

# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND  
SUMMER 2021



A LION

HE STANDS

ROBBIE HENSHAW

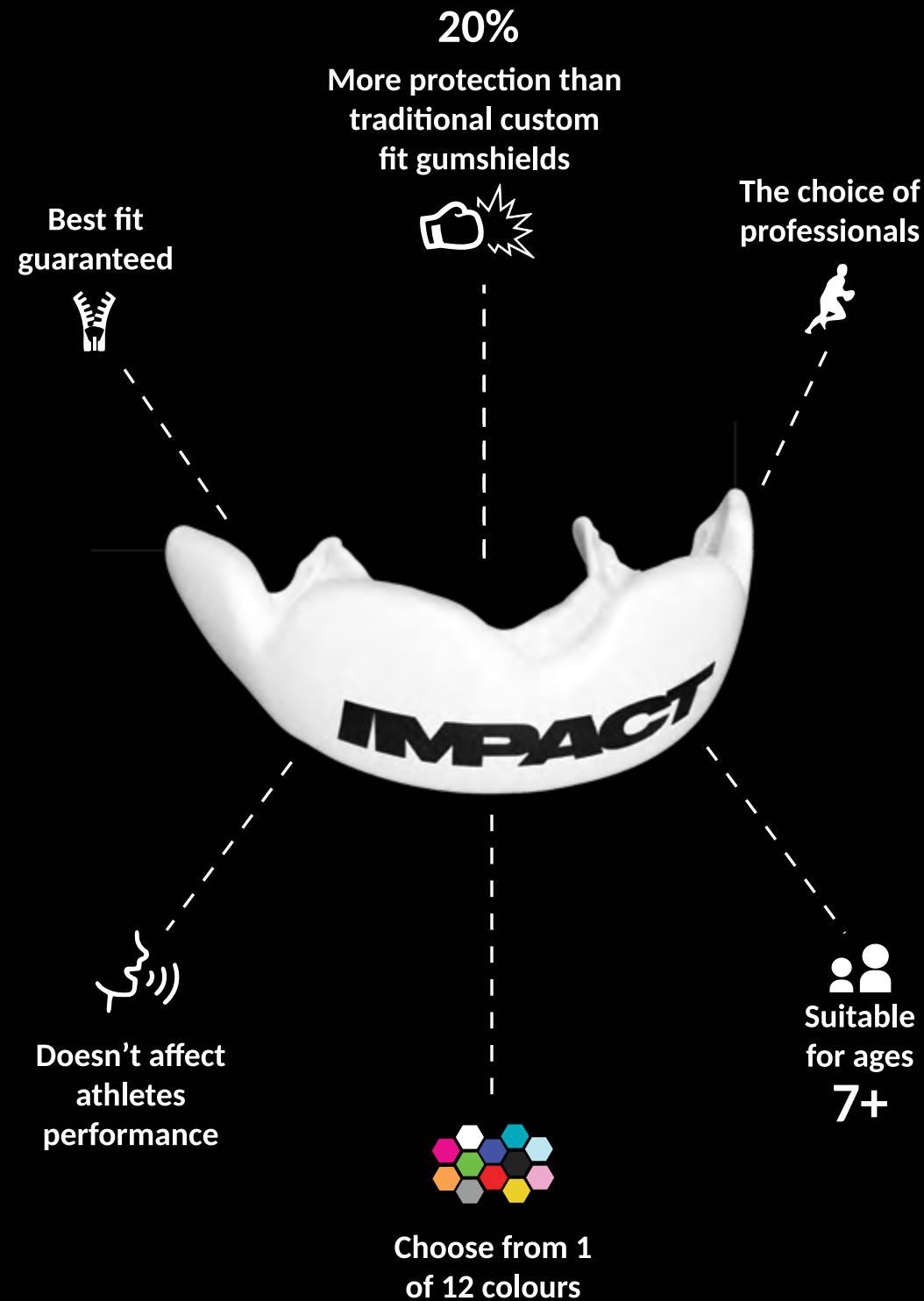
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10



16



20



30



36

## CONTENTS

- 2** Represent - CEO Address
- 4** News - Rugby Players Ireland
- 6** News - Retirements
- 8** News - Tackle Your Feelings
- 10** Engage - Robbie Henshaw
- 14** Engage - Dorothy Wall
- 18** Engage - Nominees
- 20** Engage - Jack Carty & John Cooney
- 26** Engage - Tadhg Leader
- 30** Engage - Joey Carbery
- 34** Develop - Katie Fitzhenry
- 38** Develop - Jack O'Sullivan



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# CEO ADDRESS

SIMON KEOGH



**As one of the most challenging seasons in memory comes to an end, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all of our members for their continued support throughout what has been a unique period for our game across the world. I am immensely proud of how you have responded to the challenges posed both on and off the field and believe that as a group we are much the stronger for it.**

While I suspect that most will read this note as they relax at home or elsewhere following a long campaign, for others the season continues. The bright lights and vivid sounds of Tokyo beckons for our Men's Sevens squad, while I believe our representatives on the Lions tour to South Africa will have an instrumental impact on the series.

Closer to home, it brought me great delight to see players finally get to share the experience of representing their country before their families. Several members have become established internationals since the turnstiles closed and so in some ways the recent fixtures against Japan and the USA signified a second debut!

Many fans were in attendance due to the intensified rollout of the vaccination programme across the country. This gives us plenty of renewed hope for the future of rugby in Ireland once again. Filling the seats in our stadiums has an enormous influence on our game from creating an atmosphere to financing its development, however, we are just setting out on the road to recovery.

As with most sporting organisations, Rugby Players Ireland hasn't been immune to the threats of the past 18 months. To offset the difficulties we have

faced, we have plenty of activity planned for the coming season. Hopefully we can count on our members' continued support in the months ahead at events such as the Zurich Irish Rugby Players' Awards which will take place on December 1st.

The rescheduling of the Awards night is yet another example of how we have pivoted in this strange time. By now, players have become accustomed to the postponement of training sessions and games yet this will always be accompanied by an element of frustration. The Irish Women's team has experienced this disappointment more than most. Indeed, under ordinary circumstances we might have been looking towards a World Cup in New Zealand by now.

The reality of the current environment and lack of certainty it has created has also meant that several players felt they could no longer put their lives on hold. Sadly, we have had to bid farewell to 12 members in recent weeks. While we will remain connected with each player, it is nevertheless a considerable adjustment. We wish them all well as they each start out on a new adventure.

To prepare our players for the inevitable transition we begin our work as soon as they first enter the provincial system. After a difficult end to their schooling, I look forward to seeing plenty of new faces at next month's (virtual) Rookie Camp where we will give them an introduction to life as a professional athlete. It is an exciting time for them.

Of course, over the coming years many 'Rookies' will hope to gain experience in the United Rugby Championship which is set to kick-off later in the year. The opportunity to test ourselves against some of the best sides in club rugby is undoubtedly a welcome addition to the rugby calendar but we must also be mindful of the extra demands on our members.

