

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND
AUTUMN 2021



GEARING UP FOR A NEW SEASON

SEAN CRONIN, MSL AMBASSADOR

A TEST OF
CHARACTER
BARRY MURPHY

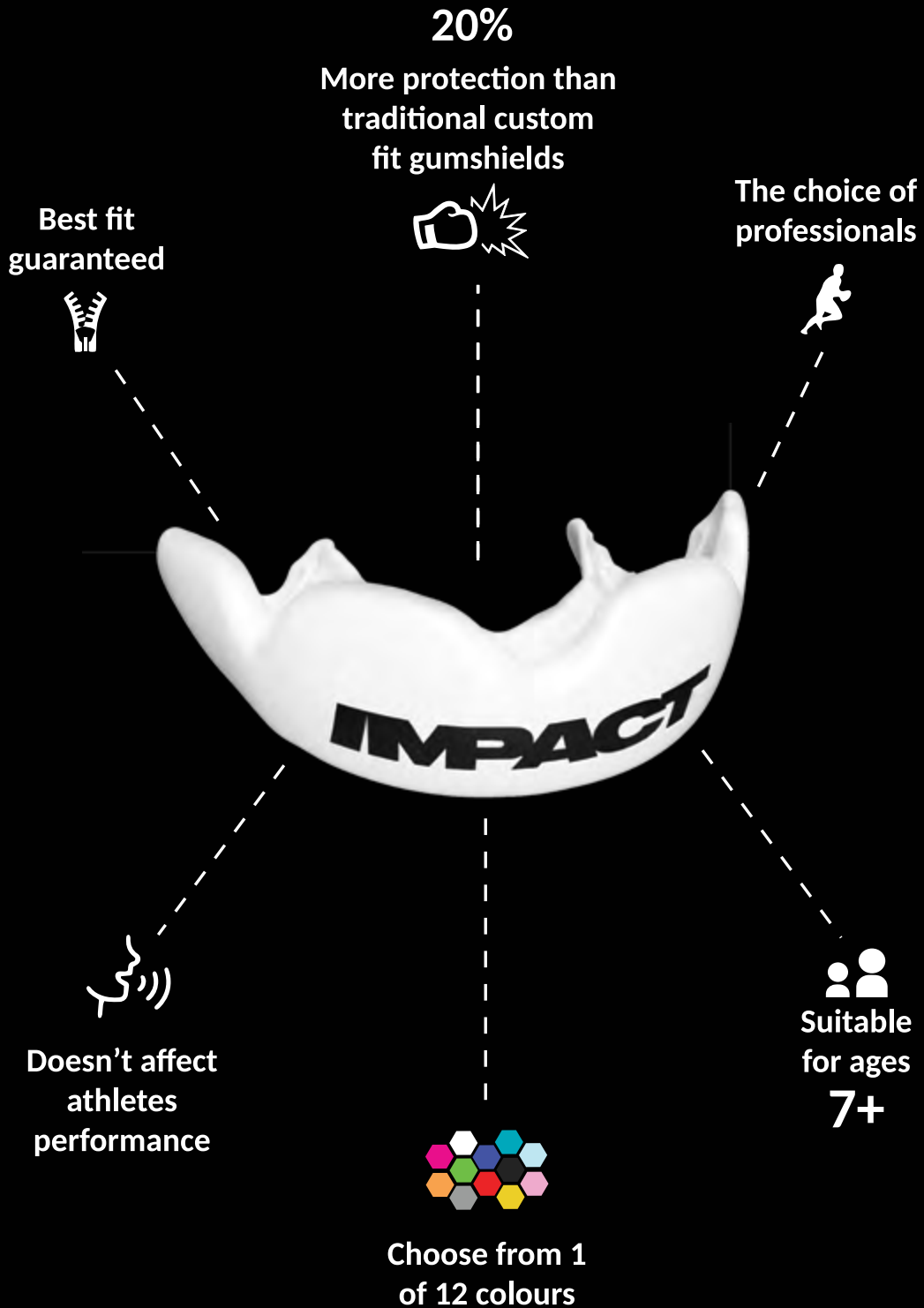
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MARK SMYTH



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CEO ADDRESS

SIMON KEOGH



Speaking to people across many industries, I got the overriding sense that many could do with a bit of a break. Up until our Sevens members bowed out at the Olympics, it has seemed as though we have been ensconced in a never-ending season. I don't have strong social media presence, but I was led to believe and glad to hear that many of our members were able to get away and put their feet up. I hope some downtime, wherever it may have occurred, has served to refresh you all for the season ahead.

As you all returned to pre-season training, we turned to our older members to ensure that they too were keeping things ticking over. My thanks to Aoife McDermott, Tommy Bowe, Malcolm O'Kelly, Peter Stringer and Paul Wallace for joining our call-out to past players to get a medical check-up through our link with the Irish Heart Foundation's recent #Reboot campaign throughout September. We have included some information on how to arrange same on page 24.

With little else to do over the lockdown, it seems many of my former colleagues managed to get into some form of training of their own over the past 18 months. While they might still be a little off the pace, I'm sure some will have imagined themselves returning to the field especially as excitement grows for the return of crowds to stadiums and the introduction of South African sides to the newly devised United Rugby Championship.

The incoming season brings with it a unique excitement for players and fans alike. While

The Bulls, Sharks, Stormers and Lions will bring a new dimension to the competition, I look forward to players raising their performances in line with attendances raising the roof. The renewed energy will also make it an exciting time for those who will be experiencing their debut professional campaign in Ireland. I wish to welcome everyone who has joined us from afar and also look forward to seeing how those who joined us on our recent Rookie Camp progress in their careers.

For many within the latter group, the past year may have had them in some doubt as to how their rugby aspirations would transpire. Most will have been pinning their hopes on places within the provincial academies from the day they first picked up a ball and despite their evident credentials, their fate was out of their control for some time. I hope the learnings of the past year will stand them in good stead for a long and successful career in the game, whilst also serving as a constant reminder as to how precarious a life in professional sport can be. Hopefully Rugby Players Ireland and its services forms part of their thinking.

At this juncture I would like to acknowledge Philip Browne who has announced that he will be stepping down as CEO of the IRFU at the turn of the year. Over the years Philip and I have grown accustomed to navigating our way through the many challenges that professional sporting environments can throw up. Although I often sat on the other side of the table, Philip was never anything but respectful and honorable in his dealings.

While Philip's departure will be keenly felt, it also represents an opportunity for someone new to come in with a fresh perspective on the game in this country. Progress is often impossible without change and while there may be some challenges along the way, we need to be prepared to try new things to ensure that rugby in this country remains on an upward trajectory.

For instance, despite there having been some great strides made in the Women's game and the Sevens programme in recent years, there is plenty more work to be done on both fronts. We need to aspire to be the best we can be and perhaps now is the time to press refresh and reconsider our path. I intend to work closely with our members on the issues that prevail.

Finally, I want to wish everyone the very best for the season ahead. As always, Rugby Players Ireland will be here to support you. If you haven't yet availed of our supports, use this new beginning as an opportunity to address that omission. It could be the difference for you this campaign!



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



ROOKIE CAMP

For the second consecutive year, our Rookie Camp took place virtually as our newest members entered the professional fray. Over the course of a week, academy players from the four provinces attended workshops on modules that included Creating Good Habits, the Language of Consent, Self-Care and Online Reputations, while Paul O'Connell, Andrew Porter and a number of current senior players shared their own insights into life as a professional rugby player.



IRISH HEART FOUNDATION

As our current members were being put through their paces ahead of the new campaign, Rugby Players Ireland joined forces with the Irish Heart Foundation for the 'Reboot your Life' campaign. Aimed at men in their 40s and 50s, Rugby Players Ireland used the campaign to encourage our past players to ensure things are ticking over by getting a medical health check-up. Having lost former friends and teammates to heart conditions in recent years, the initiative is of immense importance to our membership.

