAPLICE



**Rugby is not just a sport. It's a way of life based on values and intense compromise. A supreme assessment of strength, endurance, determination and agility, it is also a test of the moral fibre of those who participate.**

Respect is widely held as being a core value of the game. From mini-rugby sides in Portlaoise to the deciding Lions Test this summer, respect is espoused by rugby teams across the world.

Sadly, beyond the field of play it has been distinctly lacking throughout the Guinness Six Nations.

When a video of Ellis Genge failing to clap his opponents off the field emerged following England's defeat to Wales, the prop received death threats online. An ironic and disproportionate reaction to a perceived lack of respect. BBC reporter Sonja McLaughlan was also castigated for her interview with Owen Farrell on the same night.

Further, in the aftermath of their nail-biting collapse at the hands of France, the Welsh Rugby Union felt compelled to issue a statement regarding some of the abuse directed at their players. The same players who just a few moments previously had Wales on the brink of an unprecedented Grand Slam.

Very early into the competition, Tackle Your Feelings felt compelled to raise awareness of the increasing prevalence of social media abuse. While some looking on felt unsure whether it was a big enough issue, Tackle Your Feelings has always encouraged proactivity – the need to address things before they escalate into crisis.

As the #BeKind campaign gained momentum, Anna Caplice became an obvious candidate to champion the message. Having spoken out about the issue of online abuse in the past, Caplice is very familiar with the topic.

"I think tagging players, which you see a lot in the men's game, is so unnecessary and really silly," Caplice begins. "It has no place in rugby, in any sport or anywhere. In a way, as women in rugby we have to be careful what we wish for. It's a sad reality that if you want people to treat the women's game the same as the men's game, you're going to get that level of abuse.

"As far as I'm concerned, as long as you're being fully supported by your teammates, your union, your players' association, then you know that you're doing all you can to be the best rugby player you can be despite the obstacles around you. But you have to ask whether online abuse should be an obstacle at all?"

Appropriately, Caplice meets an array of journalists at a virtual media session wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with 'Be Kind'. Recently she has come to prominence on the issue regarding comments following the postponement of the Women's Six Nations and indeed some of the comments posted below her own interview with an online journal.

"I remember Leah Lyons highlighted some of the abuse that was in earshot of her family at a game a few years ago. It was shocking. Personally, I don't think posting on social media is any different. It's like someone tapping on your mother's shoulder.

**“I think that a lot of the criticism that comes in is purely because it's rugby being played by women. We become an easy target for the couch observers and when they're not held accountable, they're free to air.”**







"I think that a lot of the criticism that comes in is purely because it's rugby being played by women. We become an easy target for the couch observers and when they're not held accountable, they're free to air."

As part of Tackle Your Feelings' initiative, a series of animated videos highlighting various topics were released. Scripted using real tweets directed at rugby players and voiced by children, the clips pose the question as to whether we would like our children to talk in a similar fashion.

When contacted by Rugby Players Ireland on her potential involvement, Caplice was happy to contribute to the production. Sadly, with sexist abuse so rife online it took comparatively little time to draft a script.

"In the Premier 15s in England they release a Try of the Week compilation each week. I have to brace myself for the comments underneath. There's always a negative focus whereas the commentary under the men's always emphasises the positive aspects of play– the good footwork, the speed, the handling. I want to see that change.

"Interestingly there was a fantastic try scored by Simi Pam recently. She's a prop forward for Bristol Bears. She has an unbelievable sidestep, breaks the line and runs 60m to score. I follow a prominent rugby journalist who shared it and I was like 'Oh God, here we go!' but actually, a lot was positive which was great to see.

"I think thanks to campaigns such as this one, people are becoming more aware of online negativity and are starting to see the women's game for what it is. It's not going to change overnight but if we can keep positive conversation and exposure going in the meantime, it will keep improving."

**I just feel very lucky that women's rugby is one of the only places in the world where you can be who you want to be.**

Having started playing the game at 17 in Mallow, it's clear that Caplice has found a home in rugby. A vibrant character, her unique energy is undoubtedly valued by teams on both sides of the Irish Sea. She is allowed to be whoever she wants to be.

"I think women's rugby is a very liberal place. In all my time playing between the UK and Ireland, you can be whoever you want and there's a place for you in a rugby team. You have to accept people for who they are, that's how a team moves forward. Sometimes you have teams that don't allow you to express yourself in a certain way. I think that's detrimental to the team. Having a team of characters creates a character unique to that team.