By the next time I pen this note I hope to champion Olympic gold medallists and victorious Lions tourists but as we know well by now, nothing is assured. We cannot dictate the future, but we can adjust to it. Whatever the next few weeks holds, our greatest triumph may in fact be in seeing off the 2020/21 season with our game still intact.





# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



## MSL MOTORS PARTNERSHIP

Rugby Players Ireland are delighted to announce a new working partnership with the MSL Motor Group. We look forward to the impact this relationship will have on our organisation & the work we do with our members!

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Inherent in much of Rugby Players Ireland's activity is the goal to have our members seen as valued members of their communities. Through corporate and social engagements, we believe that players can not only contribute to their society in meaningful ways, but also become well-rounded individuals. Over the past few months Rugby Players Ireland has facilitated several partnerships as the country emerges from the lockdown. Munster Rugby teammates Craig Casey and Joey Carbery were named as ambassadors for the MidWest Simon Community and Aware respectively while Rory O'Loughlin is championing the Irish Cancer Society's #MarathoninaMonth throughout July.



## CONFERRALS

Our congratulations to all those who completed their university exams over the past number of weeks. Notable inclusions are Dr Josh Murphy who graduated from UCD's School of Medicine, Adam Leavy who finished his MSc in Finance in the week following Olympic qualification, and Jack O'Sullivan who received news of his qualification from UCC with a BSc in Finance. We speak to Jack on page 38!



## LIONS REPRESENTATIVES

Our very best wishes to Bundee Aki, Tadhg Beirne, Jack Conan, Tadhg Furlong, Iain Henderson, Robbie Henshaw and tour captain Conor Murray who have all travelled to South Africa with the British & Irish Lions this summer, with Ronan Kelleher also getting a late call-up. Meanwhile we'll also be thinking of Andrew Porter who was initially selected but has been forced to miss the tour through injury.



## ON THE ROAD TO TOYKO!

It was an unforgettable evening as the Ireland Men's 7s created history by booking their place at the Tokyo Olympics after winning the final qualifying tournament in Monaco.

After a 100% record through the qualifying stages, Ireland caused a major upset by beating France 28-19 in the World

Rugby Repechage final. The team is now set to become the first Irish rugby side to compete at the Olympics. The Sevens competition will take place from 26-28 July at Tokyo Stadium with Ireland joining Argentina, Australia, Canada, Fiji, Great Britain, Japan, Kenya, Korea, New Zealand, South Africa and the USA.





# EVERY NEW BEGINNING COMES FROM SOME OTHER BEGINNING'S END.

“

THERE WILL BE TIME TO SIT BACK, REFLECT AND TO THANK THE CLUBS AND THE PEOPLE THAT HAVE PLAYED A PART IN MY PLAYING CAREER WHEN THE SEASON IS DONE AND MAYBE EVEN IN PERSON.

SCOTT FARDY



“

MY CAREER HAS SEEN ITS SHARE OF UPS AND DOWNS AND I'M GRATEFUL FOR IT ALL AS IT HAS LED ME TO WHERE I AM TODAY BOTH PROFESSIONALLY AND WITHIN MY LIFE OUTSIDE OF RUGBY.

MICHAEL BENT

“

I'M GRATEFUL FOR EVERY TIME I GOT TO WEAR THE GREEN JERSEY AND FOR EACH EXCEPTIONAL PLAYER I GOT TO CALL A TEAMMATE.

KATIE FITZHENRY

“

I'D LIKE TO THANK MY TEAMMATES, WHO NEVER FAILED TO PUT A SMILE ON MY FACE THROUGH SOME OF THE TOUGH DAYS IN THE PREVIOUS FEW SEASONS. I LEAVE CONNACHT RUGBY WITH AN ABUNDANCE OF FOND MEMORIES AND, NO DOUBT, FRIENDS MADE FOR LIFE.

CILLIAN GALLAGHER

“

THIS LITTLE KID GROWING UP IN THE JUNGLE OF CONGO NEVER DREAMED OF HAVING THE OPPORTUNITY TO PLAY PROFESSIONAL RUGBY AND IT'S NOTHING I TOOK FOR GRANTED. I HAVE HAD SOME REAL LOWS AND EVEN GREATER HIGHS, LOST FRIENDS, SUFFERED CAREER-ENDING INJURIES AND I AM PROUD TO HAVE BEEN ABLE TO WORK THROUGH THEM ALL TO KEEP THE DREAM ALIVE.”

PADDY MCALLISTER

“

NOT EVERYONE GETS A FAIRYTALE ENDING BUT I WILL NEVER FORGET JUST HOW LUCKY I WAS TO BE PART OF CONNACHT RUGBY. I AM LOOKING FORWARD TO CHEERING IN THE STANDS.

SEAN O'BRIEN

“

I'M DEVASTATED AND HEARTBROKEN TO BE FINISHING MY CAREER AT THE END OF THE SEASON. THE ONE THING I'M MASSIVELY PROUD OF AND GIVES ME PEACE OF MIND MOVING FORWARD IS KNOWING I HAVE WORKED THE HARDEST I EVER HAVE IN MY LIFE TRYING TO GET BACK.

STEPHEN FITZGERALD



“

THE PAST SIX MONTHS HAVE BEEN TOUGH REALISING THAT MY PROFESSIONAL RUGBY CAREER IS COMING TO AN END BUT HAVING MY SON ISAAC IN OUR LIVES HAS PUT A LOT INTO PERSPECTIVE FOR ME. I CAN'T WAIT TO HELP HIM CHASE HIS DREAMS.

KYLE MCCALL

“

MY FAMILY AND I ARE LOOKING FORWARD TO THE NEW CHAPTER AHEAD. MY PASSION AND BELIEF IN MUNSTER RUGBY WILL ALWAYS REMAIN UNWAVERING. I LOOK FORWARD TO LOOKING ON AS A SUPPORTER AND BRINGING MY BOYS TO EXPERIENCE THE MAGIC OF A PACKED THOMOND PARK IN THE YEARS TO COME.

TOMMY O'DONNELL

“

I WILL CHERISH THE MEMORIES AND FRIENDSHIPS I HAVE MADE THROUGHOUT THE YEARS. IT HAS BEEN AN INCREDIBLE JOURNEY.

HANNAH TYRRELL



“

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN DETERMINED TO FINISH MY CAREER WHILST STILL PLAYING WELL AND ADDING VALUE TO THE JERSEY EACH TIME I GET TO PUT IT ON. TO BE IN A POSITION TO CALL TIME ON SUCH A FANTASTIC EXPERIENCE, ON MY OWN TERMS, IS ONE I AM EXTREMELY GRATEFUL FOR.

BILLY HOLLAND



“

I LOOK BACK ON MY TIME IN IRELAND AND WITH MUNSTER RUGBY WITH SO MUCH GRATITUDE AND JOY FOR ALL IT'S GIVEN ME. THANK YOU TO EVERY COACH, PLAYER, SUPPORTER AND FRIEND I MET OVER THE PAST NINE YEARS. I FEEL LIKE I'M LEAVING A BETTER MAN BECAUSE OF YOU!

