

# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND  
WINTER 2021

## MOVING ON

A MILESTONE  
YEAR  
*CRAIG GILROY*

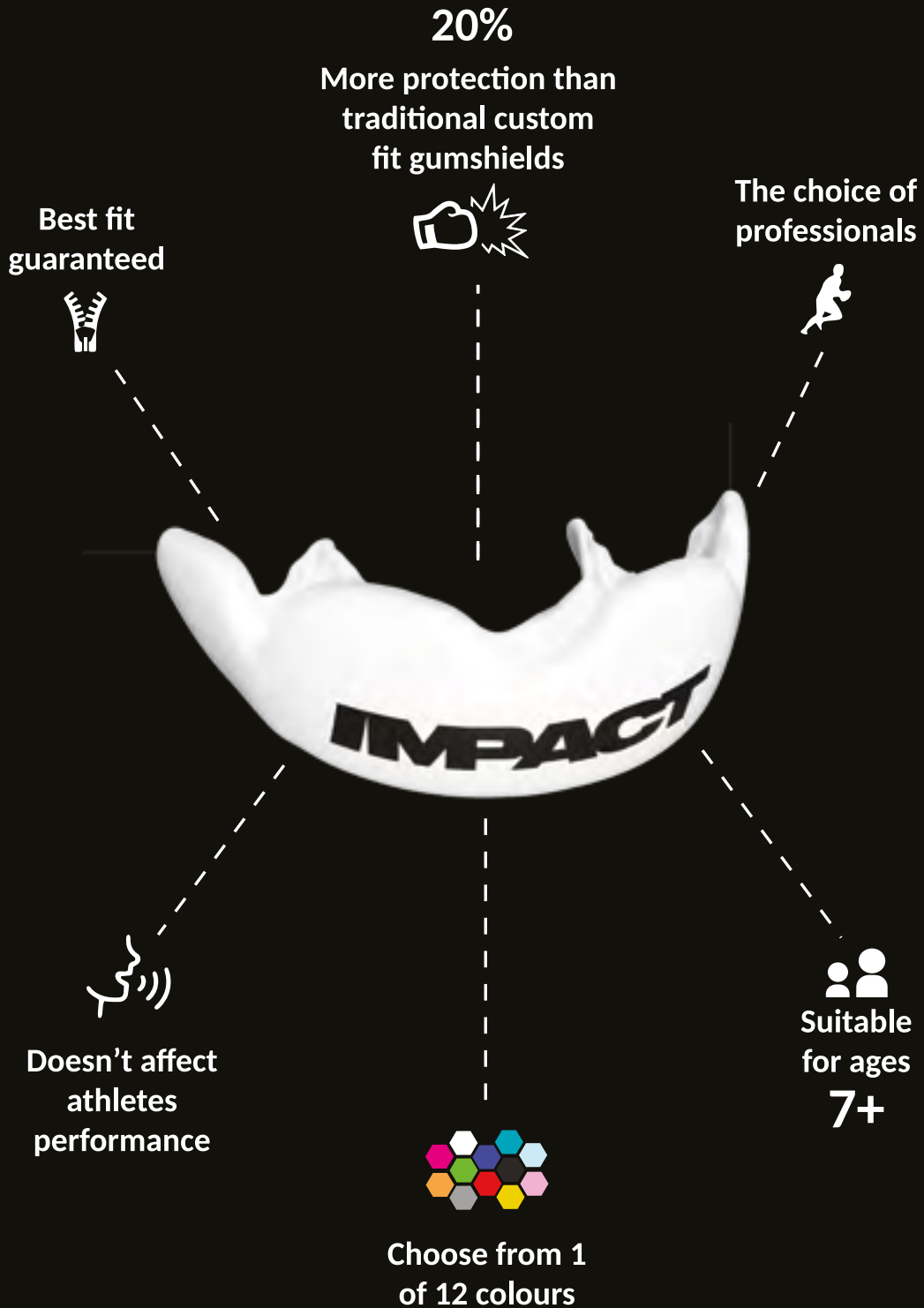
THE SHAPE  
I'M IN  
*STACEY FLOOD*



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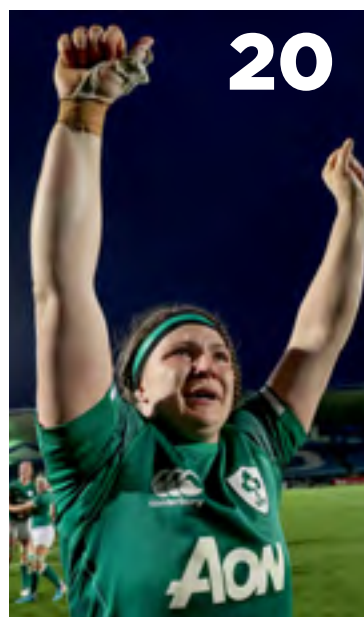
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# CEO ADDRESS