"It's interesting because men's rugby has been used as a platform for supporting anti-racist messaging and LGBTQ support. They're very important messages but from a women's rugby perspective it's kind of like, 'yeh, obviously we support that!' That's happily been my experience but I'm open to discussing it and exploring whether people do feel welcome in a rugby environment.

"I remember going to UL Bohs where I played alongside girls who openly identified as gay. It was my first-time meeting people who were that open about their sexuality in Ireland. So early on, women's rugby was quite a liberal place to be. In England it was ten times that. Often, people don't even bother using labels.

"I just feel very lucky that women's rugby is one of the only places in the world where you can be who you want to be. I'm not going to let a comment made online hold me back, but rather use it to show others that you can choose to stand up to online abuse or simply scroll past it because you have a community around you that has your back."



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# PUTTING HIS HAND UP

A debut season to remember but  
the Thomond roar still awaits

**JOSH WYCHERLEY**



**It's a long time since we all gathered to watch a rugby game. Pints spilling as roars send spit flying and every ball is kicked at your back. What you probably wouldn't give to experience that again.**

Over recent years, the language of sport is often that of a business but the last year has shown that sport has missed its passionate supporters as much as they have missed their sport.

It was only a few short years ago that a young Josh Wycherley would have accompanied his parents to a match in Limerick. Mesmerised by the raucous atmosphere, he went home to dream about one day playing in the famous ground.

Wycherley realised a lifetime ambition when he made his Munster Rugby debut at an empty Thomond Park in October. Joining Fineen on the pitch, the Wycherley brothers could only imagine how their parents felt at home.

"I saw my family the following weekend and they were delighted for me," Josh says. "But not being able to enjoy it with them on the night was definitely disappointing. They've played such a huge role in my career and have given me every opportunity that I'd have loved to have had them there.

"Thankfully Fineen was in the squad that night so I was able to share it with him. We're pretty close. We live together so we've no choice but to get on! He went through the same pathway I've been on so it's been good to have his experience to lean on."

Wycherley has been one of several new faces introduced into the Munster Rugby fold this year. With the Thomond roar sadly lacking, it has been clear that Johann van Graan has been drawing energy from his youthful reinforcements.

"I think the way the academy has been involved with the senior group has definitely helped," Wycherley believes. "I'm not sure it was part of the plan to give so many lads a run this season but training with the senior lads challenges the younger fellas to push on.

"Training with those players everyday can only improve you and it has also meant that when there has been an opening, they're well up to the challenge. A lot of guys put their hand up this season. It bodes well for the future."

A key member of Ireland's U20 Grand Slam winning side in 2019, Wycherley further cemented his burgeoning reputation when he dismantled Clermont's Rabah Slimani on what was his first European game for his home province. A young career that has already been packed with memorable moments.

"No matter what, above all playing for Munster in itself has been the highlight for me," the former Cistercian College Roscrea student declares. "A goal of mine was to get capped this season. To get it fairly early on and then push on to play in Europe, a special win at Clermont... you couldn't ask for more really.

"Yeah, it would have been great to do all these things this season in front of fans and enjoy it with family and friends but I still felt their support. I didn't allow myself to be disappointed. You can only take control of what you can."

Thanks to social media, many friends old and new, far and wide were able to reach out to Wycherley and congratulate him on several significant milestones that have taken place far from the maddening crowds. They might not have been the same as a pat on the back around Thomond but the messages have undoubtedly helped him to reflect on his achievements.

"It's always nice to read good things about yourself but you can't read into it too much either," Wycherley says. "Where there are good comments, there are bad comments waiting to be found. That's the stuff that tends to stick.

"Growing up in a social media world, we're well used to how it works. We've also had a lot of webinars and different people talk to us about the highs and lows of it. We're well aware of the potential dangers that are there but there's



also plenty of positivity too. Social Media can be a great asset but you have to take everything with a pinch of salt.

"Thankfully I haven't had much negativity to deal with over my career but either way I try to avoid social media before and after games."

Wycherley, who has acted as a champion for the Tackle Your Feelings (TYF) campaign for the past year, is further informed on the advantages of social media through his Marketing and Management studies at LIT.