CJ STANDER



**TACKLE  
YOUR  
FEELINGS**



# TYF 2.0 UPDATE

## THE BIG RUGBY RUN

Our sincerest thanks to Johnie Murphy, Graham Ross and the PSA Academies team for their efforts in leading #TheBigRugbyRun once again this year. Clubs throughout Ireland participated in the event which was launched by Robin Copeland. All funds raised will go towards the running of Tackle Your Feelings initiatives in the participating rugby groups over the coming months.



## WELCOME BACK!

We were humbled to see Tullow Rugby Club welcome back their players with a familiar message earlier this summer. It's great to see how various groups can use our messaging to help the people in their community!

## ANOTHER MILESTONE

Earlier this year, the Tackle Your Feelings hit a significant milestone with the 10,000th download of the TYF App. Available to download for free across iOS and Android, the App was launched in late 2019.

**10,000  
DOWNLOADS**

## DOWNLOAD THE FREE APP



## EXPANDING OUR REACH!

Keep an eye out for the Wexford GAA away jersey throughout the summer months. It will be first GAA jersey to showcase a partnership with TYF and is the first step in a wider plan that will involve expansion of the initiative into the high-performing sports community in Ireland. The partnership with TYF will also see the Wexford ladies and men's teams participate in wellbeing workshops and gain access to TYF's elite athlete section within its mobile app.

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# A LION HE STANDS

Following a strong season, Henshaw travels to South Africa with high hopes

**ROBBIE HENSHAW**



**For a time it seemed as though only Robbie Henshaw could win the Nevin Spence Young Player of the Year Award. Across three successive years from 2013, the Athlone man romped home with the accolade and the plaudits kept coming. Henshaw knew no different.**

Surprisingly, while he was nominated for the Players' Player award in 2015, he has yet to add that particular title to his array of individual honours. Nominated once again in 2021, he will be hoping that stat will change but in doing so he will have to fend off the claims of his fellow Lions Tadhg Beirne and Iain Henderson, while Tom Daly of Connacht Rugby has also been recognised.

"I've had a bit of success with the Nevin Spence Young Player of the Year award a few years back when I was a young lad. I got it three years in a row and the lads were like: 'C'mon now, what's going on? Who are you paying?'"

"But when you look through the names of the players who have won [the Zurich Men's Players' Player of the Year] before and who have been nominated before, it's a great milestone to be in there among great players. Tom, Iain and Tadhg have all had phenomenal seasons, so it's great."

Since he first broke through in the senior ranks almost ten years ago, Henshaw has carried a considerable burden of expectation on his shoulders. Remarkably he has only just turned 28 but his rugby career to date has already encompassed 52 Irish caps in addition to Grand Slams, Six Nations titles, Lions tours, European Cups and PRO14 successes.



It wasn't all Henshaw's doing of course and over the past number of seasons the likes of Keith Earls, Conor Murray, James Ryan, CJ Stander and Henshaw's trusted midfield comrade Garry Ringrose have all won the ultimate recognition of their peers. So, what has Henshaw in the running this time around?

"I feel like I got a good run this season," he believes. "I've been unlucky the past few years with injuries hampering my progress. I got a run of games together this year and just kept going. That was the biggest thing."

"Being consistent is also huge. You don't need to stand out in every game. You need to do your job for the team and the rest will look after itself. I haven't been worrying about the outside noise or about the outcomes. It's been a small little shift in mindset, something the first lockdown assisted me with."

**"I've been unlucky the past few years with injuries hampering my progress. I got a run of games together this year and just kept going. That was the biggest thing."**







But for injury last time out, Henshaw might also have a Lions Test cap to his name by now. A torn pectoral muscle before the second Test ultimately precluded him from an opportunity that he will hope will be more forthcoming in South Africa over the coming weeks.

Indeed, following the squad's announcement it seemed that Henshaw was the only centre heavily touted to make it. Bundee Aki, Elliott Daly, Owen Farrell and Scotland's Chris Harris make up his competition. In 2017, the likes of Henshaw, Jared Payne and Jonathon Joseph could only look on as Farrell, Jonathon Davies and Ben Te'o nailed down test places.

"Looking back and looking at the Test team they selected [in 2017], I had no arguments at all with it. I think the Test squad they selected was top class. I enjoyed the tour. I played against a lot of great teams down there. I played against Sonny Bill Williams in my first game, which was class.

"I was quite a young lad as well so it was all new to me. I wasn't expecting to walk in the door and be straight into a Test side. But not many lads can say they played against the Blues, the Highlanders, the Chiefs and the Hurricanes. There were players who played the midweek game and got into the Test team so there was always a sniff of hope or opportunity that if I'd gone well I could have potentially grabbed a spot on the bench.

"Obviously, getting injured was a pain in the a\*\*\* but these things happen. It was quite a brutal tour in terms of the physicality, playing against big teams and big men. But I've taken a lot from that tour and hopefully I'll use it as a positive going into this one.

"I've got more experience and a bit of a wiser head on me... I think! It's all definitely stood to

**“Everyone will be chomping at the bit to get into that starting test team. You have to take it day by day and do the best you can. Most importantly, enjoy it. You need to cherish it. These tours don't come along very often.”**

me and I'm just looking forward to getting going and being in the thick of it. It'll be highly competitive. Everyone will be chomping at the bit to get into that starting Test team. You have to take it day by day and do the best you can. Most importantly, enjoy it. You need to cherish it. These tours don't come along very often."

Henshaw undoubtedly has Andrew Porter on his mind as he speaks at the launch of the 2021 Zurich Irish Rugby Players Awards. Having been initially named by Warren Gatland, an injury off the bench in Leinster's penultimate game of a long campaign put paid to Porter's hopes of travelling. Many felt the eye-catching prop was set for cult-hero status on the tour. His time will come again.

"Ports' situation is definitely something that has been mentioned" Henshaw acknowledges. "Everyone was so gutted for him. He has put in so much work over the past five years since he's come into the senior squads. He's a player that never gets injured, like he's rock solid and so for it to happen in the manner it did was very unlucky.

"I met him on the Monday after the injury in and in fairness to him, he's a pretty resilient guy. He was in the gym at 7am lifting weights, even after getting that sort of news. He's an incredible athlete. I just feel so sorry for him because he never gets injured. He's a pretty bulletproof person and player."

Henshaw has demonstrated his own fair share of resilience over the years. Yet as he enters his peak years as a rugby player in arguably the form of his life, Henshaw will be able to rely on his plentiful experience in overcoming the challenges ahead – namely getting into the Lions Test squad to play South Africa on July 24.