**SIMON KEOGH**



**Despite the darker evenings and brewing storms, the end of 2021 has many in the game looking to the coming year with great optimism. I was in attendance at all the international fixtures that took place in Dublin in November, and it seemed appropriate that there were many memorable moments for the returning fans to take home with them.**

I'll certainly always remember the moment the crowd greeted Johnny Sexton's try on the occasion of his 100th cap while the atmosphere for the All Blacks game fizzled with energy all afternoon. Emotions also ran high a little up the road as Ciara Griffin led Ireland to two victories as she closed out her Irish career. Cometh the hour, Ireland's leaders answered the call.

It struck me that for many children it may have been their first opportunity to see their heroes in real time. As we know well, a lot can change in 18 months. Indeed, as we took the opportunity to look back on the 2020/21 season for the Zurich Irish Rugby Players' Awards, the sound of players voices echoing through the country's biggest stadiums was a stark reminder of the journey we have been on.

I have taken great pride in the ways my own team at Rugby Players Ireland has adapted to the changes of recent times. Traditionally a highlight of our year, our Awards event has been postponed on several occasions this year yet with plenty of hard work and cooperation we managed to ensure that the 2020/21 season will not be forgotten. My sincerest thanks to Barry Murphy and Andrew Trimble for the way in which they took to the virtual task.

Turning back to the current campaign, seeing our men's team play an attractive style of rugby, our women's side returning to winning ways and our Sevens teams finding their feet once again on the World Series circuit, normal service seemed to have resumed over the past few months. However, Covid-19 continues to pose problems.

I felt hugely for our members caught in South Africa recently. With Christmas fast approaching, it was a nervous time for their family and friends. However, the rugby community showed itself to be a supportive unit with our colleagues at My Players in South Africa, the SARU, Munster Rugby, the URC and the IRFU all on hand to ensure all our players' needs were catered for.

We sought to pay this support forward to our Welsh friends at the Scarlets who were similarly caught in a Belfast hotel. During their time in quarantine, we provided the players with access to Mark Smyth, Clinical Lead of Rugby Players Ireland's Mental Wellbeing Service. Courtesy of BJ Botha, we also had range of innovative rugby balls by ShadowBall delivered by Ian Madigan while our partners at Heineken kindly supplied the team and staff with some refreshments during their stay.

While I look forward to positive results on the field next year, I am also invigorated by the sense of togetherness that currently pervades the rugby community at large. Together, we come to greet the New Year having built an enormous well of resilience. While we must remain vigilant to the inevitable dilemmas that this unrelenting disease will present, we must also continue to look forward and along the upward trajectory upon which we have embarked.

Wishing you all the best for 2022,

Simon



# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



## DUAL CAREER

We have been delighted to see a number of our members continue to progress their academic journey alongside their playing careers. In recent weeks we have seen Luke Carty (MSc International Business – UCD Smurfit School), Sean Cronin (Business – Griffith College), Linda Djougang (Nursing), Craig Gilroy (Law – The Open University NI), Luke McGrath (MBA – Dublin Business School), Tommy O'Brien (Actuarial & Financial Studies – UCD), Hugh O'Sullivan (PPES – Trinity College) and Jack O'Sullivan (Finance - UCC) all graduate from their respective universities.

Irish Sevens player Katie Heffernan also continues on the road to becoming a Qualified Financial Advisor (QFA) with LIA, Rugby Players Ireland's Financial Services Education Partner, having recently qualified as an Accredited Product Advisor (APA).



## FIGHT OR FLIGHT

It was a busy few months for Keith Earls. Not only was he involved in the Autumn Nations Series but he also opened the doors to Eleven14 Coffee Roasters in Limerick and launched his book 'Fight or Flight: My Life, My Choices' which was subsequently named as the An Post Sports Book of the Year.