"I was delighted to help out in any way that I could with TYF. You can see how powerful social media can be so to use them in a positive way for TYF was a no-brainer for me. It's a good public message but as a player I also find it very interesting to see other players' perspectives on things. I can relate to a lot of the advice on the app.

"How we can use different platforms is also a crucial element of what I'm studying. The digital world is so powerful now that even with the lockdown, many sectors have been able to keep going.

"For example, from a rugby player's perspective I'm getting more from my college work. With everything going online, I can engage in more coursework because all students are in the same boat.

"It's been great to inform my studies with various bits that come out in a lecture, bits that wouldn't appear in the notes I'm used to working off. As a result, I don't feel like I'm doing my work just to tick boxes or meet deadlines.

"I think people have to acknowledge that while it has obviously been a difficult time, there are plenty of positive things to come out of lockdown too if you look hard enough. We can't control it, but things will reopen, the fans will come back and there'll be some craic again. I can't wait."



# LIGHTING A FIRE

CJ Stander is bringing the best of South African culture to Ireland

CJ STANDER



**Throughout the years, various dignitaries have paid homage to the special relationship that exists between Ireland and South Africa. Since the early settlements around the Cape, Irish people have been welcomed to the country to the extent that 30,000 Irish citizens now live there.**

Ask any one of those ex-pats what the biggest thing we share in common is, and most will say barbecues and CJ Stander. Fitting then that the 51-times capped retiring Irish international is now behind Fireboks, Ireland's exclusive supplier of quality fire boxes.

"Since I first arrived in Ireland in 2012, I could see that the Irish people love a good barbecue," Stander says. "The funny thing for me was how the barbecues were put away for most of the year and then rolled out when a bit of sunshine came through!"

"It was about cooking and eating as fast as you could before running back indoors before it rained again! In South Africa, we treat the cooking at the braai as part of an overall occasion. It's a social event. You might have had plenty of drinks and treats by the time the food is presented, but you'll have had a good time along the way!"

Fireboks was launched in late 2020 by Stander, Leon Jordaan and Darin Claasen. Based in Galway,



the company sell premium barbecue equipment including free-standing units, pizza domes, cooking utensils and safari braais.

While South Africans are the beneficiaries of good weather systems, northern Europeans have had to adapt their al fresco dining over the years. The barbecue, for those keen to sample the delights of outdoor cooking, simply became a slow circumvented unit a hot air under a lid. The braai, on the other hand, is cooked over an open grill fuelled by wood or charcoal.

"There are two things that were key to us entering into the Irish market," says Leon Jordaan. "For a start, the fact that there is such good quality wood so readily available here was crucial to the integrity and quality of our products. There is also the capacity or homes to build small extensions without needing planning permission which opens further doors.

"Ultimately, we can adapt to the circumstances of the customer. We have mobile units, free-standing units and industrial units for beer gardens and restaurants, or we can bring our products into the home. For instance, with most people having central heating they are happy to reinvent the usage of their fireplace which is no longer in use.





"We've built up a good network of architects, builders and landscapers around the country. Many of them have been building our Fireboks into their plans. After the year we've had, a lot of people are paying more attention to their surroundings and I believe the Fireboks is the ideal addition – it looks good too!"

A friend of Ryk Neethling, Jean-Marie Stander's Olympic gold-winning brother, Jordaan was encouraged to seek out CJ when he moved to Ireland from South Africa with his wife, Irish TV presenter Grainne Seoige last year.

"It was a bit of a mad time. We made the decision to come to Ireland and got everything lined up and ready to go and then the country went from level zero to level 5 lockdown within the space of a week. Our container was delayed for about 3 months!"

Not to be found wanting, Jordaan pressed ahead with his plans and arranged to meet with Stander when restrictions allowed.

"I spoke to CJ and started explaining how there was definitely a market in Ireland for this type of thing and that we needed to shift the understanding of a South African barbecue. I mean it's our tagline: 'Inside. Outside. 365.' The Irish have been missing out on so much for 48 weeks of the year!"

"Within about 2 minutes he told me he was in. That was refreshing because I didn't want him to think



we were using his face to sell our product. He really believes in what we are doing and how we are going about our business."

Conveniently, through his involvement with Hellbent alongside fellow rugby player Louis Ludik, Stander also has access to an ample supply of Boerewors coiled beef sausages and spicy burgers. Formed by Ludik alongside Schalk van der Merwe in 2018, Hellbent was recently listed by Aldi Ireland to supply 142 supermarkets across the country.