Our thanks to Tommy Bowe, Malcolm O'Kelly, Peter Stringer, Paul Wallace and Aoife McDermott who all joined the call to arms. Check out page 20 for more!

Rugby Players Ireland are pleased to announce the details of our partnership with LIA, the center of excellence for the education and development of Financial Professionals, that will see them provide a financial wellbeing programme to professional and elite rugby players across the country.

Good levels of financial awareness, knowledge and skills are necessary to make effective financial decisions and are important preconditions for wider financial wellbeing. Money, and the way you use it, can have a positive or negative impact on your health and wellbeing.

Built around five core modules, Smart Money Habits will provide our members with a sound introduction to understanding their finances and ultimately allow players to take their first steps in planning for their financial future. Smart Money Habits will be fundamental in future-proofing a player's overall wellbeing throughout their career and beyond. For more, check out pages 30-33.



DEVELOPING
YOUR FUTURE
IN FINANCE

IRFU CHIEF EXECUTIVE TO RETIRE

In their respective roles as CEO and Chairperson of Rugby Players Ireland, Simon Keogh and Peter O'Mahony responded to the news that Philip Browne will be stepping down from his role as Chief Executive of the IRFU.



On behalf of Rugby Players Ireland and our members I would like to extend our best wishes to Philip in his retirement. As will doubtlessly be echoed throughout the reaction to this news, Philip's contribution to the game in this country across several decades has been immense.

"We have faced many challenges since Rugby Players Ireland was first established in 2001. While we have not always been in agreement, Philip approached our discussions with the greatest respect at all times and ensured that the best interests of the players and the game remained at the very heart of our discussions. He has been a pleasure to work with.

"Philip has presided over the greatest era in our sport with great humility. Working together we have been steadfast in our quest to have Ireland be the best place in the world to play rugby. While I look forward to continuing on this journey with him over the coming months, I also hope that in time he will be able to look back on his tenure with enormous pride

Simon Keogh



On behalf of my fellow players, I'd like to thank Philip Browne for everything he has done for our game. In overseeing its transition from amateurism to success on a global stage, Philip's contribution has been hugely significant. As we emerge from the pandemic, we must build on his legacy of growth and stability to map out the future of rugby in Ireland.

Peter O'Mahony



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND ANNUAL GOLF CLASSIC

We were delighted to get back to Druids Glen Hotel & Golf Resort for the Annual Rugby Players Ireland Golf Classic in September. With current players observing their provincial bubbles, this year we were joined by a host of former players on the day. Many thanks to all our guests and sponsors for playing your part on a memorable day, while a special acknowledgement must go to our members who traipsed across the country to be with us!

1ST PLACE:

Wilson Hartnell

2ND PLACE:

Druids Glen Hotel & Golf Resort

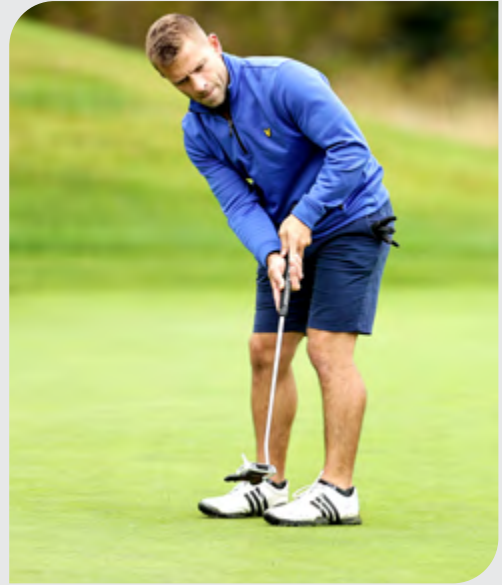
3RD PLACE:

Ulster Bank

LONGEST DRIVE:

Mick Kearney





**TACKLE
YOUR
FEELINGS**

ZURICH

TYF 2.0 UPDATE

TYF SCHOOLS

As students and teachers across the country prepared to return to classrooms ahead of the new school year, Irish international rugby players Ciara Griffin and James Lowe teamed up with Tackle Your Feelings to invite post-primary schools to take part in the 2021/2022 Tackle Your Feelings Schools mental wellbeing programme as part of the #ImTakingControl campaign. The programme is designed to instil a positive proactive approach to mental health and wellbeing among young people, reducing stigma and encouraging the development of positive wellbeing habits which they can bring throughout their school career and into adulthood.



The Tackle Your Feelings Schools Programme is a classroom based, teacher led, life skills development programme which enables students to build healthy habits and personal coping strategies as well as kindness and understanding when it comes to mental health and wellbeing. The content for the app-based programme, is developed using positive and sport psychology principles and is supported with comprehensive lesson plans for teachers, whilst students can easily access the content whilst in school or at home. The 2021/22 programme includes an 8-lesson schedule, covering awareness, emotions, wellbeing characteristics and self-care.

Ahead of the return to school, Ciara and James hopped on a call with several students to share their own experiences of school as a teenager. Check out the chat on page 14!

TYF UNIVERSITY ROADSHOW

Research conducted by Aontas on the mental health of 3rd level students showed that 59% of responders' mental health was negatively impacted by Covid-19. 54% of those surveyed also cited a lack of motivation or structure whilst dealing with remote learning. With colleges and universities returning to campus and two groups of students (this year's first year and second year students) stepping into lecture rooms around the country for the first time, Tackle Your Feelings is hoping to bring the messages of positive mental wellbeing to the 3rd level students of Ireland with our inaugural TYF University Roadshow. Empowering these young adults to adapt to a new environment and build the skills to deal with future challenges that they may face.



In conjunction with campus students' unions, we plan to host a courtyard takeover in at least one university or college campus in each province, raising awareness of positive proactive mental health and wellbeing, as well as the resources and tools to build and maintain positive mental health. We will also run a panel discussion, compiled with experts in mental health and wellbeing as well as our own member ambassadors who will share their experiences and help spread the messages of proactive positive mental health.



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GEARING UP FOR A NEW SEASON

MSL Ambassador Sean Cronin on broadening his horizons

SEAN CRONIN



Entering into the fifteenth season as a professional rugby player, Sean Cronin's identity is synonymous with that of his exploits on the field. Capped 72 times by Ireland throughout a trophy laden decade for both club and country, the Limerick man could be forgiven for easing off the pedal and riding out the final years of a glorious career.

Yet as Father Time taps on his clockface, Cronin is not letting a moment pass him by. While he intends to eek every ounce out of his body before he calls time on his playing days, it's clear that his perspective has also broadened as a new horizon looms. Earlier this year Cronin completed a business degree from Griffith College.

"I actually started a business course back in UL many, many years ago and had it transferred to Dublin when I moved to Leinster so it's been a long time coming! I'm delighted with it. Over the past year there's been no getting away from the fact that I'm in the twilight of my career so I quit beating around the bush and started putting plans in place.

"Leo [Cullen] has been very keen for lads to get involved with Dr Emma Burrows and to use the supports Rugby Players Ireland provide. The whole study thing was something I should have done earlier in my career but you can become very narrow minded with the rugby and everything else tends to go by the wayside.

"I haven't been the greatest for the books but I've enjoyed having things that take my mind away from the game for a bit whether that's studying, coaching or a bit of volunteer work. It's all getting me ready for the next step but at the same time it has given me a focus that can benefit my game too even at this stage in my career. I'm a bit late to the party but hopefully with Rugby Players Ireland growing in influence, some of the younger lads won't make the same mistake."

Despite his additional commitments, Cronin has also been dividing his time between Dublin and the M7 with his young family having relocated to Limerick. While most would prefer to avoid the commute, the 35-year-old hooker has come to value his time on the road. Time for podcasts, music and even a bit of learning. He is also grateful for the comfortable journey enabled by Rugby Players Ireland's new partners at MSL Motor Group.