To mark the release of the autobiography, the Munster winger made an appearance on The Late Late Show earning tremendous praise for his honesty in dealing with mental health issues. The Zurich Irish Rugby Players' Player of the Year in 2018 revealed he was diagnosed with Bipolar 2 in 2013.







## MILESTONES

We were delighted to be present on the occasion of Johnny Sexton's 100th cap for Ireland. Our former chairperson fittingly marked the afternoon with a try and was swiftly mobbed by his teammates while the adoring 40,000 strong crowd rose to their feet. The day was also a momentous one for both Tadhg Furlong and Dan Sheehan as they picked up their 50th and 1st respectively.

Speaking after the 60-5 victory over Japan, Sexton said: "I'd an incredible day, for myself, for my family, I think every single one of them is here. They're all up from Kerry. That try in the corner was one of best moments of my career so far, I'll never forget it.

"I feel a little bit guilty. Over the last two years, guys like Cian Healy won his 100th cap in an empty stadium, Rob Kearney and Fergus McFadden retired in an empty stadium so to get today I feel a little bit guilty but I'll remember this forever, thank you to everyone."

Sexton went on to lead Ireland to a famous win over New Zealand the following week.

## MARCUS HORAN APPOINTED TO EPIC RISK MANAGEMENT PRO SPORT ADVISORY BOARD

Marcus Horan has been appointed to the first-ever EPIC Pro Sport Advisory Board by EPIC Risk Management. The nine-person board includes a blend of people drawn from the sporting ecosystem that EPIC Risk Management believes can play a significant role in minimising gaming and gambling harm in elite sport.

The main purpose of the EPIC Pro Sport Advisory Board is to use the respective board member's expertise across gambling, gaming, eSports, integrity, athlete welfare and lived experience to guide EPIC's wider strategic goals and objectives in elite sport. The board will also provide recommendations to reduce harm and protect players from gaming and gambling harms.



## INTERNATIONAL RUGBY PLAYERS

Following a wide-ranging consultation between World Rugby, member unions, regions and International Rugby Players, a World Rugby vote has resulted in eligibility rules being changed to allow certain players to transfer to a different country based upon certain criteria.

Meanwhile, Irish international Sene Naoupu, who is Head of Strategic Projects at International Rugby Players, was part of a global education campaign to increase understanding of the importance of brain health.

# GOODBODY PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT BURSARY

Our partnership with Goodbody symbolises everything we strive to achieve for our members, as both professional athletes and successful individuals. Our mission at Rugby Players Ireland is to give our members every opportunity to be the best they can be and a core aspect of this goal has always been in aiding the progression of their off-field pursuits.

The recipients of the Goodbody/Rugby Players Ireland Personal Development Bursary for 2021/2022 are:

MIA ALCORN

STEPHEN ARCHER

JUDY BOBBETT

CATHAL FORDE

MARCUS HANNAN

ED KELLY

CONOR PHILLIPS

HARRY SHERIDAN







# LONG GOODBYES

**It was an emotionally charged November for the Irish Women's XV's team. With Greg McWilliams set to take over the side and Claire Molloy already announcing her decision to bow out after the World Cup qualifying tournament, it seemed like a changing of the guard with the likes of Lindsay Peat saying her farewells against the USA before Ciara Griffin took one final game to the opposition with an inspirational two-try salvo against Japan.**

Having waved their goodbyes to their Irish compatriots, Peat and Griffin were afforded one final chance to tog out in the international arena. The pair lined out for the Barbarians at Twickenham in front of what proved to be world-record crowd for a women's game. Compatriots Anna Caplice, Jenny Murphy and Sene Naoupu also featured.

Unfortunately, having not played since his last outing for the Western Force some months ago, Rob Kearney was denied the send-off his career deserved with the men's fixture against Manu Samoa cancelled in the hours leading up to the game amidst Covid-19 concerns. While it was a very disappointing conclusion for Rob, his family and his friends, his time as Chairperson of Rugby Players Ireland would have undoubtedly demonstrated to him that some things are greater than a game of rugby.