The hope is that Fireboks continues along a similar trajectory.

"Having grown up on a sheep farm back home, I have always been very familiar with the outdoors, with the braais and with the best of meat," the retiring Stander says. "To their credit, Louis and Schalk have created sausages, burgers and meatballs on a par with the very best available in South Africa in terms of quality, taste and texture and with Fireboks I hope that Irish people can learn to appreciate the quality of the braai."

"I am delighted to be able to bring some of the best in South African culture to Ireland. It has been a difficult time for people here, especially over the winter. However, as things begin to open up and we can invite people into our homes and remember what it's like to enjoy each other's company again I'd like to think that our Fireboks can be a central part of that."





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# RUGBY'S ROCKY STORY

From selling gym equipment to the brink of an Irish cap, Garry Doyle of The42.ie explores Darragh Fanning's unique rugby journey.

**DARRAGH FANNING**





**Rush hour in Dublin and the city centre traffic has stalled. A driver is frustrated and not just by the noise of his engine grunting as a few sluggish metres chug by. He looks up at the lights, sees they are stuck on red and knows it is the perfect metaphor for his rugby career.**

A year earlier, things couldn't have felt any better. In the build-up to the November series, Joe Schmidt called to say he was on the radar. That weekend he stayed on it, scoring twice against Wasps in Europe. After impressing the following Sunday against Castres, Matt O'Connor tapped him on the shoulder.

"You've to report into Ireland camp, tomorrow. Well done!"

He was on his way. Three days training with Ireland exposed him to Schmidt's work, the minute attention to detail; the confident, demanding delivery that filled a room. "I'd only ever known Joe up to that point as this funny guy who I'd meet in and around rugby matches or events. Now I was seeing him in action and he was unreal. It was brilliant being a part of that."

Thirteen months is a long time in rugby. A star who was on the rise was now unseen. He'd played the first game of that 2015/16 season against Edinburgh and was then handed a bib for training.

Weeks passed. Others got their chance. He kept being handed that bib, a worrying sign for any player. "There were training sessions when they would stick an academy centre on the wing if someone went down injured rather than me. Mentally those weeks were crushing."

He remembers thinking, 'I don't know what is going on here?' But he made a pact to stay positive. Happy-go-lucky by nature, he made a conscious effort not 'to be a dickhead in training'.

"I'm a Leinster fan," our driver says. "I wanted them to win. I was still helping the team to prepare but there was only so much I could do. Then Leinster approached me in November to see if I was interested in leaving and I just said no, I'd started a business, I was happy, settled in Dublin."

"I said to them, I've only ever wanted to play rugby for St Mary's, Leinster and Ireland. By then I'd done two of those and the third had ceased to be an option. I wasn't leaving. End of."

Then just before Christmas, came an early present. He was out of the bib and lining out with the prospective starting XV. "I played well that day in training."

Ben Te'o thought so too, loudly joking when Mick Dawson, the Leinster chief executive, passed by. "Mick is heading upstairs to write you out a new contract," Te'o laughed. "We had so many injuries. I remember thinking, 'unless they pick Ronan O'Donnell (Leinster's logistics manager)', I'm in there."

O'Donnell didn't make it. But nor did our commuter.

It is a Tuesday evening now, rush hour in Dublin. Our driver collects his girlfriend from work when Leo Cullen rings to say he won't be starting that Friday's game against Dragons. In fact, he won't even be in the travelling squad heading across to Wales. There's no point arguing these things.

I knew that was it. At that point, if they weren't going to pick me that week, they never were. I burst out crying."

Welcome to the world of professional sport. This is how it ends, by the side of a road as the traffic crawls by and the Christmas shoppers struggle home with their bags. Anyone who thinks professional rugby isn't a cruel game, well they need to think again.





Darragh Fanning – that driver stuck in traffic – doesn’t want anyone’s sympathy. “My career was a rollercoaster and I was happy to ride it,” he says. If the way the rollercoaster ended for him was sudden, well the beginning was just as unexpected.

His route to the top wasn’t the traditional one. Academy rugby passed him by, the AIL proving to be his finishing school. He was trucking along nicely there, making his way in the nine-to-five world; getting a few quid in his pocket and a few beers after St Mary’s matches at the weekend, when Connacht called. A contract was on the table. One year, €15,000.