“I haven't been the greatest for the books but I've enjoyed having things that take my mind away from the game for a bit whether that's studying, coaching or a bit of volunteer work.”



"I've been with MSL about 18 months now and to be honest it's been a really great business to work with. I've primarily dealt with Brian Downes at MSL Pottery Road who has been fantastic in terms of setting me up with a car to fit my needs. I have an E220 which is the perfect family car because when you have three kids like I do there's a lot to fit in!

"Being able to drive in comfort is a huge benefit too especially with the age I'm at, I need to be looking after myself. I look forward to the spin and getting a bit of time to myself. Plus, I now look the part as a father!"

Cronin's off-field initiative has also seen him link up with Rugby Players Ireland's Financial Services Education partners at the LIA, the Centre of Excellence for the Education and Development of Finance Professionals. Having secured his degree, Cronin set about doing his QFAs before learning of Rugby Players Ireland's newly established connection.

"I think the LIA and Rugby Players Ireland coming together is important for a few reasons. I think it's really good for younger players coming into the game for a start. Getting a bit of money at that age can be very exciting but they need to be thinking about how they use it and the LIA can encourage financial models they can benefit from.

"It's also important for the older guys like myself and Devin Toner who has also got on board with what they're offering. It's a really clear-cut programme. We have our six modules, six exams and they send you all the materials you need. The lines of communication are very good and the system online is fantastic to use. Personally, it's a great opportunity. I feel there's an additional layer of support now and I think it will be a really good partnership for the players' association across the board."



“

As we've seen over the past year, you never know what's going to be around the corner. I'm off the back of a good pre-season so I'm really looking forward to kicking on.

With more time on the road, study and the extra care a 35-year-old body requires, Cronin's time has been squeezed more than at any other time during his career. The saying goes that you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but Cronin would beg to differ.

"I had to make it work because I could suddenly see the importance of it. We get a lot of downtime as players and so if I was to walk away from the game not having put that to good use, it would have been a huge regret. I wish that I had realised I could do this a few years ago. Back then the thoughts of it all put me off but it's just about being organised. The key is getting into the routine of it and it becoming part of your day. It's about being proactive and utilising your time efficiently."

With crowds returning to stadiums and the South African sides posing a new challenge to Leinster's undisputed domestic throne, Cronin remains as excited for the coming season as any other. In recent years, staples of the dressing room have moved and the temptation might have been to do likewise but he feels he still has plenty to offer.

"As we've seen over the past year, you never know what's going to be around the corner. I'm off the back of a good pre-season so I'm really looking forward to kicking on. The sessions haven't got any easier but I've been trying to cherish them as much as I can. It's not only because of the age I'm at but also because we've come through such a strange time. The years pass by very quickly. I don't want to take any of it for granted.

"The younger lads keep pushing me on too. I'll have a right battle on my hands to get into the team this season with Ronán (Kelleher), James (Tracy) and Dan (Sheehan) but that's all part of it isn't it? A challenge brings out the best in us. I know what I can bring to the mix."



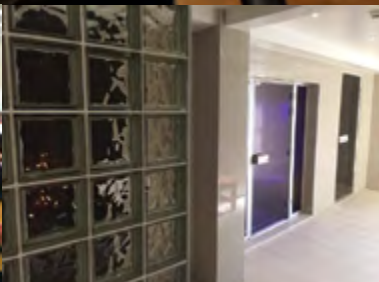
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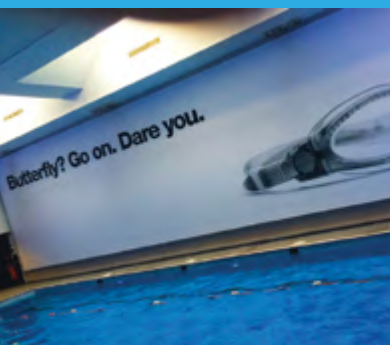
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TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS

THE WONDER YEARS

As schools returned in September, Ciara Griffin and James Lowe jumped on a call with several students to discuss their own experiences of life as a student and a budding athlete

CIARA GRIFFIN & JAMES LOWE



Emma Jane (13)

When you were our age, did you always play rugby or did you begin a little later?

James Lowe

When I was your age, I was still playing every sport under the sun. I grew up in New Zealand so there wasn't much GAA! I would have played a lot of cricket, basketball and athletics. I played a little bit of soccer too but I wasn't very good so that was the one thing I really didn't really like. I found that playing a variety of sports really helped my rugby. They all had transferable skills. For example, my hand-eye coordination is good because I played cricket. If I was you, I'd play as many sports as you can. I was drawn to rugby because my Dad played it and I always enjoyed playing so I felt it was going to be my passion.

Ciara Griffin

Growing up in Kerry I played a lot of GAA, so a lot of football and handball. I had a small bit of soccer but similar to James I wasn't very good at it! They all gave me the skills I use today. My dad coached rugby locally when I was small so rugby was in the house but I could never play it. At 14, I got him to set up our girls team in Castleisland. At the time I felt I was really old taking it up but now when I chat with my teammates, I was actually very young. A lot of them didn't start until they got to college.

Harry (13)

Were you the best in the team?

James Lowe

It's hard to say that you were the best. From a very, very young age I was always interested in sport. I was also a little bit bigger than everyone else which helped. I found I could run a little bit faster and jump a little bit higher. I was always one of the better players in my team but I had to learn many harsh lessons along the way. I was pushed up a grade or two now and then and I had to play against older boys. People develop at different ages. You find that somewhere along the line everything begins to level out and that's where the hard work makes all the difference.

Ciara Griffin

I definitely wasn't the best, that's for sure! I was a hard worker though. I'm from a farm so I was out doing jobs from a very young age. As a result, when I started playing rugby I felt a bit stronger than the others which helped me to settle into the concept of rugby and the physicality. I still worked very hard at it.

I'll never forget, I played on mixed tag rugby team in school. There was one boy we played with who was always a little bit faster than me. No matter what I did, he was always out ahead of me and I always seemed to be chasing him. It made me want to get better. I firmly believe that once you



have a good attitude and work ethic, you'll get better but you have to focus on yourself. When I focused on the boy, I'd feel disappointed and frustrated because I couldn't get to his level. I'll never forget going home to Dad back in the fields and he had me doing sprint techniques in wellies just to get it out of my head. It worked. I worked on myself and set my own goals. You don't have to be the best but you can always get better by your own standards.

Kate (14)

How do you feel before a big game?

James Lowe

I used to get very nervous before games but the way I see it, I was nervous because I cared. I wanted to perform. Nowadays I'm only really nervous if I haven't done my preparation. As a professional, I use all my time during the week to prepare for the game at the weekend. I've played the game for almost 30 years so you put me on a field, I know what I'm doing but instinct will only get you so far. What sets you apart is the work that has gone before it. If my homework isn't done, I don't feel good before a game. I'm nervous if I haven't done my work.

Ciara Griffin

I get butterflies in my belly! I'm the opposite to James because if I don't feel them, I think there's something off, so I like having that feeling before a game. I love silence too. Some of the girls will be going mad with their music but I'm very old school. On the way to a match I'll visualise different situations and how I'll react to them. There will be nerves but I calm myself by going over those scenarios and how I'll answer those questions.

I thought a little differently about my nerves when I was small. I used to play handball but I'd tell my parents not to come to any games because I'd be so nervous. I didn't want to embarrass them. As I've got older I realised that I could relish the nerves, control them and use them to my advantage. Personally, I think nerves are good.