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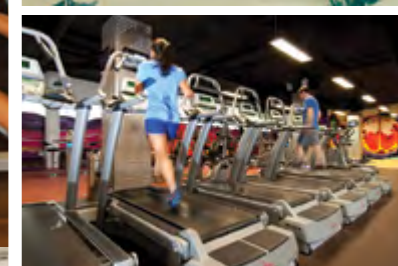
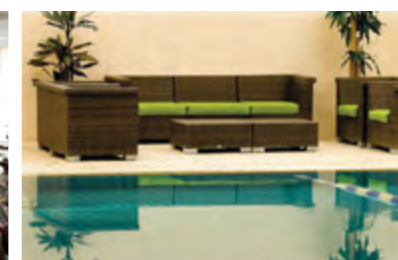
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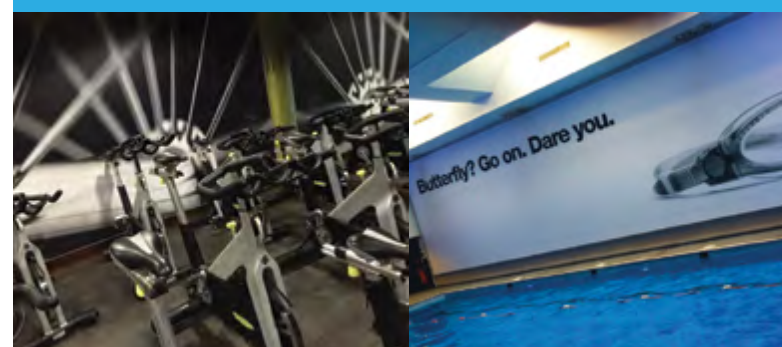
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# BRICK BY BRICK

The Zurich Women's Players' Player on the Year nominee reflects on a unique season

**DOROTHY WALL**



**Speaking to Rugby Players Ireland in 2018 upon being announced as one of the first recipients of the Goodbody Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary, Dorothy Wall cut a slightly timid figure as she discussed her transition from basketball courts and classrooms of Fethard to the rugby fields and lecture halls of south Dublin.**

Now an integral and much-admired member of the team that finished third in the Women's Six Nations Championship, Wall is at greater ease as an established Irish Rugby player. Nevertheless, she is evidently humbled by her nomination for the Zurich Women's Players' Player of the Year Award alongside Eimear Considine, Stacey Flood and Béibhinn Parsons following a positive campaign.

"To be honest, when we regrouped as a team it was a successful season for us," Wall reflects. "For the first game against the Welsh we had 20 camps under our belt, people wanted to play and show what they're worth against a team and we did."

"Then there was huge hype around it and it was a good win but it probably should have stayed as a good win rather than something that was talked about as it was because then we had the French who were a very professional outfit, and we did not perform to our standards."

"My own inexperience came to the fore in that game," she admits. "I'd never faced that competition before and so I learned a lot from it and how they treated me on the pitch. The pressure they put us under in terms of their defence coming up on us and our players, pinpointing things in the way we play and stopping how we progress was eye-opening. It showed that we need to be better problem solvers when we come up against it."

**“My own inexperience came to the fore in that game, I'd never faced that competition before and so I learned a lot from it and how they treated me on the pitch**





“But even though it was a negative experience as a team, there are definitely things we have taken from it and have turned into a positive on individual and collective levels.”

Thrust to the fore of media coverage following her abrasive performance in Ireland’s first game in six months, Wall soon became accustomed to the highs and lows of life in the spotlight. While increased coverage of the women’s game was welcomed with open arms, greater scrutiny also had its drawbacks.

“It was just a complete 360 from the week before,” Wall continues. “As players we knew within our own team what had to happen and what had gone wrong. You also had to weigh up who you’re playing each week so there was a clear difference.

“I think that it was kind of like we were superstars one week and then we were, ‘God, Jesus they’re in a bad way’ the next week. We knew what we had to do and we regrouped.

“There were some errors in the Italian match but we got the win and we won two matches out of three and I think it’s put us into a good place to build into the qualifiers. So overall in my opinion it was a positive experience.”

While Wall is satisfied with the performance of her team across the truncated competition, as



a highly competitive elite athlete she wasn’t delighted with the outcome. She acknowledges that there are improvements to be made across the board, starting with her own game but is nevertheless humbled by her nomination for the Zurich Irish Women’s Players’ Player of the Year.

“Nominations like this are definitely empowering. It’s good to know that people have your back. But to get here in the first place, you’ve done a job for the team. Your individual efforts go towards something bigger than individual accolades. It’s about the building blocks.



“I think we’re onto a really good thing,” Wall continues. “We have a built a new culture under Adam [Griggs] and Orla Curran where everyone is valued. A ‘MeWe’ culture. The culture is key because if you’re not ticking on the inside I don’t know how you’re going to perform to the outside world.

“There’s huge emphasis on that culture in both the XVs and Sevens squads. Nothing is perfect but there has been huge work put in by Ciara Griffin and our leadership group. Good people are driving us in the right direction across all of Irish women’s rugby.

“From my first Six Nations last year we’ve done nothing but go in the right direction. We’ve had

“**From my first Six Nations last year we’ve done nothing but go in the right direction. We’ve had blips, but blips happen to every team.**”

blips, but blips happen to every team. It’s just about just how you deal with them. I’m really excited. There are some really good people involved and you want to play for them all.”

Alongside the likes of Parsons, Wall represents the present and future of the women’s game in Ireland. In recent months, older figures in the squad have decided to put their rugby careers behind them. Katie Fitzhenry and Hannah Tyrrell have been involved in the Irish set-up for several seasons and leave a considerable void in the squad’s experience. Wall is prepared to step up.

“It might be a young person’s game in terms of your body and other obligations at home,” Wall believes. “Being young is what you are in your head. There’ll be a few players there for a while who might not be traditionally young but will still be playing excellent rugby. It is wearing on your body and tough in that sense but there’s also a lot of tough girls involved.

“You have to respect the girls’ decision. There’s life outside of rugby too. Both have done so much for the green jersey that they don’t owe it anything. They want to get things going in their own lives. I have the utmost respect for them.

“Look at Hannah. She’s killing it now for Dublin ladies and is a huge loss for us in terms of her skillset and what she brings to the team. She has a very cool head. I found her great to talk to on the pitch. I’ll miss both Hannah and Katie her out there but you can’t deny someone the chance to move on and make the most of other opportunities. One day that’ll be me too!”







## PLAYERS' PLAYER OF THE YEAR NOMINEES



TADHG BEIRNE



IAIN HENDERSON



BEIBHINN PARSONS



DOROTHY WALL



STACEY FLOOD



EIMEAR CONSIDINE



ROBBIE HENSHAW



TOM DALY



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# FRIENDS FIRST

Perceived on rivals on the field, Jack Carty and John Cooney are great friends off it. Here they are in conversation with Oisin Langan to discuss their latest involvement in Tackle Your Feelings

JACK CARTY & JOHN COONEY



**Oisin:** Lads, talk to me about your friendship and about how important it is to have a friend who understands things that you go through as a professional, and a friend who is there for you to lean on...