As members of Rugby Players Ireland's Executive Board, Ciara and Rob were steadfast in their commitment to the game both on and off the field. In recent weeks Ciara has been joined by Claire, Lindsay and Clodhna Moloney in making representations to the Irish government on the current state of affairs in the women's game. In addition to sporting careers to be proud of, their legacy will be one of inspiration to women across Ireland.

We wish them all well in their retirements.





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Hosted by Andrew Trimble and Barry Murphy of the Potholes & Penguins Podcast, the Zurich Irish Rugby Players' Awards 2021 premiered on Facebook Live on Friday, December 3. A gala event was due to take place at the end of last season but was postponed owing to Covid-19 concerns.

Each of our winners - who all received a WHOOP 4.0 - joined Baz and Trimby for a brief chat to reflect on The Forgotten Season.



### Peter O'Mahony

*Chairperson, Rugby Players Ireland Executive Board*

It was a difficult start to my role because we were getting stuck into the lockdown. It was a really important period because we had to establish where we stood with regard to the IRFU. There was a lot of uncertainty for players to deal with. It was certainly a baptism of fire but I think we can stand over what we did. We did it to the best of our ability. I'm very proud to look after the players.

### Gavin Coombes

*Nevin Spence Men's Young Player of the Year*

It was class to become an established member of the Munster squad and get a few games. Before that I used to play here and there. We all want to be in every week. The tries were an added bonus!

**Nominees:** Craig Casey, Hugo Keenan, Scott Penny



## Terry Kennedy

### *AIB Corporate Banking Men's Sevens Player of the Year*

It was incredible to get to the Olympics but the 18 months before it were very difficult. We played our last tournament in Vancouver back in March 2020 so we had a year of just training and mentally preparing for tournaments that didn't take place. It was a difficult period but we stuck together as a group and managed to make it to Tokyo.



## CJ Stander, (Ireland Men v England)

### *Druids Glen Hotel & Golf Resort Moment of the Year*

I spoke to Andy Farrell that week and he felt it was a great time to share news of my retirement with the squad. We sat down for dinner and told them. I could feel the emotion in the room which I wasn't expecting. Some big men were crying. It showed to me that everything I gave for the Irish and Munster jersey had made an impression. They might not have always understood me but they enjoyed my company. Everything fell into place that week.

**Nominees:** Ireland Men's Sevens Olympic Qualification, Ireland Women v Wales

## Béibhinn Parsons (v Wales)

### *MSL Motor Group Women's Try of the Year*

My pace was always one of my strengths coming through the ranks. Now I try to showcase that while adding other strings to my bow.

**Nominees:** Eimear Considine v Wales, Amee-Leigh Murphy Crowe v Italy, Sene Naoupu v Wales

## JJ Hanrahan (v Cardiff Blues)

### *MSL Motor Group Men's Try of the Year*

My memories of that try was that I was unbelievably pissed off before the game! I had been in isolation in my room for 14 days beforehand so came off the bench. It was an enjoyable game though because we tried to play a bit. The amount of offloads was crazy. It's not one of those things you can practice but it was pretty good!

**Nominees:** Robert Baloucoune v Leinster Rugby, Keith Earls v England, Sean O'Brien v Scarlets

## Tommy Bowe

### *Zurich Contribution to Irish Society*

I am very grateful to receive this award, especially considering the amount of work players, past or present, do for different charities. I'm often blown away by the things they do and the money they raise. Charities have found it very difficult over the past year. For me to win this award is very humbling but I consider it as recognition of what rugby players do as a whole. We try to do our bit because we know we are very fortunate.

## Lucy Mulhall

### *Best Marketing Women's Sevens Player of the Year*

To me this is the pinnacle when it comes from your own playing group. Their opinions matter most to me. It might sound a bit strange but it was quite an enjoyable year of training. With all that was going on it kept us going, gave us structure and enabled contact so I see it as a very special award.

## Dorothy Wall

### *Zurich Women's XVs Players' Player of the Year / WHOOP Women's Young Player of the Year*

It's been a bit of a rough patch since the Six Nations but there are great girls involved. You learn from every single one of them. I was in awe of people like Ciara Griffin and Claire Molloy, and then you had Lindsay Peat who is the most competitive person I've ever met. Seeing that calibre of person and athlete has been really good for me as a young player.