REFRAME

Nerves and feeling nervous are a normal reaction to something important coming up. In fact, from a sport psychology point of view, in order to perform well we need to have a little bit of nervousness before a game. Our bodies and minds become activated and alert getting us ready to put in the effort required to play. What we can do however, is reframe that nervousness into excitement. If we are not excited enough, we can feel bored and lethargic, if we are too excited, we can start to panic. Getting into the right zone of excitement can be where we experience our best levels of performance.

Roisin (13)

Do you have any rituals before a game or training?

Ciara Griffin

Before I play I'll always have two pancakes, two pieces of bacon and a rice pudding with raspberry jam! I'm very precise. I won't have it any other way. It's my routine so it's a big thing for me when we're travelling. In the dressing room I have my own spot too. We have little cards to write our targets, I write down my three words, I get a caffeine gum and put them into my gumshield pocket. They're little things but they are important to me.

James Lowe

I eat a block of chocolate the night before a game! When I made my professional debut at 19, I couldn't understand why some of my teammates were eating chocolate – it's not exactly Sports Nutrition 101. The lads told me not to worry about it because you'd burn it off in a game anyway! I knew it didn't make scientific sense but I went along with it. I'm 29 now and I'll always have a block of chocolate because that's what works for me. I always have to be prepared and make sure I have a block in the bag. Trust me, a lot of the boys have jumped on my chocolate train!



TAKE CONTROL



The most important thing before matches, games or big performances is to be confident in your own preparation. We can often let our minds fill with doubt: doubt over performance, doubt over outcome, doubt over the opposition, doubt over conditions. These are not unusual thoughts to have but they are often things that can be outside of our control. Instead, focus on the things that are in our control. If you have done the preparation, trained hard, learned plays and had fun then nothing can take away from that. If you commit to doing your best on the day, taking control of your own personal performance, then nothing can take away from that either.

In terms of preparation, finding something that works for you and helps you get into the right frame of mind, whether eating a bar of chocolate, a couple of pancakes or writing down goals and affirmations, creating a positive routine before you play can help you feel more in control and remind you of the good work that has already been put in.

Conor (16)

Is there anyone that you looked up to when you were growing up?

James Lowe

When I was growing up Jonah Lomu was obviously a big icon in New Zealand. He was a man mountain and could do unbelievable things on a rugby field. That dude was a mammoth of a human with a huge heart. What he did on the field revolutionised the game. Then as I began to understand the game a little more, I always looked to Israel Dagg. He was a former All Black who was very, very good. These days I suppose I'd have a wee crush on Cheslin Kolbe. What he can do with ball in hand and his defence for such a small man... crikey!

Ciara Griffin

I have three. Like James, Jonah Lomu was there for me too. I remember getting up as a six-year-old to watch the All Blacks play. From the haka and right through the game I'd be looking for him the whole time. I loved watching him play.

Closer to home, Siobhán Fleming was and still is my hero. I idolised her. I was very fortunate that I got to play with her for my club and for Munster.

I remember going to training and she walked out of the dressing room and started talking to me. It was a bit surreal!

I also admired Serena Williams. Growing up I didn't have your typical frame. I was a bit bigger than others and carried a bit of weight. At that age you think you should look a certain way and Social Media these days adds a bit more pressure. It was eye opening when I first saw Williams. Athletes like her love how they are, promoted it and used her body to her advantage. Watching her gave me a new lease of life as a 14/15-year-old. I realised I can be who I am.

ROLE MODELS



Role models are a great thing to have, and a great thing to be.

We know that people are more likely to adopt a certain behaviour if someone they look up to embodies that behaviour. We can actually build our own self-belief by modelling ourselves on the positive actions of others. Sometimes in difficult situations we can look to role models for guidance or answers. Role models do not have to be someone famous or unknown to us, they could be a family member, teammate, or a friend.

It is also important to realise that sometimes, we ourselves are the role models and how we act and react to certain situations can influence someone else's beliefs and actions. Therefore, it can be beneficial for us to stop and think about how we may act or behave, because we are never fully aware of who may be watching.

Colin (14)***Who has helped you deal with the emotions of being a rugby player?*****James Lowe**

When I made my professional debut I was a completely different person. I was very uptight 19-year-old and I worried a lot about what others thought about me. I had all the media apps and alerts to check what was being written about me. People can be quite outspoken on someone's performance.

When I started playing Super Rugby I linked up with David Galbraith, a performance psychologist and an amazing human. He was the first person I told about these (what I thought were) weird insecurities but he told me it was such a common thing. He just said: 'Mate, stop worrying about what other people think.' I had such high expectations of myself and when I didn't reach them it'd really get me down, especially because rugby was the one thing I knew I was good at.

Now I genuinely don't care what anyone says about me. It's been such a relief. Once you stop caring, you can go out and do what you want. For me, once you're a good person it's the number one thing. I have teammates that don't perform but it doesn't bother me because I know they're good people and doing their best.

Ciara Griffin

Growing up, my parents definitely gave me emotional support. It's mad the amount of times I used to sit in the backseat and vent all the way home in the car! They'd get the full debrief and usually I'd be giving out about everything that had gone wrong. They'd hear me out and then flip it, telling me all the things I'd done well. Looking

back, I needed that opportunity to talk it out instead of bottling it up. When I do bottle things up it doesn't work out well for me.

The more I got into rugby, my husband Damien has always been there to listen. He's my rock and gives some great advice. I think support bubbles are hugely important to have around us. Even though it's a team game, there are times in sport when you think you're going it alone yet there are all these people around you who are looking out for you: a coach, a teammate, a parent. In any walk of life, you should make the most of the support network around you. Don't be afraid to ask for their help.

James Lowe

My family are very supportive too, only they are all the way over in New Zealand! Over here I try to surround myself with good people. My girlfriend moved over here with me and has been amazing. She played hockey semi-professionally back home so understands some of the pressures for sure. We definitely bounce off each other very well. We understand when the other is down and can pick each other up. It's a very good relationship we've built. We're open and transparent about everything. I know when she needs to let her hair down, go to the hairdressers and get pampered and she knows when I want to go to the pub! We've been amazing for each other and enjoying our life over here for sure.

SUPPORT NETWORK

We know that strong, positive support networks are invaluable to our overall wellbeing. People in our support network can help us navigate difficult times as well as help us celebrate our wins. Knowing you can ask someone to help you make a tough decision, unpack tangled thoughts or even just keep you company can help ease the burden of certain challenges that we face.

We also know that strong and healthy relationships can predict longer and happier lives, increase life satisfaction, self-esteem, confidence and our experiences of joy. Athletes can use their support network to learn new skills, or to provide sporting expertise and guidance. Friends and family also supply complimentary support which does not require sporting expertise but are equally as beneficial to our own mental health and wellbeing.





Hannah

How difficult was it to balance your sport with your school, your friends and all that comes with being a youngster?

Ciara Griffin

It can be a real balancing act when you're in secondary school because you don't want to let anyone down. I used to take a lot on my shoulders and let things get into my head. For example, in school I used to stress about exams. As things got on top of me I learned that I needed to clear my head so I'd get up at 6.30am and go for a quick 30min run before my 8am bus. I felt so much better and was able to focus on the class I was in.

Coming up to my Leaving Cert I had to give up some sport which was really hard. I told myself it would only be for a few months and that I could always take them all up again. It was the best decision I made because I took control of my study and while I kept one sport on I knew I wasn't stretching myself too thin. Some people can do it all but I had to put myself first for those few months. It was a big call for me at the time and I was really worried about what people might think but my coaches and teammates were very understanding. I realised I'd built it up too much in my head rather than just saying it and explaining how I was feeling.

James Lowe

I had a seriously big balancing act. For a whole year I had training for two different sports every day of the week. I played so much! It wasn't until my exams at the end of the year that I found that my schoolwork was starting to fail. I had taken on too much. I started cutting back on a few things and had to get better at time management.