“It was like winning the lotto,” Fanning says.

He started well, got eight games under his belt before Christmas when his appendix burst. Out for three months, by the time he’d recovered, he couldn’t get his place back. Still, he was told that he was going to be kept on, until a budgetary adjustment led to three contracts – including Fanning’s – being withdrawn. The deal was for €35,000. “You don’t play rugby for the money. It was more a case of wondering where it could have taken you.”

The bad news was delivered on a Tuesday night. By the Thursday he was on the plane to Australia, signing for Canberra Vikings, still a full-time player. “The worst thing would have been to hang around, listen to questions, ‘what happened? Why aren’t you playing?’” The only question he asked that weekend was where was good for lunch. We’ll come back to that later.

The Vikings experience went well, so well that by the time he was heading back home, Dan

McKellar, now head coach of the Brumbies, told him he’d make contact with mates of his coaching in Italy and the English championship. It was 2013. Leinster were about to win their fourth trophy in three years under Joe Schmidt. “Surely a club in Ireland might look at you,” McKellar asked.

Fanning laughed. “I was 26 at the time. If Connacht didn’t want me, there wasn’t a chance of Leinster being keen.”

He was quickly proven wrong. Unbeknownst to him, Fanning was already filed away in Schmidt’s memory cabinet when he went to see him play for St Mary’s against Garryowen in the AIL. Fionn Carr and Andrew Conway were leaving the RDS. A wing vacancy needed filling and Schmidt arranged for Fanning to play against Ulster A. The possibilities were growing. Then Schmidt got the Ireland job. “And I thought that was that. It was a nice pipedream. I’ll move on.”

That July he went across to Muirfield to watch the 2013 Open Championship. On the Friday, as Miguel Angel Jimenez moved to the top of the leaderboard, Guy Easterby – Leinster’s head of operations – called. They met three days later and for the second time in his professional life, Fanning walked out of a secure nine-to-five job to hop on a magic carpet ride. “It was just a six-week trial. I was happy to just get a bit of few gear.”

He’d get more than that. After watching the Lions play that summer, he ended up playing against George North just a couple of months later. Matt O’Connor – Schmidt’s successor – rated him and so the six-week deal quickly became a three-month one. It was like a Rocky story told in a south Dublin accent, Fanning walking into the dressing room only to find that all the lockers were already taken.

“  
The worst thing would have been to hang around, listen to questions, ‘what happened? Why aren’t you playing?’



"Do you mind getting changed with the academy lads?" He was 26. They were 18. "Sure, no problem."

Nothing seemed to be problematic. North knocked him down but he got back up. Christian Wade was fast. But he kept chasing him, ending up scoring two tries against Wade's Wasps. Three months became a two-year deal. "The biggest kick I got out of the whole Leinster thing was that – because it came so late for me – everyone (friends, family, team-mates at St Mary's) just seemed to get so much joy out of it."

He was in his mid-20s but taking baby steps. A pre-season appearance; then selection for a Pro14 game; then a date in the Aviva against Munster, then the Champions Cup.

"It was surreal." And nothing seemed stranger than the first day Brian O'Driscoll and the Lions contingent returned to training. By now, Fanning was settled. Or so he thought. A training drill went wrong; Fanning switching off when partnered by O'Driscoll.

He literally screamed his head off me. I remember being in shock and then sort of thinking for a split second, 'this is hilarious, Brian O'Driscoll has just given out to me!'"

He wore it as a badge of honour. "I never had any sleepless nights wondering whether I fitted in or not. I always enjoyed the opportunity, the big crowd. I'm a bit of a show off; I always backed myself to do well."

That belief, he noted, was the difference between so many players, those who made it, those who didn't. He was an eyewitness to a young Dan

**“I never had any sleepless nights wondering whether I fitted in or not. I always enjoyed the opportunity, the big crowd.”**

Leavy, Jack Conan, Josh van der Flier, Tadhg Furlong, playing in illustrious surroundings like the wonderfully named Pandy Park.

"A few of them, you just know it's going to happen for them. Confidence oozed out of them. Josh, I wouldn't say I'm surprised by the heights he's reached but because he's a really quiet guy – he does things that a few others – had they had his ability, would have shouted about. He always had an incredible work rate."