**YPOTY Nominees:** Stacey Flood, Brittany Hogan, Béibhinn Parsons

**POTY Nominees:** Eimear Considine, Stacey Flood, Béibhinn Parsons



## Robbie Henshaw

### *Zurich Irish Men's XVs Players' Player of the Year*

At the start of the lockdown I had a chance to reflect on my career to date. I set a new goal strategy and refreshed my mindset. We were all training on our own which was weird but it definitely helped me shape how I wanted to perform down the line. All the hard work behind closed doors paid off in the grand scheme of things. I focused a lot on breathwork and different areas of performance that I know other high performing individuals use.

**Nominees:** Tadhg Beirne, Tom Daly, Iain Henderson



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# HOPE

The former Meath goalkeeper speaks to Louise Lawless about her mental health journey

JUDY BOBBETT



**In October 2019, rugby player Judy Bobbett achieved a childhood dream when she was capped for the Irish women's senior rugby team.**

It had been years in the making, having started rugby with Ashbourne, been a mascot for the Irish team in 2010 and captaining the Leinster U-18s in 2017. Yet, it was one of the toughest weeks of her life, mentally.

"Even as a kid, I felt like I was always off, I didn't feel normal, felt like I was the only one going through them, none of my friends had these emotions that I did, and I kept them to myself for years.

"I always wanted to play with Ireland, that was my goal, my dream since I was a child, but that week I felt mentally ill, really sick. I didn't think I was going to play, it was really bad at that point. I didn't tell anyone, kept it to myself, and went out, played.

"The game itself we ended up losing, and as a first cap went, I didn't perform, but at some point, I looked over to the bench, and was very close to asking to come off. I felt like s\*\*\* on the pitch to put it like that."

After all that, there was the post-match meal in UCD to endure.

"I remember sitting down and the food was coming out, and I had to go outside, bawling my eyes out after my first cap. I've never told anyone this, but I was sitting outside crying. There was me, so emotional, so anxious, so depressed about everything, there for about half an hour, before going back in. It's sad to look back and think of my first cap like that, as so emotional."

In the year after her debut, there had been little time to reflect and nothing seemed to be getting better.

"I hit rock bottom," she recalls now. "I'd never dealt with what happened the year before, I'd confided in team-mates, but I never got help, just brushed it away. I was very suicidal, in and out of training the few months before that – the summer when things (restrictions) lifted again – with Ireland. I was like, 'I don't even want to play rugby anymore'. I just had no motivation, no interest in playing. At that point, nothing mattered, I didn't care about life. I was in camp one weekend, that was one camp where I actually felt good, the girls were due to play a game, Italy I think. I knew I wasn't going to get played. I was fine with that."

“

I always wanted to play with Ireland, that was my goal, my dream since I was a child, but that week I felt mentally ill, really sick. **I didn't think I was going to play, it was really bad at that point.**





"Being stress-free, that feeling of being absolutely on cloud nine, that's what I chase for, every day, I suppose. With depression, every day can be hard and you might only get 10 minutes of a day where you're feeling good. Same with anxiety, they go hand in hand. That camp, before the hospital, they say before you are suicidal, you're the happiest you've ever been because ultimately – I'll say it as it is – the stress is gone. I remember that camp going so well because I knew two days later that I wasn't going to be here. No matter how bad the camp went, it didn't matter."

Thankfully, Judy was brought into the St John of God psychiatric hospital soon after. "I kept that very quiet. I came from training with the girls and one weekend, I was gone. I didn't know how to deal with it, didn't know how to tell people I was in the hospital. I was embarrassed. And because of Covid, no one could visit and I couldn't leave.

"I dunno if I'd have appreciated the idea of what

a psychiatric hospital was," she adds. "It's hard to explain, more like a residential place where you check in with yourself, you get better.

"As tough as it was, it was the best thing I could ever do. I went from (the Irish team) bubble to this one, being best friends with a 70-year-old man with depression. I'd be there at 10pm having tea and biscuits with people with the same struggles, where we could openly talk about them. It was the first time I felt normal."





For those who did know about her struggles, Bobbett has nothing but good things to say about their support.

“Adam Griggs (outgoing women’s head coach) and Anthony Eddy (director of women’s rugby) were fantastic. One lady I couldn’t thank enough was Orlaith Curran, the S&C coach, who has probably heard me cry a million times. I don’t think I would have gone through it if she wasn’t there. Every camp, she made sure I was OK if she saw I was about to cry, she’d pull me out of the room, way beyond her job!