My brother was very smart. He told me that while it'd be cool if I became a sportsperson, I needed to remember that it might not work out that way: if that bridge burns down you need to cross the river on a different crossing. That was actually very helpful advice because my parents just thought I was the best and let me at it! I was about 17 and was going to school each morning completely knackered so I started knuckling down. It was a difficult

time because I was so passionate about sport but I began to understand that it wasn't the be all and end all.

It's important to remember that if something doesn't go well it doesn't make you a bad person. My mates understood. I wasn't opting out for the wrong reasons. You have to look after yourself first. I wasn't quitting on them because I didn't like them, there just wasn't enough hours in the day. I physically couldn't cope. They fully understood the reasons why.

Sean (14)

Did you like school?

James Lowe

You realise when you leave that school is amazing. It's one of the best times of your life, trust me. It's weird for me to say it but if I could go back to school I'd do it in a heartbeat. I'd apply myself in everything I could. It took me quite a few years to realise that jeepers, I should have been listening a bit better.

Ciara Griffin

I loved school so much so that I went back for the rest of my life! I'm a primary school teacher and I teach second class but I love working with kids because they keep you guessing!

James Lowe

I actually enrolled in teacher's college when I left school! Rugby got in the way though. I like to think I still have plenty to teach!

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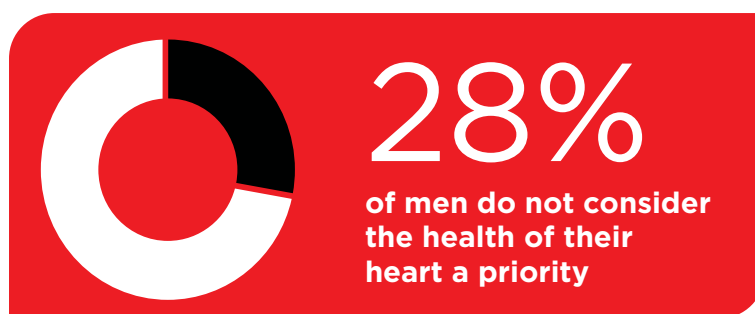




RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND JOINS **REBOOT CAMPAIGN**



A new survey carried out by Ipsos MRBI on behalf of the Irish Heart Foundation has found that more than one in four (28%) men do not consider the health of their heart a priority, even though males account for almost three quarters of those who die prematurely of cardiovascular conditions in Ireland.



Data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) shows that almost 30% of all premature deaths (younger than 65) in 2018 were from cardiovascular conditions such as heart attacks and strokes and the vast majority (73%) of those affected were men.

In response to the findings, the Irish Heart Foundation launched a 'Reboot Your Life' campaign which ran through the month of September to encourage men to review their lifestyles and make vital, sustainable changes to improve their heart health.

The campaign was supported by Rugby Players Ireland and fronted by a number of former Ireland internationals – Tommy Bowe, Malcolm O'Kelly, Peter Stringer and Paul Wallace, while current Irish Women's player and Clinical Research nurse Aoife McDermott also rowed in behind the initiative.

In the past five years, two of the players' friends and former teammates, Anthony 'Axel' Foley and Gary Halpin, passed away suddenly due to heart issues at the ages of just 42 and 55.

Led by their players' association, the former players came together to urge men of all backgrounds and fitness levels to take control of their health and Reboot their Lives throughout September.

CSO data shows that 999 men died of a heart attack in 2020, compared to 642 women. In the same year, in the 45 to 54 age group, 217 men died of heart disease and stroke compared to only 75 women.

"One in four men in Ireland die from heart disease and stroke and men are nearly three times more likely than women to die young from these issues – but the good news is that 80% of those deaths are preventable through healthy lifestyles," said Janis Morrissey, the Irish Heart Foundation's Director of Health Promotion.

"The proportion of men who are living with overweight (43%) and obesity (25%) is higher than for women (31% and 22% respectively) and men's diets are generally less healthy.

"The older you get, the higher your risk – and so we are encouraging men, particularly men in their 40s and 50s, to take stock of and Reboot their lifestyles by identifying what simple changes they can make now to benefit their heart health into the future."

Rugby Players Ireland continues to encourage its members, particularly former players, to prioritise their heart health.

"Over the course of their careers, our members have access to the best facilities and medical supports to ensure they maintain peak physical performance," said Simon Keogh, CEO of Rugby Players Ireland.

"It's only natural that some of these habits and activities take a back seat when the time comes to retire from the game.

"We are therefore encouraging all our past players to stay fit, healthy and to get medically screened at least every two years."



Malcolm O'Kelly on... living for the future

In my younger days, rugby was not only my career but also my passion and it was built on discipline and commitment. Leading a healthy lifestyle was key to making that work.

These days, I don't have the same amount of time or energy and that goes for all of us. But as a dad of three, I need to keep myself healthy to ensure I am around for as long as I can be. And that takes commitment too.

The statistic that sticks with me is that 1 in 4 men will lose their lives to heart disease or stroke. We have to change this. Making positive lifestyle choices are key to keeping you and your heart healthy. Eat healthily, get active and lads... give up the bad habits - we all know what they are.

Make a change now and you can lead a healthier, longer life. Don't miss out on your own future.



Tommy Bowe on...staying healthy

When I was playing professional rugby, diet was such a huge factor in my performance – I didn't even have to think about it because I needed to eat well, it was part of my job...and I had people keeping an eye on me! But now, I sometimes need to remind myself.

Diet plays a huge part in our overall health, wellbeing and most importantly, our heart health. Last year, almost 1,000 men died from a heart attack in Ireland. We can't let this continue.

It comes down to lifestyle choices. Make an effort to eat healthier – skip the takeaways and try cooking new recipes at home. Eating healthier can be fun and easy and you might discover a new passion too!





Paul Wallace on... **keeping fit post-injury**

When I was playing rugby fulltime, I never worried about my health. I was active, fit and ate well. But since I have retired, old injuries have made me reassess my approach to my health.

No longer able to run like I used to, I needed something to keep me fit and healthy, but didn't affect my injuries. Cycling is now my way of keeping fit. Take up a new sport, go for a daily walk or try a new hobby that gets you outdoors like gardening or cycling. Just get active!

Peter Stringer on... **losing a friend**

Sadly in 2016, we lost Anthony Foley. He was not just my teammate – he was my friend. At only 42 years of age, heart disease took him away from his family and friends far too young. Nobody would have expected this to happen to a former athlete, coach and such a young man.

Often there are no warning signs, and currently 1 in 4 men within will lose their lives to heart disease or stroke in Ireland. We all know someone who has lost their life, or nearly lost their life, to this disease.

The good news is that 80% of cases are preventable. We just need to make a commitment to Reboot our lives by making positive lifestyle changes. This could be exercising, eating healthier, taking up a hobby that gets you outdoors or giving up a bad habit. And importantly go in for a check-up. Your body needs an NCT at our age too.



Aoife McDermott on... **keeping things ticking over**

Through my rugby and my work, my life is built around healthy habits. I need to look after myself to maximise my performance both on the pitch and in the lab as a research nurse.

As an amateur player, I have to juggle a lot of things - so I need all the energy I can get! Thankfully I can make the most of some great training facilities but I also get energy from being on the move throughout the day. Walking or cycling to work, preparing good meals for the week. You see, it's a choice.

I know I have a healthy lifestyle but I also know that we can't take anything for granted either. I need to stay on top of things. No matter how fit you might seem, it's important to get checked and ensure we keep everything ticking over.

HEALTH SCREENING OPTIONS

The two best ways to make an appointment for a health check-up is via:

1. **GP – make an appointment and ask for a full health screening.**
2. **Private health insurance – most policies will have cover of at least partial cover for a full health screening.**

Past Players in the Republic of Ireland

Charter Medical

Charter Medical supply both public and private healthcare within its own facility and have a range of services. Health screening can be booked directly with Charter medical without a GP referral. Rugby Players Ireland has a preferred rate for the Executive Health Screen with Charter Medical. A past player with private health insurance, can avail of a discounted price and can further claim tax relief on the portion of those expenses not covered by your insurer. Many policies also have additional benefits which include a contribution toward health screening.