**John:** I think it's important to have a friend who understands you. It's big part of it. We understand each other very well having been through similarly tough times. We understand through rugby that there are a lot of lows and not as many highs probably. I was lucky enough to play with Jack at Connacht for three years. We would have spent a lot of time together. Some of that time turned out to be quite tough for Jack but it was an honour for me to be close to him during that stage and to try and help him where I could. Off the back of that we spent a lot of good times together, including winning the league! So it was great to team up with him for Tackle Your Feelings and enjoy that jovial aspect of the relationship again. That's not to say it isn't any fun playing against each other! Of course, with the kicking our competitive sides came out but if we were joking around we mightn't have got very many of them – that wouldn't have been a good video! It was great craic!

**Oisin:** Jack, you'll have to say nice things now!

**Jack:** Nah, I can't say much bad about Coons other than something about that Trickshot Tuesday thing he does! When John came down to Connacht, my housemate was good friends with him. John has made me realise a lot about myself. Probably the first thing he made me realise, we speak about it in the video, was about how I communicated with people on the pitch. I would have thought that communicating from my position meant I had to shout and be authoritative. One day John came up to me and said: 'look, the way you communicate with me doesn't work for me on the pitch.' That's when our friendship went to the next level. I had a tough time after the World Cup and at another stage my form wasn't where I wanted it to be. Coons was the first person I picked up the phone to. At the time he was at the top of his game, kicking last minute kicks for Ulster week in, week out whereas I didn't know how to get out of the rut I was in. I owe a lot to John for helping me to

navigate a way through that. We have good fun too. Thankfully I won the TYF kicking competition. John has a better kicking percentage this season but when the pressure came on I brought it home! We're great mates. We've a mutual friend and it would be remiss of us not to mention 'Goose'. The three of us have a What's App Group called 'Jexit' which we set up when John moved up north. We owe a lot to Goose. There's three of us and we all look out for each other.

**Oisin:** You mention that you developed a relationship by playing together and that particular conversation about the way Jack was communicating. That could have gone badly south. How did it work and how did you become closer friends because of it?

**John:** I think that conversation happened in training. We probably just got together and chatted it through. For me, and I'm sure Jack would think the same, we're like sidekicks. We're the connection between the backs and the forwards. The more we can communicate with each other, the way we play together can become almost effortless. I always look back on a performance we had together against Gloucester for Connacht in the Champions Cup. It was the pinnacle of our partnership. We lost it but it was a really fluid performance. We both scored tries that day and it was one of the most enjoyable games I've ever played in. That was a reflection of how far we had come and the connection that grew between us.





**Jack:** What it taught me was that there was more than one way to do things. I had always played my game shouting at others, I did it to every player. It wasn't as though we had to sit down and have a big conversation. He just pulled me aside after a session and asked me to communicate in a certain way that would help him and ultimately help me. What that did was open my eyes to how I communicated with others. I was in a place where I felt it was always somebody else's fault. I'd throw a bad pass and if the player knocked it on, I'd go mad. It definitely opened my eyes as to how I communicated with others. I suppose it was

a good thing from my own perspective in that I was able to take his constructive criticism on the chin and the fact he was professional enough to approach me about it. It probably shows that we had a link there and he felt I was approachable.

**John:** It's weird how everything happens then. Jack's first cap for Ireland was with me at scrumhalf against Italy. It was pretty amazing for me to be on the pitch with him for that moment and to see how it all played out in the end. To see him make that leap. I think I carried him to bed that night too so it was good craic!

“  
**It's weird how everything happens then. Jack's first cap for Ireland was with me at scrumhalf against Italy. It was pretty amazing for me to be on the pitch with him for that moment and to see how it all played out in the end.**



**Oisín:** I have an image from *Step Brothers* in my head! But look, playing together for your country is undoubtedly something you'd both want more of but unfortunately it hasn't happened in the last couple of games. Is it something you lean on each other about? How do you handle it?

**Jack:** It's a difficult thing. The only thing you can really worry about is playing well for your province. I can only speak for myself in terms of consistency. When your performances are up and down you leave yourself open for debate in terms of selection. You need to get to a place where you leave no question for the coaches. I don't want to speak out of turn but Coons has probably been in that spot for the past while. He hasn't been in squads but still manages to churn out performances. It's quite remarkable how he keeps getting on with it and keeps improving as a player.

**John:** It's been one of my mantras for the past couple of years. I remember my sister saying that all we can do is keep playing as well as we can and keep knocking on the door. It's something I've really, really tried to do. Both

Jack and I want to be world class. We want to be as good as we can. The more I realise it's in my hands, it's down to me, the autonomy of it all. Once I set out to play as well as I can, learn as much as I can and try to be the best I can then whatever happens with Ireland, happens. I've accepted that as I've gotten older. I'm also proud of how I have responded over the years. I've done all that has been asked of me over the years. I've never faltered or put my head down. Proudly I can stand up and say I gave it everything. That's the main thing for me. If playing for Ireland doesn't happen again for me, I'll be proud of how I have reacted and a lot of that came from the support I had.







**Oisin:** *That's what this Tackle Your Feelings campaign is all about. The latest video is all about supporting each other and having friends. I imagine it's advice you'd share with everyone be it in rugby squads, professional or amateur or people who have never played sport in their lives. 'You know what, go get yourself a friend, talk to someone, have someone to lean on.' Would I be correct in saying that?*

**Jack:** I got involved with Tackle Your Feelings initially because there were times during my career when I struggled. I kept going round in circles. There would have been times when I played poorly at the weekend and I let it dictate how I felt about myself. It would continue until the Thursday of the following week when you've a new game to focus on. You're just getting over it and then you have another poor performance by the standards you expect of yourself. I was feeling down and didn't feel I'd any control over how I felt. I went to see Niamh Fitzpatrick who is a sports psychologist, and we went through how to take control of those emotions. Tackle Your Feelings was just kicking off. When I was approached by Dr Deirdre Lyons at Connacht about getting involved with the campaign a little while later, it was a no-brainer for me because I wanted to help a young rugby player or a young person or anybody who finds themselves in a reoccurring circle of self-doubt, not feeling good about themselves, and give them the tools to be more proactive in managing their emotions and navigating a way through.

**Oisin:** *John would you echo that? You know what, if you have someone to talk to, you're better off?*

**John:** Jack spoke earlier about how he struggled and he got in touch with me. We all have those moments. I found this year very tough with Covid. I probably ostracized myself a little bit from people. It's been a trend for plenty of others too. I think everyone became less connected. We all became very selfish and it was about looking after number one. Towards the end of last year I realised that I needed to reach out to others more and socialise with my friends. I went into a bit of a hole. It's hugely important to have someone. Even taking part in this aspect of the campaign together was a breath of fresh air. We hadn't seen each other in a while so it was nice to do.