So had Fanning. Schmidt called again, initially to tell him he wouldn't be in the Ireland squad, speaking for just a few minutes, then quizzing Fanning about an incident in a Scarlets game, 14 months earlier. "I was like, how did he remember that?"

The week of the South Africa game in November 2014, Schmidt was asking more questions, Fanning in camp, noting how more intense things were, how players used their free time to swot up on opposing players. "You are a bit awestruck, getting all the gear with DF embroidered on it."

As we know the Ireland cap never came but there are no regrets, no bitterness. "I don't look back and think I was unlucky not to be capped. Far from it."

If you're wondering where this sense of perspective comes from, well it's partly in his genes, part of growing up.

That restaurant he went to on his first weekend in Australia was Zambrero, a Mexican food chain run by an Australian businessman with a conscience. In 15 years, they have donated 45 million free meals to disadvantaged children in the third world. Fanning has been there, handing out the meals in a South African shanty town, his carrot red hair a source of fascination to the local children.

So he knows the true definition of bad luck and it isn't being born in a safe democracy with plenty of work opportunities. The key is making the most of those, the advice Simon Keogh, in Rugby Players Ireland, gave him.

And that was why, when it came to the end at Leinster, he didn't look at trekking around the championship for a few years. "I'd done the hard yards."

Instead he opened a restaurant within weeks of his father – former Leinster captain, Declan Fanning – negotiating a settlement with Dawson. "I didn't have time to dwell on things. Hope was fading fast on the rugby field. You have to move on and move quickly."

He did. Four weeks after retiring, he opened his first restaurant. He now has 10 – all part of the Zambrero chain. "Regrets?" he is asked. "None. Remember that I got to ride that rollercoaster when I didn't even have a ticket, never mind a place in the queue. It was fun."



# A NUMBER'S GAME

The Irish Sevens player was a recipient of the Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary

KATIE HEFFERNAN





**Sometimes the path isn't clearly identifiable. For one thing, Katie Heffernan never thought playing rugby would enable her to see the world. Neither might her maths teacher have foreseen the youngster undertaking a career dealing with numbers.**

Having successfully navigated her way through Business at TUD, the Irish Rugby 7 player is now closing in on the final weeks of studying Financial Analytics at Dublin Business School. Encouraged by Dr Vincent O'Flaherty as her Player Development Manager, Heffernan was not going to let a pandemic put her life on hold any more than it needed to.

"When I finished my degree last year, I wasn't sure what direction I was heading in. All I knew was that with the World Series on hold it was a good opportunity to study. There were so many options on the table but I didn't really know what I wanted. When I look back now I was quite overwhelmed by it all. Vinny helped me to narrow it down.

"I had my ideas, but he kept pushing the boat out. I never would have thought I was capable of doing something like a postgrad but he didn't see any reason to hold back. 'You play for Ireland,' he'd say, 'of course you can do this!' It gave me the nudge I needed. I can't thank him enough."

As they worked on her DBS application, Dr O'Flaherty also drew Heffernan's attention to



the Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary. Since it was first established in 2018, the programme has aided over 25 members develop their off-field careers with all players using the funds to support their endeavours in a variety of ways.

"Would you believe, before I received the Goodbody grant I didn't even own a laptop! Imagine starting a new course in lockdown without one?! I never realised how much freedom it would give me and that has obviously been crucial over the last year.

"During my degree I had to race around the city between training and the TUD campus to make sure I got to my lectures – there was no such thing as a second chance. Then I'd have to go to the library to use the computers for the evening. Now I can study and catch my lectures from the kitchen table. Lockdown or not, it's been a game changer."

Back home in Mullingar, Heffernan has been taking advantage of her flexible study schedule to make the most of the country air. With rugby coming back into focus, she has found renewed energy and hopes to take that into the modified season ahead. Perhaps she might even be able to apply her statistical knowledge?

"The stats have always been something I've loved about being involved with Ireland," she acknowledges. "I love sitting down and identifying our opponent's strengths and weaknesses based on the numbers. In some ways it has also helped me understand how numbers can be applied to a business. It fascinates me how they tell a story that words never could.

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**When I finished my degree last year, I wasn't sure what direction I was heading in. All I knew was that with the World Series on hold it was a good opportunity to study.**





"I try to limit those interpretations to team performance though," she points out. "I don't want to read too much into my own numbers. I still prefer to judge my performance on how I feel about it. Most times you can back that up by the stats anyway!"