For those without Private Health Insurance, you can still avail of a Rugby Players Ireland preferred rate by contacting corporatehealth@chartermedical.ie or to book directly through the website and enter "Rugby Players Ireland" into the description of the booking.

Past Players in Northern Ireland

CRY Screening Centre

For individuals under the age of 35 Cardiac Risk in the Young (CRY) holds ECG screening clinics for those aged 14 to 35 at locations around the UK. Since 2005 over 14,000 young people have been screened in Northern Ireland. Visit testmyheart.com website to view all upcoming screenings.

NHS Health Check

If you're aged 40 to 74 and you haven't had a stroke, or don't already have heart disease, diabetes or kidney disease, you're eligible for an NHS Health Check. This is a free check-up of your overall health, which can identify if you're at higher risk of getting certain health problems, such as:

- heart disease
- diabetes
- kidney disease
- stroke

The NHS Health Check may be carried out by your GP or local pharmacist and should be repeated every five years. If you meet the criteria and haven't been invited to attend this routine assessment, you should contact your GP.

Private Health Insurance Options

If you have private medical insurance cover you may find that your policy covers various types of health assessments and/or screening services, or provides some discount for health checks with outside sources.

Any investigation usually needs a GP referral, however with some health assessments you may be able to self-refer. Please consult your health plan benefits or contact your provider to check your cover and the correct process, prior to making any appointment.

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A NEVILLE HOTEL

BACK ON TRACK

The former Irish Sevens player is chasing her own goals

STEPHANIE CARROLL



Stephanie Carroll has many fond memories of Energia Park. The first is a little hazy. Back in April 2019, the Limerick flyer latched onto a pass from Leinster Rugby CCRO Daisy Earle to streak away and set Railway Union en route to their maiden AIL title. Few, if any, could get their hands on the winger all season except for the club's President who nearly knocked her out in the ensuing celebrations.

The second came just a few weeks ago as Carroll returned to Donnybrook with a Munster Rugby side who proceeded to claim their first interprovincial title in four years. It was a championship that proceeded to attract attention for all the wrong reasons but for Carroll it was a positive bookend on a difficult period in her young rugby career, for at the turn of the year she was in a vastly different space.

"Carol Keenan at Rugby Players Ireland was the first person I told that I had been left out from the Sevens programme," she discreetly reveals. "People knew I wasn't involved with Ireland anymore. I was injured and we were in the middle of the pandemic. I hadn't been expecting it."

"The whole thing really hurt and so I kept it to myself for a good long while. I think it was July before I eventually spoke to Carol about it and got

it out into the world. I don't think I anticipated how talking to someone, especially about something that was hurting so much, could be so relieving. It felt like a massive weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

"I think that was one of the reasons why I enjoyed the interpros so much," Carroll muses. "Even though they were my first games back after injury and I was a little nervous, I felt under less pressure, if that makes sense? I found myself enjoying rugby more than I have for a couple of years. I was having fun again!"

"It wasn't a professional environment like the Sevens and we've all seen the social media clips but on a personal level it was really enjoyable. I guess beating Leinster in the final round was a nice way to round it out too!"

Carroll's relationship with Rugby Players Ireland is a longstanding one. Previously she worked closely with Nancy 'always good for the chats' Chillingworth and Dr Vincent O'Flaherty as she settled into the Irish Sevens programme in 2018. Indeed, both were instrumental as she set about balancing her rugby with her work as a VAT trainee at BDO.

"When I first came to Dublin everything happened very quickly. After finding a place to live, I managed to get a job with BDO and then the Irish Sevens came calling. Thankfully, BDO were very accommodating and enabled me to chase what had always been a dream of mine – to play for my country.

“

I don't think I anticipated how talking to someone, especially about something that was hurting so much, could be so relieving. It felt like a massive weight had been lifted from my shoulders.



"At the same time, I was definitely spreading myself very thin. There were some days I was at training or work in body but not much else. I'd get through it without letting it impact on things, but I found it hard to keep up with all the other expectations made of elite athletes. For instance, my recovery time was essentially at my desk in the office. Sometimes I struggled at work because I was so, so tired.

"I felt like I was struggling with the change of pace and so I spoke to Nancy Chillingworth in the early stages because I felt I simply couldn't do it. It was all too much. I couldn't get over how calm Nancy was about the whole situation. She had me talk it out, helped me to organise my time and got me to consider what really needed to be done and when it needed to be done by.

"It turned out that I was committing myself to completing jobs within a couple of hours that would ordinarily take the day or more. I remember speaking to my manager one day and promising her that I'd get X,Y and Z done by a certain time. She told me not to be mad, that I could take more time with it. I was placing these demands on myself without talking about it and asking for help. That was probably my biggest learning in that first year."

It proved to be a crucial one. Having returned from a broken leg, Carroll's international ambitions were further hampered by a cruciate ligament injury and another lengthy spell on the sidelines. While less mobile players might countenance the impact of such an injury, Carroll was left in doubt that her trademark speed would return. She also had to go back to work with yet another calendar of surgeries and medical appointments.

"When I broke my leg I think had only been in BDO about five months and had to take a few weeks off. They kept me in the loop and quickly brought me back up to speed when I was back in the office. They were unbelievably supportive.



"I tore my cruciate not long after and I really didn't know how they would react. In some ways I was fortunate that we were already working from home because of the lockdown but nothing was ever an issue. That's why I love working with the company and would dearly love to stay if I pass my exams. I mean, imagine if I had left BDO when I was so overwhelmed in the beginning? Where would I be now? I would have nothing."

While Carroll is evidently relieved that her awareness of the bigger picture ensured her off-field career remained on track, she is nevertheless grateful for the opportunity to have experienced sport at an elite level with the Irish Sevens. She sees many benefits to her time in the programme, whilst also looking back on the experience with a pragmatic pair of rose-tinted glasses.

"People sometimes ask me if I'd considered pinning my colours to the mast and giving the rugby everything I had but if I'm honest with myself, I don't think I was ever going to be a great Sevens player. Maybe that was always at the back of my mind.

"I would love the opportunity to play for the Women's XV's in the future, so I've enjoyed getting to play with Munster and am looking forward to getting back to some senior rugby with Railway. I'll see where the journey takes me but my ultimate goal is to play for Ireland again one day.

"That being said, I have no regrets. Trying to manage everything to such a high level instilled good habits and discipline that I use in many other ways. Sport always tends to be a good ice-breaker too and so I have been able to forge good relationships with people in professional environments. I like to think the people I work with also appreciate my commitment and the lengths I will go to when needs be.

"I still love rugby and I'll always be grateful to the Sevens programme for how it developed my skillset," Carroll asserts. "I know I'm a far better player now. When I first went into the system I couldn't even pass! I'm still not very good at it apparently but my argument is that I don't need to - I can get to where I need to go myself!

"I'm just glad that when one door shut I still had something at the end of it."

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SMART MONEY HABITS

LIA to provide a financial wellbeing programme to Rugby Players Ireland's members

LIA, the centre of excellence for the education and development of Finance Professionals, is pleased to announce details of a partnership with Rugby Players Ireland, that will see them provide a financial wellbeing programme to professional and elite rugby players across the country.

The average person's financial life involves earning income over the course of a multi-decade career. That income is saved and invested to build up wealth, which is then used to support various milestones and goals such as marriage, parenthood, homeownership, and retirement. Of course, not everyone has an average career; and professional rugby players are a good example of this, as they can ascend from modest means to a hugely successful playing career quickly.