**Jack:** And I won the kicking competition which was even nicer.

**John:** That was just a confidence booster. You still owe me dinner from last season!

*Well done to Tackle Your Feelings and our partners at Wilson Hartnell on winning the Best Long-Term Campaign award at the Awards for Excellence in PR hosted by the Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA) and the Public Relations Institute of Ireland (PRII).*

*The Awards for Excellence in PR celebrates the very best Irish public relations, public affairs and internal communication work across the public and private sectors.*

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**I got involved with Tackle Your Feelings initially because there were times during my career when I struggled. I kept going round in circles.**

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# KICKING FOR THE TOP

Galwayman Tadhg Leader is making quite an impression in NFL circuits

TADHG LEADER



Tadhg Leader stood in the Aviva Stadium suited and booted in his USA Eagles number ones taking it in. The previous week he had tuned in from Missouri as Ireland claimed a famous victory over the All Blacks. Days later, the Galway man was at the site of that iconic game bellowing A Star Spangled Banner with all the bursting pride of an American. His rendition of Ireland's Call was a little more discreet.

Not long before, Leader was partaking in a Sports Management module at Lindenwood University when his phone buzzed. Greg McWilliams was on the line from Romania where the Eagles had picked up an injury at fly-half. Within three hours, Leader was on a flight to meet them in Dublin where the USA were due to play a buoyant Irish side.

Eligibility criterion ultimately precluded Leader from featuring that evening but it demonstrated to his Irish peers that there are opportunities out there for those who are keen to avail of them. He would go on to make a handful of appearances for the Eagles. Quite a turnaround for a player who left Connacht without a senior cap.

"The doors that open to sportspeople are very unique," Leader says. "They're the kind of opportunities that aren't offered to everybody so I think you owe it to yourself to do your due diligence on them and not dismiss them out of hand."

From coaching sides to national titles, to representing American rugby players in the European market, Leader has left no stone unturned in the USA. Even at 29, Eagle #532 continues to push new boundaries. Over the past number of weeks Leader has been lining out with the Aviators in the Spring League, an elite American Football professional development competition and NFL scouting event.

"It was only late last year when I began to give American Football some serious thought," the former Galwegians player explains. "I was all lined up to play MLR again with the New England Freejacks and I was in the US Eagles player pool. I went out kicking some footballs one day, enjoyed it and decided to do a session with a kicking coach. After 3 or 4 kicks he said, 'ok kid, you need to go see John.'"

A veteran of 24 years in the NFL and many years since honing the skills of the game's best kickers, John Carney can spot talent when he sees it. It wasn't quite Chubbs Peterson's reaction to Happy Gilmore swinging a club but there was certainly an element of surprise when the red headed Irishman



landed several kicks from distance with ease. Carney was impressed.

"It's definitely a different ball game," Leader says of his latest sporting adventure. "I've come off rugby pitches having missed a few kicks at goal and people would still pat me on the back on a game well played because as a 10 there are so many ways in which you can influence a game. In American Football you might only have five involvements in the entire game, you have to be clinical every time. Some of the Americans liken it to a snipers mentality, one shot, one kill"

"As a kicker, you're on for 1.3 seconds. It's so specific. The margins are tiny. If you take .05 seconds longer than you should you're getting blocked. You have a guy snapping the ball 8 yards and another catching, placing, twisting, and leaning the ball in like .2 of a second while I'm on approach. If the slightest thing is off it makes it a whole lot harder. Trust in the other two guys is vital, any hesitation and you've no chance of scoring.

"John Carney recommends that you sit as far away from the action as possible and not engage with the game. It's a bit like golf in that you can't be too emotional. He has taught me the processes to manage that dead time so I spend a lot of time drinking water and kicking into a net. I need to be ready to do my job irrespective of what's happening in the game around me.

“  
**As a kicker, you're on for 1.3 seconds. It's so specific. The margins are tiny. If you take .05 seconds longer than you should you're getting blocked.**





“Meanwhile you can’t help but hear the guys going crazy on the field. I’ve never heard anything like the amount of smack they talk! In some ways you miss being in the heat of a battle... but don’t get me wrong, they’re such big men that I’ve no interest in getting involved in that sense. It’s just very different from a psychological point of view. I’ve been learning a lot about the mind.”

Continuously developing his skillset as a coach, Leader has already been imparting his most recent learnings on eager students. Despite only wrapping up the last game for the Aviators at 2.30am on a Saturday morning, he was out a few hours later hosting a kicking session in Indianapolis drawing on the various influences of his career.

“Traditionally football kickers are very robotic in that they kick high and straight. In rugby, we tend to kick across the body so I found that a lot of returners struggled to read the flight of the ball because they couldn’t read my hips. I could mix it up quite a bit. I’ve also incorporated loads of information I’ve soaked up here, especially the mental stuff into my rugby coaching. The detail they go into is an eye opener.

“I’d like to think that my broad skillset has put me in the shop window for the NFL,” he admits. “Over the past few weeks a number of guys in the league have signed contracts so I know I’m not that far away. I’m in the next pool behind the 32 kickers already there. That in itself is pretty cool.

“Even if it doesn’t come off and I never put a shell on my head again I’ll still look back on what I’ve

“**I’ve talked to some of the guys on the fringes back home and have told them not to be afraid to broaden their horizons.**

done and be delighted that I had the courage to give it a crack.”

Having attained a GPA greater than 3.5 in every semester during his time at Lindenwood, Leader opted to kick on with his education and recently concluded his MBA at Lasell University in Massachusetts. Through his studies he has developed a keen eye for risk and opportunity. He encourages players who might in their comfort zone to consider a fresh environment, just as he did with his own brother.

“I’ve seen a change in Darragh who came out to the States last year. He did all the right things: 90 odd caps for Connacht, a call-up to the Irish squad, a degree. Yet he has matured so much in the few months he has been here because he has had to fend for himself. Getting out of the bubble has been the making of him because it’s allowed him to spread his wings.

“I’ve talked to some of the guys on the fringes back home and have told them not to be afraid to broaden their horizons. I was even showing some lads an article in Rugby World about the potential for rugby players to pick up jobs in WWE. I think players should see that they can actually use their experience as a professional rugby player in so many ways.

“No matter what somebody chooses to do I really believe that once you go into things with an open mind and once you’re prepared to explore them, you’ll have a very cool journey to embark on. These doors don’t open to just anybody.”



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# KICKING THINGS TO TOUCH

As an ambassador for Aware, the Irish out-half hopes to help men have important conversations

**JOEY CARBERY**



**Still only 25, Joey Carbery had it so good for so long that he'd have been forgiven for assuming that a career in professional rugby was all plain sailing. An Irish debut against the All Blacks in Chicago (just five months after inspiring Clontarf to the AIL league title) was followed by PRO14 titles, Champions Cups and Grand Slams... Carbery enjoyed a remarkable introduction to his senior rugby career.**

Yet as Ireland began their preparations for the next seminal moment in his career, Carbery was stretchered off with an ankle injury leaving his participation in the 2019 Rugby World Cup in the balance. He ultimately travelled to Japan but it was the beginning of a challenging period for the out-half. Following his return, he only played twice over the ensuing 15 months.

"I found being out injured for so long was very tough," Carbery begins as he is announced as an ambassador for Aware. "I had a series of frustrating, niggly days with loads of uncertainty. Nothing seemed to be improving. Then I had what I would describe as an awakening, a realisation of how important it is to be mentally strong and healthy."