“The first step – I think it’s probably the hardest – is telling people you’re low. I first confided in my team-mates in Blackrock, they were the first people I told and they were telling me for ages to get help. They pleaded with me for months, and when I finally did it, that’s when things got better. It makes all the difference.

“Also, Rugby Players Ireland are a group that runs alongside all the national teams. They’ve provided

me with, at this stage, 15/20 counselling sessions. They were with me the whole way through, with player development managers, checking in with you every week, asking what they can do, ‘do you need to see your counsellor?’

“They definitely don’t get enough credit, but between management and themselves, they’ve been 100pc.

“It’s easy to shut the door on someone when they’re struggling, but they didn’t, and they still haven’t.”

In the first conversation for this interview, Judy spoke from St John of God, although with a different outlook than her first time.

“I’m back in hospital for a few weeks,” she says. “I was embarrassed at the start, but this time around, it was different. I put myself in, no one asked me. I noticed the difference and felt my mood getting lower. When I told my close friends, they didn’t even notice I was in a poor mood, so it was good that I was aware.

**“  
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"I'm not 100pc better, but 100pc wanting to get better. The difference was that I did not want to get better last year. I'm still struggling, obviously, but now I actually have hope.

"It's crazy how far I've come in a year. I literally didn't care, really didn't care about anything, and nothing mattered. Only that I had a good group of friends like, 'Judy, you need to go to hospital', or I wouldn't have gone. I would love to go back to Ireland rugby, but that's where it is now. Like I would love to be back in Ireland [camp], but I don't want to ruin my progression.

"At the end of the day, I'm 21, I'm sure I have a couple of years ahead to play rugby. I used to panic and put the rugby first, and myself second. When you're getting to the point where you're not wanting to play rugby, or do things, it's time to change."

We chat again when Judy is out of hospital, where she has been for approximately a month. "I'm thankful that it's there, but I don't want to go back. It's good to know that I can always go there if needed."

None of this is easy, not least speaking publicly about it, whether on her own Instagram page on World Mental Health Day or to a journalist, so what made her decide to do so?

"(In St John of God) We get a few hours out at the weekend, so a couple of weeks ago – I'd been in about two weeks at that stage – I decided to go see Blackrock's game against Wicklow.

"I didn't tell anyone that I was in the hospital, and people were asking why I wasn't playing or coming to training. I ended up lying, saying that I was injured, that I'd hurt my back.

"I left the match quite upset, to be honest. I was sick of lying about it, I'd been lying for years. I just wasn't ready to talk about it. About a week later, I put up the post (on Instagram). People I'm close to knew the whole time, but now I'm ready to talk about it.

"I just wanted to open up the conversation. So many people messaged me about that Instagram post, people I didn't even know and from all over. It's nice to see athletes talking like this. It's way more common than you'd think. With depression, you're always going to be scared of hitting that low again, but for me, it's about finding that balance.

"On a bad day, I can't get stuck in my head thinking it's going to be a bad week or month. But I'm feeling positive and looking forward to the future. I'm excited."

***This article was authored by Louise Lawless and published by the Irish Independent. It is reproduced here with their permission.***





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# THE CAPTAIN'S TABLE

## Transferable insights from the best in rugby leadership

In her role as captain of the Irish Women's XVs, Ciara Griffin sat down with the respective captains of the provincial sides to talk about their experiences of leadership in elite-performing environments with Aidan McCullen.



## Iain Henderson on bringing a team together

A lot of the social stuff that is traditionally associated with Lions tours obviously couldn't happen. We were locked into a hotel for eight weeks with no friends, family or the chance to get out for a bit of sight-seeing. It was stressful enough, not to mention having to go out at perform at the highest level. As a result, there was an emphasis on trying to get to know each other in enjoyable ways. We met in smaller groups so guys could form tighter bonds and we tried to create an atmosphere as though we weren't there, like banning Lions kit if you were coming down for a beer.

The Lions is a unique group to work with. Everyone is an established player in their own right and most are also leaders. A lot of that tour was about facilitation and about understanding the individual and how they fit into the environment. You have to try and facilitate them in getting the best out of themselves, that spans across a broad range of professions. You have to recognise what people are good at and let them do it.