Navigating that change in financial stability can be difficult. Therefore, in consultation with the world leading player development team at Rugby Players Ireland and its members, LIA has developed "Smart Money Habits" to help current and past elite rugby players face the financial challenges they typically encounter. The programme forms part of the

players' association's work to promote and protect the welfare of rugby players in the country through educational, vocational and commercial engagement.

Professional and elite rugby players are becoming increasingly savvy when it comes to managing their money, recognising the need to balance intense training schedules with the necessity to protect and build on the capital they accumulate. To that end, the LIA-delivered programme will cover various aspects of financial planning, from investments to pension planning, contracts and retirement; as well as addressing other financial challenges that individuals working in the sport typically encounter. The syllabus comprises of five online modules including: Money Goals and Budgeting; Understanding your Payslip; Loans, Credit Cards and Mortgages; Savings and Investment Goals; and Being Self-Employed.

Speaking at the announcement of the partnership with LIA, Simon Keogh, CEO of Rugby Players Ireland, said *"There is no 'one size fits all' approach for players, as their income can derive from multiple sources, ranging from playing contracts to endorsements and appearance fees. As well as from their playing career, nowadays, players are also generating more income from social media and other outside interests, increasing the complexity of their finances; and so we are very pleased to team up with LIA to offer this training programme to our members as we equip them with the supports to succeed both as elite athletes and successful individuals."*

Joanne Keane, CEO & Executive Director of LIA said *"This jointly developed programme will be available to all professional and elite players, from younger players starting out in their professional career, to those approaching retirement, and we are proud to play a part in educating players nationwide on a topic that will stand to them many years from now. We are also extremely proud to be the first organisation to offer this type of financial wellbeing training to professional sportsmen and women in Ireland."*



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WORKING ON SMART MONEY HABITS

Leinster Rugby PDM Dr Emma Burrows takes
an introspective look at her financial affairs

DR EMMA BURROWS



What's in your purse?

I very recently swapped from a mammoth bag to a bare essentials situation. I'm a planner so I used to carry everything I could possibly need – right the way down to plasters. I'm working on living a bit more in the moment these days, so I ditched the "just-in-case" stuff and now all that's in my purse is earphones, two mobile phones, a fuel card, hair bobbin and a one-euro coin for the shopping trolley... and sometimes a snack.

What's the most important thing your career has taught you about money?

It's as scarce as you think it is

What do you enjoy more... saving or spending?

I aim for balance. I really enjoy spending but over the years I've tried to coach myself to enjoy spending on 'future Emma' first. I found setting my pension up painful because I compared it to what I could spend that money on today. Once I realised I was torturing myself I was able to reframe it as multiplying my potential. Some days I'd still prefer to spend it on a weekend away.

Do you have any saving goals?

I'm trying to buy a house at the moment – in Dublin. So I am saving for that as well as for my son's future. At this very moment he has a healthier bank account than I do.

Can you remember your first paycheck?

Yes! I started working as a cashier in AIB the day I turned 18 and even though my first pay cheque was emergency taxed I remember feeling like a squillionaire. I bought a pair of sunglasses with it that cost me €150 and I still have them 13 years later. They're a bit scratched but do the job, and I wouldn't dream of spending that much on a pair today.

Earn more or live more?

I finished my PhD studies two years ago and I can still remember the feeling of being short of money constantly, so I'm really grateful now that I don't have to think twice about buying a coffee in a café. The urge to say yes to every opportunity to earn more is still there because of the memory of scarcity. I often worked four jobs on top of my PhD to make ends meet. However, the cost of working more is seeing less of my son, and there's only so many years he's going to want to hang out with me. So for now, live more.

What's the best advice you ever got about money?

I'm struggling to think of any specific piece of advice. I really enjoyed Eoin McGee's book 'How to be Good with Money'. There's a lot of valuable information in it. The best piece of advice that got me into saving was "pay yourself first". It was also worth using Citizens Information to find out what tax credits I could avail of. There was more than I knew about and I clawed back €300 per month from my tax bill.

Do you have any guilty spending pleasures?

My hair! It's naturally quite dark brown and it costs a lot of time and money to keep it blonde but I couldn't hack seeing my mother in the mirror every day.

What significant purchase holds the greatest value for you?

My own home. I've rented for 10 years and moved house 11 times in that period. I'm ready to be in charge of my own roof!

What was the biggest waste of money?

The €1000 I spent on a couch that my beagle tore apart within a year – before I'd finished paying off the finance on it

Do you find money management stressful or just part of life?

I found it stressful until I found some ways to automate it. Standing orders take away the worry of paying rent on time. Having an account with AIB means spending is really transparent and easy to access through their app. I used to cringe and avoid looking at how much I spent eating out. Now I batch cook every weekend for breakfast and lunch for the week. Taking care of those meals in advance freed up some budget so I don't think twice about going out for something to eat in the evenings.

What's the most expensive thing about being a parent?

My other commitments. As a parent, time is the most precious commodity to me. I'm really involved in an American Football Club as a coach and the Chair of the Board and I'm the Assistant Head Coach of one of the national teams. Having a diverse identity is really important and my personal interests stop me from becoming an overbearing mother but sometimes those interests clash with my son's interest in reading a book with me or making a jigsaw. Those moments are precious and the cost feels high when I need to say no.

What's the most expensive place you've ever visited?

I'm definitely still in the perpetually broke student mindset so I haven't taken any expensive trips. I used to work in The Westin Hotel and they had a cocktail that cost €100 – so that's probably the most expensive placed I've visited!

You've won €1million in the lottery. Do you tell anyone? What do you do with the money?

I'd love to think I'd take care of myself first but I've met me and I would 100% not be able to keep it quiet. I'd take care of my son's education first, clear those niggling student debts and then max out my pension contributions. Once I was secure, I would make a donation to a charity supporting emergency workers.

MAKING MENTAL WELLBEING A PRIORITY

Mark Smyth is the Lead Psychologist for Rugby
Players Ireland's Mental Wellbeing Service

MARK SMYTH



I had been aware of Rugby Players Ireland as a keen rugby fan but I first came into contact with the organisation through Dr Ella McCabe who was a Clinical Psychologist and managed the Mental Wellbeing Service. I was previously the President of the Psychological Society of Ireland and had come to know Ella quite well. She asked me to cover on a few occasions and when she ultimately left the post, Rugby Players Ireland asked if I would be happy to continue in the role and over two and a half years later I'm still here!

Initially I wasn't sure what to expect from the role. There was some anxiety from my own perspective as I also had my own practice and other roles to manage. I was a little unsure if I might be overwhelmed by the workload. In the beginning it was somewhat slow but over the past 18 months and through the lockdowns there has been an increased awareness of the Mental Wellbeing Service and the available supports. I feel a major factor in that uptake has been Rugby Players Ireland members speaking to each other quite openly about their experience of the service. That is hugely impressive role modelling by a lot of players across the different teams and as a result more people have been accessing the service for early intervention which is key.

While Tackle Your Feelings has done great work to reduce mental health stigma in the general public, there has nevertheless remained a belief amongst the players that because they are in a privileged position, they believe that they shouldn't feel the way they're feeling. As far as they're concerned,

they are provincial players or national players and so someone in their situation shouldn't ever struggle with their emotions. Therefore, the most important piece of this service is reminding squads that there is no threshold to seek support. Players are humans like everyone else. Emotions will impact them irrespective of their job.

It's the same with the injuries they seek out a physio for. Just like having a sore muscle, if there is something impacting on your wellbeing, notice it, get some help and we can get to it before it develops into something more significant. When we get to the issue early enough we can manage most situations. Some scenarios will need more support than a primary care intervention and we can liaise with those supports too. The main thing is not to feel they shouldn't need to access the service because they are professional rugby players, it's a service for them irrespective of what reasons are a source of stress for them.