"I can't say that I was ever blind to the importance of looking after your mental health," Carbery continues. "I was previously involved with Aware and so had awareness of the prevalence of the issues that men face but I guess when you're a bit younger you might be less inclined to acknowledge it off your own bat."

"Being mentally strong is a huge part of being a rugby player. There's a lot of talking done out there and a lot of criticism thrown about. I've been aware of it over the years without ever thinking it had an effect on me. It was when I had the ankle injury that I began to see a different side of things. Having the mental resilience to cope with what life throws at you is crucially important."

**"I found being out injured for so long was very tough, I had a series of frustrating, niggly days with loads of uncertainty. Nothing seemed to be improving."**







Having been sidelined for over a year, it was to everyone’s great relief when Carbery finally entered the fray as a late substitute in Munster’s win over the Cardiff Blues in February. It was a significant step in his mental recovery too, something that was further embellished by a late conversion from the touchline. Finally, Carbery could draw a line in the sand.

“I initially had a return date for August last year but I’d say it was about the middle of June that I knew I wasn’t going to make it. Whenever I went to the shops or caught up with family and friends, I was always being asked about it. People were being kind and asking after me but I found it tough to have to keep engaging on the topic.

“Then people began to question whether I’d come back at all. I had to question it too.”

Moments of doubt can be part and parcel of a lengthy term on the sidelines. While few would argue that Carbery’s loss to the game would have

“**I initially had a return date for August last year but I’d say it was about the middle of June that I knew I wasn’t going to make it.**

been profound, it also moves quickly on. In his absence JJ Hanrahan won the Guinness PRO14 Golden Boot while Ben Healy emerged as a genuine contender for his favoured position.

Carbery accepts that he has never had divine right to his place in any team. He sees former teammate Stephen Fitzgerald, a man of a similar age, bow out and appreciates that for now simply being back on the rugby field is the victory. Still, he has shown few ill-effects since his return while he linked up with Ireland once again to start both summer tests.

“It hasn’t been easy. I had to put the head down and keep working. That can be difficult when you’re not seeing the results for a while. I used to imagine that I was building a brick wall. Every day after my rehab I would add another brick to the wall and slowly but surely it began to build. That was just my way of looking at it, of seeing how much work I’d done and what I’d left to achieve.

“I tried to do a bit of work like that on myself but mostly I relied on the people around me. I found that by chatting to others I could get things off my mind and off my chest. Sometimes that was easier than having to try figure it all out myself.

“I chatted to people like Jack O’Donoghue and Chris Farrell, lads who have been out of the game for long periods of time with ACL injuries. In a way I was also lucky to have RG Snyman and Neil Cronin with me in rehab for a lot of the time too. I got close to them and we were all able to chat about the things we were going through.

“As bad as it might sound and I’d never wish it on anyone but having people around me who were in the same boat, coming back from long-term injuries, helped me a lot. It can be tough when you’re in the physio room and lads come into

the ‘crew’ but end up leaving before you. I’ll be delighted when I see RG and Neil out there again because we have been through a lot together.”

As he gets back to calling the shots on the field for club and country, Joey is also calling the shots off it. His learnings over the course of the past year have taught him that he has much more to contribute than points on the scoreboard.

“I’m excited about my partnership with Aware and getting involved in discussions on men’s mental health because it’s a huge component of everyday life and yet not everybody acknowledges that. I’m looking forward to learning more about it and sharing with others so that they can learn a bit too. We’ve a few things planned so I can’t wait to get stuck in.”

“**I tried to do a bit of work like that on myself but mostly I relied on the people around me.**





# STEPPING ASIDE

A veteran of the international game in two codes calls time on her Irish career

**KATIE FITZHENRY**



**It may have been a daunting decision but as the weather picks up and life begins to reopen, retirement from international rugby doesn't seem quite so bad for Katie Fitzhenry. Besides, closing the chapter on Ireland was always the plan for 2021 even if it didn't play out quite as she had envisaged.**

"Yeah, it's been good so far anyway!" the Wexford woman admits. "The support that has come through has been overwhelming – so many messages and phonecalls. At the same time it doesn't feel real yet either. The girls are on a break so for now things are just as they would have been. It'll be different when they go back into training.

"It was a bit of a decision based on my body and the fact that I felt my time was done," she continues. "I always said I'd finish after the World Cup in 2021 but Covid obviously threw everything up in the air. I mean, my body is fine but between the XVs and the Sevens I didn't think it had two World Cups in the space of a few months in it so I decided to stick to my word."

A real combatant for Ireland over several years, Fitzhenry's abrasive approach to the game earned her the highest respect of her teammates. If at the sake of a few niggles. Nevertheless, she retires with 13 caps in addition to 79 World Series games for her country. Yet while her physicality marked her out as a force to be reckoned with, Fitzhenry believes her real strengths lay elsewhere.

"When I first came into the squads I was very unsure of my place. I didn't think I was good enough. Thankfully, throughout my career I've worked with coaches who have known whether someone needs a kick up the ass or a shoulder to cry on. Stan McDowell was one of them.



"I spoke to Stan in those early stages and he reminded me that we were all good rugby players and that we wouldn't be involved if we weren't. But he also said that I had to be different in some way. I had to see myself at the top of the list in terms of certain attributes. Other girls had speed, some were excellent at set-piece. I wasn't at that stage yet.

"We decided that communication was going to be my point of difference. It was a small thing but it gave me a huge boost of confidence to know I was going to be the best communicator on the field. It ended up bringing on other aspects of my game on too."

This month, Fitzhenry begins a new role with the IRFU that will see her based at the High-Performance Centre in Abbotstown. Though she acknowledges it will be strange to look on as her teammates are put through their paces, she also believes it will help to ease her into her transition. Either way, she hopes to use her learnings in continuing to build the women's game.

"There's huge room for improvement but huge strides have also been made. How the game is played and the facilities that surround it are massively different to only a few years ago. Now I think we need to put a bit of focus on the club game and blaze our own trail. We can't mirror the men's structure because we simply don't have the numbers. There are other challenges too and those need to be heard.

**“When I first came into the squads I was very unsure of my place. I didn't think I was good enough.”**





“For me, any progress will boil down to communication. I think it’s underestimated, especially by girls. If you’re not sure where you stand on something you need to go have a conversation. We need to know certain things. It applies as players too – if you’re not making a team, go and have a chat, ask how you can improve. It’s not going to kill you. Then go back and ask for feedback, look for the next thing. Communication is key in every aspect of life and always look to improve upon it!”

Clearly, Fitzhenry is a player of the game. Even in the way she played she put others before her. As she casts her eye back over her own career as an international rugby player, she sees life through a similar lens.

“The thing I’m most proud of in my career is how some girls came in with little or no belief, adapted to how things are done and went on to become top class international athletes. Watching them run out for their country brings me huge satisfaction because I know I was part of their journey.