First introduced to rugby by her sister in 2013, the statistical analysis of rugby was at a far remove from that first session in amongst a mixture of abilities drawn from local GAA and basketball clubs. For all the amenities in Mullingar, Linda Heffernan noticed that despite the increasing popularity of rugby in addition to a Mullingar RFC alumnus at its pinnacle, the local area lacked an underage women's rugby set-up. Together with interprovincial player Ellen Taite, she set about correcting it.

"I can't believe what the underage structure at Mullingar looks like now," Katie says with an obvious hint of pride. "I got down to the club between the lockdowns and there was basically two girls teams for every age-grade from U6 right up to U18. When I was training there we barely had enough for a meaningful session!"

"Some people have put it down to the Joe Schmidt effect. He's the kind of guy everyone at the club has their fond stories about. He left quite an impression. So of course the club is going to pride itself on an association with the greatest coach in Irish Rugby history.

"The additional coverage and growing membership have helped it to grow into one of the best clubs in the midlands. Yet while the women's side of the club has also benefitted, I think it all had more of an impact on the men's side of the club. We still needed people who cared

enough about it to develop women's rugby at Mullingar from almost nothing."

While the club prides itself on some esteemed exports in the form of Schmidt, the recently retired Conor Gilsenan and the O'Brien brothers (Conor – Leinster Rugby & Sean, Connacht Rugby), Heffernan also counts amongst that number but has had to find her way in what was a new venture for a female member of the club. Although she now lines out for Railway Union in the AIL, Heffernan has retained her dual status.

"I think we're now beginning to see the fruits of the work being put into the female structures at Mullingar. You'll be hearing more from players like Maeve Scally and Ava Jenkins. I guess the challenge is in keeping players of promise tied to the club.

"Rugby is a short career and any player will want to make it to the top as quickly as they can. Unfortunately, the gap between the top tier and the clubs below is quite big but hopefully as more clubs develop we'll see that distance closing and I hope Mullingar will be one of the clubs to lead the way.

"A lot of people have thanked me for paving the way for young Mullingar women in rugby and even for young women outside of the rugby strongholds. It's nice to hear those things but, to be honest, I don't think I'm doing anything special or different. I'm just doing what I love.

"If my contribution was to show any young girl in the area that you can progress by doing what you love, by taking your own path, well... that's enough for me."



**Rugby is a short career and any player will want to make it to the top as quickly as they can.**

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# Embrace The Unknown

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# FOCUSED ON THE ROAD AHEAD

The Irish & Ulster Rugby prop has been embracing his unique interests

JACK MCGRATH





**A qualified truck driver and motorbike enthusiast, Jack McGrath clearly likes spending time on the road. Akin to a juggernaut himself, getting behind the wheel of one was an unusual aspiration held by a youngster growing up in Dublin 6. It is one of his many diverse interests.**

"My dad is a truck driver," Jack explains, "so when I was growing up that's all I ever wanted to do. That or a trade, anything to do with my hands really. I was never one for the books... I barely did my Leaving Cert to be honest with you and I didn't go to college.

"Thankfully, the rugby took off in the right direction. I was happy to just play and so I didn't step outside my comfort zone too often. I see that now. My career has been good to me but I can definitely see how I wasted a few years as a younger player."

Eager to make up for some lost time, the Ulster, Ireland and Lions prop has been a busy bee over the past year. Regular jaunts on the M1 coupled with idle lockdown periods have provided McGrath with plenty of opportunity to think, plan and move.

"I try to get down to Sinead (Jack's wife) in Dublin as often as I can," he tells us, "but I've had a lot of time by myself in my apartment in Belfast over the past year. I like being busy but for the first lockdown nobody was really set up for it and you didn't know what you could get up to.

"It got to a stage where my head was melted by all the time I was wasting on my phone and looking at the wall, so I got my woodwork tools out and I began to fix things about the place. I found that really enjoyable and ended up looking forward to getting stuck into something different every day!"

It was during his quieter moments that plans for Collective Fitness came into being. Developed by McGrath, his brother-in-law Conor Corcoran and former Leinster Rugby player James Norton, Collective Fitness is an online community with multiple training pathways for everyone's unique needs. With an extensive range of in-built resources to compliment your training, Collective Fitness is quickly becoming a market leader in online fitness.