As there is no minimum threshold for accessing the Wellbeing service it means that anything that impacts on a player's wellbeing, whether it's linked to the field or not, can come through the service. To be honest, it's almost impossible to differentiate anyway. It doesn't matter whether they are having issues with their relationships, stress, anxiety, mood or anything that is preoccupying their mind and making their day a little more challenging.

We have screening calls which are designed to help us to identify the best fit in terms of supports that particular player needs. They'll be speaking to me on that first call and I'll always assure them that they have made the right decision in seeking support and no matter what they're going through it's relevant, important and worthy of support.

“

The most important piece of this service is reminding squads that there is no threshold to seek support. **Players are humans like everyone else. Emotions will impact them irrespective of their job.**





Traditionally, encrypted referrals will come through their PDM but the service can also be contacted via email or through the number provided by Sporting Chance in the UK. Once I receive the referral, I will contact the player to arrange a call via zoom, phone or in person – whatever suits them best. Generally, it's a short conversation to get an understanding of the challenges they are experiencing and to identify where the best source of support would be for them. We have a network of counsellors and psychologists based across the country and I will seek to identify the best fit for that player. I'll draw up a short encrypted report to summarise their particular difficulties and a recommendation for where they can access the support.

In my experience, pressure of expectations and anxiety would probably be the most common issues that players report. As part of their role as a professional rugby player they are expected to achieve to a really, really high standard and there is a constant pursuit of excellence. Sometimes a player brings those standards and expectations of perfection into other aspects of their day to day lives or into their relationships. That can be extremely difficult to achieve.

More recently, players have also got a little tired of talking about rugby all the time. It's a difficult balance because it's also their job but when they're in their bubbles they're not socialising with family and friends where conversations diversify. Many also live with their teammates, so they go to their job to play and train together before going home together too so there's no escape or respite! Of late, players are looking for places to go so that they don't have to think or talk about rugby. They need to switch off.

Living with teammates does have its advantages though. Opening up and feeling a little vulnerable to your emotions can be a difficult task but one that is absolutely necessary. Players might feel comfortable opening up to those closest to them and they in turn encourage that player to seek out help but ultimately the person needs to make that first step. They have to take ownership and make that decision to allow themselves to be vulnerable. The biggest role teammates have is being open about their experience and sharing of access in positive terms which has helped to break down barriers and preconceptions about accessing support.

Thankfully that tide has been changing. Through initiatives like Tackle Your Feelings players have been happy to share their stories that have had an impact in the public sphere too. They recognise that they are role models and that they be a source of inspiration for people to open up, to notice their feelings and to move towards them and tackle them. There have been some great ambassadors in there who have been willing to help the wider community but all players can help a little closer to home. Talking about your feelings is not a weakness.

In my 19 years as a practicing psychologist I've worked with athletes from a variety of sports through my private practice and other avenues. What I've noticed within rugby is the bond and sense of collegiality and support that exists within the sport tends to be stronger than a lot of other disciplines. There is a definite collegiality between teammates and opponents on and off the field. Encouraging others to seek out help is the ultimate respect.

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A TEST OF CHARACTER

Barry Murphy is finally busy again

BARRY MURPHY



Cian Lynch's showing in the All-Ireland hurling final was the closest thing we had seen to an artist at work over the past 18 months. Watching from his Limerick home, Barry Murphy was enthralled at the sight of the ciotóg give one of the great Croke Park performances.

But as Murphy sat down to consider the post-match reaction to Lynch's mastery, a different narrative was taking hold in his head. Images and videos of supporters socialising and drinking in the vicinity of Croke Park emerged on social media, while several notable politicians were also spotted amongst the 40,000 strong crowd.

"It's been difficult for me to speak about it," the Hermitage Green musician admitted. "I've been fairly quiet throughout the lockdown because I understood the need to be compliant. I also understood that we'd be the last sector back, so I didn't panic. For the most part, seeing the crowds was amazing and it made for a terrific spectacle. Limerick were class.

"However, even though the footage of everyone milling about the place was disappointing what really frustrated me was seeing politicians in the papers bantering about the game. They were all at it and yet when it comes to the entertainment industry they weren't even showing up to



meetings with Catherine Martin. You can't help but think they hold the GAA in higher regard.

"As an industry, we've been at our wits' end. It felt like the dark before dawn for so long because while we knew things would happen there's been no plan or foresight and I think that shows a complete lack of respect. We were being ignored. Looking on and watching them have a great time at that game was a bitter pill to swallow."

As we speak, Murphy is getting back into action with Hermitage Green for the first time in several months. Having been made aware of the projected vaccination rates during the summer, the band pencilled in a tour from October. Yet despite the confidence of the government that over 90% of Ireland's adult population will be inoculated by September, doors were reluctantly opened to the live entertainment and events sector as the concert dates loomed ever larger.



**HERMATIGE GREEN'S
NEW ALBUM
'HI GENERATION'**



OUT NOW



"I think they made us out to be an irresponsible bunch," Murphy surmises. "We had all been hoping that Electric Picnic would act as a gatekeeper for our reopening but that wasn't to be. Either way, there should have been some focus on a return to small gigs. We have a number of small theatres lined up for our tour and I have every confidence that the incredible people who manage those venues will do all in their power to be compliant and risk averse. It's not like it's going to be a rammed Dublin pub at Christmas.

"Unfortunately, not everyone will be back with us. Our Tour Manager was also our sound engineer. He was amazing at his job and travelled the world with top class acts but with a wife and two kids in Dublin to support he couldn't hang around any longer. He's one of the best in the business but he's now in another job and hasn't been able to get off work to help us with the few gigs we've planned. The reality is that a lot of the people who make the industry tick are already gone."

Murphy goes on to discuss the maths and it makes for startling reading. Indeed, despite Hermitage Green racking up over 10,000,000 listens on Spotify, the former Munster Rugby man estimates that he has recouped just €1,000 from the platform over the past ten years. Giggling he says, is their bread and butter.

"I'm not looking for sympathy, it's simply the reality. A lot of musicians choose not to talk about the finances but in truth we have to do a huge amount of work to make ends meet. For the amount you pour into it, it's not a great return. I've tried to stay optimistic, but it has been incredibly difficult.

"I've suffered massively over the past 18 months. It creeps up on you. I have two kids here and I've tried to paint the picture that at least I'm getting good time with them when I might otherwise have been touring. But when you lose your purpose, it gets into your head. You feel worthless.

"What's the point of it all when you can't do the thing that helps you get out of bed? You try to plough on but when you're stuck in that rut you can't create or do what you're supposed to do. It's a vicious cycle. You become unproductive. You have your better weeks and you end up getting through a bit of work but you have to go to the well on those occasions. It's not long before you're back to square one again."

Throughout September Murphy has been a feature on our screens as part of RTÉ's 'Celebrity Hell Week.' In addition to several other notable names, Murphy was joined by his former Munster teammate Peter Stringer while Anna Caplice and his Potholes & Penguins co-host Andrew Trimble also geared up for the challenge during the summer.

"Stuff like Hell Week was incredible for me," Murphy says of the show. "It gave me a huge sense of perspective. It was the fact that I couldn't think about anything else. I was enthralled by the challenge and I felt alive again. It's one of the hardest things I've ever had to do but it couldn't have come at a better time.

"I found it all very emotional if I'm honest. It was a massive test of my character. For quite a period of time over the past year I've questioned my worth but then to work with a group of people, all pulling together as a team, relying on you, you relying on them, it was very rewarding.

"I have to say that there was an empty void when it finished though, just like when I finished playing! I guess I thought the industry was going to open up and that would take my focus again. It was a real kick in the stomach.

"Thankfully, that's all behind us now. It's been a huge test but I'll be the better for it."

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I have two kids here and I've tried to paint the picture that at least I'm getting good time with them when I might otherwise have been touring.



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