“What people might not realise is the amount of sacrifice that goes into playing for Ireland. Yes, it’s a huge honour and we get to travel the world, but very often we’re stuck in a hotel or waiting for hours on transfer flights while we’re missing big family events at home. It’s far from luxurious and we do our best to keep each other going.

“From a personal perspective I remember being in Colorado, in our first year on the World Series. We were really struggling to perform in the early games but then hammered Fiji to get into the 5th Place semi-final where we played Russia.

“I’ll always remember the determination shown by everyone against the Russians that day. Lucy Mulhall came from nowhere to chase someone down. I also remember tackling someone into touch on our tryline. They were big moments.

“To that point it was the highest we had finished on the series, but the biggest thing was how that game proved to be a game changer in terms of our belief. It showed that we could mix it with the best in the world. To be part of that and part of that change in mindset is something I’m hugely proud of.”

“**The thing I’m most proud of in my career is how some girls came in with little or no belief, adapted to how things are done and went on to become top class international athletes.**

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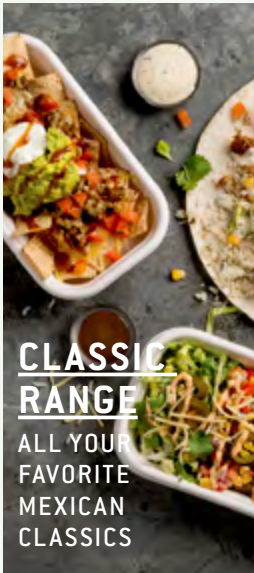
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# A DEGREE IN ONE HAND, A RUGBY CAREER IN THE OTHER

The Munster backrower has been making the most of his UCC experience

JACK O'SULLIVAN



**At just 22 years of age, Jack O'Sullivan's CV is pretty remarkable. As a student at PBC Cork he won all that was available to him before being fast-tracked into the Munster Rugby academy. Already an established member of the senior squad, O'Sullivan has also managed to get a Finance degree from UCC under his belt without delay.**

"It hasn't been easy!" O'Sullivan says. "There have been plenty of stressful times along the way, that's for sure. The first few years were about getting through whereas over the past year I've had to really perform. I knuckled down to put myself in a good position by Christmas and just did my best to stick with it."

Over the course of his four-year stint at UCC as both a student and professional athlete, O'Sullivan has had considerable demands placed on his time, yet many of the pressure points he encountered were eased by the support system at his disposal. Marcus Horan maintains regular contact with Jack Casey, the Rugby Development Officer at UCC while as manager of the Quercus Talented Students' Programme, Michelle Power has been an equally influential point of contact.

"In fairness to UCC they have been incredibly facilitating," O'Sullivan points out. "Having to do mandatory placements while mainly based in Limerick was always going to be difficult but they sorted me out, as they did with extensions and other requests. By being so helpful I think it encourages you to make sure their support is justified."

While O'Sullivan is happy to pass the praise, Jack Casey would put the backrower's successful spell in UCC down to O'Sullivan's character. Throughout his time at UCC, Casey has seen several players come through the gates at the Mardyke and onto the study halls on campus. While many succeeded, others struggled to make the most of the opportunity.

"It all comes down to individual responsibility," Casey surmises. "We'll do all we can for the player but ultimately there needs to be engagement and buy-in from staff. That will only come if the players are committed to making their academics work. Over the years we've had players come through expecting everything to be done for them. It doesn't work like that."

"I think of Cian Bohane who Marcus also linked me in with. He's an unbelievably good role model for these guys in a number of ways. Early on he recognised that the rugby wasn't going to happen for him as he had hoped. He approached his studies with the same consummate professionalism he approached the game with. We made a plan, he followed it to a tee and it was executed."

"John Hodnett is another example. He's in a time-consuming course and through connectivity and organisation, we put a programme in place while remaining respectful to the integrity of the course and others within his year. The real ticker was that he also did what he said he'd do. These guys know what it takes to get things over the line."





In addition to support staff in the UCC community, O'Sullivan has been able to lean on others within the Munster camp. UCC alumni Niall (Law) and Rory (Finance) Scannell are his cousins, while Shane Daly (also Finance) was at hand for advice on how to manage his commitments. A recipient of the Goodbody/Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary, Daly was also able to pass on handy study notes.

"I got a call from Marcus in the week leading up to Shane Daly's debut," Casey recalls. "He was due to have an exam on the day of the game against Ulster so I arranged for him to sit it in an accountancy firm in Belfast that morning. Shane isn't a member of the rugby club, but was a student looking for support which we were happy to help with. It goes to show that we try to work closely with Munster Rugby, not against them.

"Of course, we might not see a lot of our contracted players much but that doesn't matter to us. If we have them for a half dozen games, great. If not, so be it. What's important is that these individuals get the best out of themselves and play at the highest level they can.

"The studies show that a happy student is a happy athlete. If Jack O'Sullivan is worrying about deadlines ahead of a Munster game or whether he'll be picked to play for UCC when he's available for us for the first time in a few weeks, it does nobody any good. We map it all out and set our goals well in advance so that we're all on the same page."

It's clear that O'Sullivan appreciates all the support he receives. Even though his time as a student at UCC has come to a close he has no intention of parting with the famous red and black strip. While his hope is that his professional career kicks on, he'll never turn down an opportunity to run out on the pitch that famously hosted the All Blacks.



"I love playing with UCC and will play here until they tell me to leave," O'Sullivan says. "I won't be around as much as I'll be putting the study on hold for a while but I've put a lot into the past four years so I think I'm entitled to lay off the books for a bit. My priority now is to progress with Munster.

"It has been a tough year. The study has been pretty relentless while the uncertainty around the rugby was difficult to deal with. I couldn't build much momentum and so there were stages in the season when I wasn't getting picked which was frustrating.

"Then I look at it on the whole and I can see that then when the rugby wasn't going well it actually played into my hands from a study perspective. I could turn my focus to something productive. That benefitted my game too because I was better able to switch back into gear on the field. I ended up putting a good run of games together and got a Finance degree to show for it too!"

Jack Casey is immensely proud of what the club and the University have achieved over the years, especially through Quercus which also counts Hodnett, Alex Kendellen, Louis Bruce and Scott Buckley amongst its incumbents. The team effort has seen many players go on to fulfil their rugby ambitions while others have been suitably prepared for a life without the game.

"Professional rugby is ruthless. It's a hard existence. Only a small percentage go all the way. The one bit of advice I try to give all players is to leverage all the support they can get whether that's through us here, Rugby Players Ireland or whoever is willing to support them. Don't be afraid to ask for help. It's not monumental, it's only aligning stuff. Providing solutions to potential problems.

"It's a team effort between the departments. We promote the support structure, the dual career. If they need something, we can sort it but the player needs to play their part also.

"As a rugby club, success for us is seeing people like Jack leave with a degree in one hand and a rugby career in the other having enjoyed the college experience. We're thrilled for him."

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Then I look at it on the whole and I can see that then when the rugby wasn't going well it actually played into my hands from a study perspective. I could turn my focus to something productive.”

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