Initially devised to help people achieve their goals from their own homes, the Collective Fitness community has grown exponentially prompting the trio to assess the wider potential of the business. With the support of Jack's professional rugby network they have sought to grow their brand awareness and simultaneously prepare to take the company into a post-Covid environment.



"When Conor, James and I sat down it was obvious that we all complimented each other very well in terms of our vision and what we bring to the table. James and I have professional rugby experience while Conor has a masters in sports rehabilitation and is also a personal trainer. I think what's been most important though is the massive experience James has in setting up businesses like the Punnet Health Food Store.

"That knowledge definitely provided a bit of a safety net and put us at ease. Conor and I had a load of questions, but James was always comfortable with anything we asked him. We've all been friends for a long time, but his experience has created a massive additional layer of trust which I think is hugely important in any start-up."

Like many of his peers who have recently set out on a Start Your Own Business course facilitated by Rugby Players Ireland through the Local Enterprise Office in Galway, McGrath acknowledges that the first steps can be daunting. However, in addition to Norton's first-hand learnings he has also been able to call on guidance from his wife Sinead who opened luxury bridal store 'The One' in Rathmines back in 2018.

"I think the key to success is believing in what you're doing. I see that clearly with Sinead's business. She has worked so hard to get to where she is and I don't think anybody could take that approach if they didn't have full faith in what they're doing.

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When Conor, James and I sat down it was obvious that we all complimented each other very well in terms of our vision and what we bring to the table**

"As a rugby player you get plenty of opportunities to get involved with things but I've never put my name to something I didn't believe in. I don't see the point. I'd much rather do something I enjoy. It makes sense – you invest time into your interests and develop that way.

"There are plenty of lads who finish up but have nothing to show for all the free time they've had over the years. I don't necessarily think it's their fault, I just think they haven't found what it is they want to do. Sometimes they don't think outside the box enough. Like, if you told me I'd to do an online college course, I'd have thrown my hat at it on day one. You can't force it."

In any event, not many college courses could cater for McGrath's varied pursuits. His latest hobby has seen him link with with Dublin based beekeeping company OpenHive in the past year. Using traditional beekeeping techniques alongside modern and sustainable means, OpenHive has become a favourite amongst healthy-living athletes, whilst also supporting the native Irish honeybees.

"I posted a picture of a bee book on my Instagram last year and a friend copped it and said he'd put me in contact with Kyle (Petrie) and Mark (Earley) who had hives near where I live. When I met the lads we all just hit it off. They have regular jobs but I liked how they weren't afraid to follow their passion. It's a part-time gig but it's seasonal so when it hits there's a lot of work involved and I was happy to help them out.

"The first day I called by they had me in the hives so I guess I dove in headfirst and have learned the ropes from there. As I said, I see things with my hands... if that makes sense?! Anyways, they say the most experienced beekeepers are still learning so I don't drown myself in information anytime I go in. Your head would be fried!"



With two full hives sitting atop his Dublin home in addition to his growing commitment to Collective Fitness, Jack has his hands full when his schedule allows for a visit home. He insists that family will always come first but is appreciative of the support he receives from his wife when the nixers come calling.

"Sinead knows the craic. She knows what running a business is like and she knows I have to focus on my options outside of rugby. I'm injured at the moment and when you're in this space, you see things a little differently. It's only natural that stuff like retirement comes into view.

"I'm not saying that I think that day is coming anytime soon. I'm a 31-year-old prop and once I can correct this injury, the rest of my body and mind are willing to kick on and get back to where I was. I suppose I'm just being realistic. I'm closer to retirement today than I was yesterday and I want to look forward to the next chapter rather than dread it.

"I don't think anyone knows how they'll feel until the day they hang up their boots, but we were watching the lads play in the Six Nations and I said to Sinead that it feels different watching Ireland play when you're injured. I wonder if it's the same when you finish?

"You can be in a bit of no man's land with any injury if you choose to be. Covid hasn't helped either. I've actually found that the lay-off has put a positive spin on things, for me. I've been able to sit back and enjoy the games rather than being pissed off because I wasn't selected. It's a different perspective.

"I'm trying to focus on the light at the end of the tunnel. I can see the road ahead on and off the field."

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There are plenty of lads who finish up but have nothing to show for all the free time they've had over the years. **I don't necessarily think it's their fault, I just think they haven't found what it is they want to do.**





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