## Jarrad Butler on understanding an existing culture

When I first came over to Ireland, I didn't want to ruffle any feathers. Everything was pretty set as it was. At Connacht we had a leader who had been in place a while, we had good values and we enjoyed some success not long beforehand. I came in looking to make a good impression, play well and not tread on any toes. I let my performances speak for themselves and built the trust of the group and coaching staff.

In my second year, the squad was in a bit of a transition. We lost our leader who had been a rock of the organisation

and we also had a new coach. It was changing of the guard. It was new for everybody so when I did step into the leadership role, I made sure to get a good group around me, especially the guys who had been here a long time. I wasn't going to pretend that I knew everything about the place. I didn't want to fake it. I was going to give the best of me but to do that I also needed the best people around me. From there we were able to build, and I could start to instil some of the values that I think are important.





## Johnny Sexton on setting an example

I grew up watching Man Utd when Roy Keane was at the top of his game. He was my idol in terms of how you lead a team. Then when I first got involved with Ireland that style of leadership was reinforced by the way the likes of Paul O'Connell and Ronan O'Gara led. I became fixed in my thoughts and felt that must be the only way to do it. Things have evolved a little bit since then.

At Leinster we have a good connection with Dublin GAA and they do things very differently. If someone makes a mistake, it's put to the player and they are brought along the journey.

The thinking is that if you go on the attack all the time, people build up a wall and don't receive the feedback. You reach the same end point but in a different way.

There are no excuses for things like laziness, for being late or for being sloppy with calls. We deal with them in a certain way. However, if mistakes are happening constantly there could be something bigger at play. You never know what's going on in the background of someone's life. It's an area I've had to work on massively. It's always been in my nature to lash out but I recognise the need to evolve it.



## Ciara Griffin on dealing with adversity

As a teacher I'm always amazed at how a child can change when they share a problem. Their shoulders lift and they feel so much calmer. As adults we tend to bottle things up because we don't want to let it affect anyone else and so we can't escape the issue. When you're in a team, you're only as strong as your weakest link so we encourage people to ask for support. It's not a weakness, it's one of strength because it shows a willingness to put your best foot forward for the team.

When I was younger, I read into things too much. I read into the way people spoke to me. I read into the colour of the bib I was being given at training. I've had to learn to stop worrying about things I couldn't control. We've had a big learning as a squad in that respect with our season structure having been thrown about over the past two years. Our group has had to face a lot of challenges but you learn most when things that don't go your way. That's how you build resilience.

## Peter O'Mahony on leading a team through disappointment

When I first left school I played in a really successful Cork Con team. We had guys rocking up in the evening after a full day at work who were incredibly good. We won some trophies but lost a lot of big games along the way. Some of the younger lads in that team soon progressed into the Munster side. When the Irish players were away in 2011 we got a shot of games over a few weeks. We won five but the most important game was the last one before the international guys came back in. We lost it and it felt like the previous five weeks had gone out the window. Oddly enough, when I look back now that was the game that stood to us all and drove us on that season. One week we were superstars, the next

we were on the backfoot, and we had to respond, something we'd learned to do at Con.

You can tell the young lads all the stories and how losing big games felt but ultimately you can't give guys your experience. They have to experience it for themselves to appreciate the value of the lesson. We have specialised people in to help with the mental side of things but the experience is where it's at. When you get to the biggest days you can fall back onto those memories, you recognise the moments and how you went the wrong way before. You know how to fix it.

## Iain Henderson on preparing the body and mind

When we first started holistic preparation at Ulster, the one thing that surprised me was that the players who were already performing really well were already doing these things. They were writing stuff down, having reflective periods and practising some form of visualisation. They never preached about it but when I started to look out for it I could see guys noting things in their journals or reading notes before games. It all ties into the mental wellbeing of a player. If you're putting your mind in the best position, you're aiding yourself across the board.

## Peter O'Mahony on discipline and code of ethics

I've always insisted that I be very coachable. Throughout my career I've had a lot of different coaches, from S&C to rugby and life coaches. I've always made sure to listen and to be open to learning. I'm still a young man but I've plenty of experience and at times it might be easy to think I've done all there is to be done but there is always something to take from things. I've been hard on myself in that regard. You're never the complete package and I've seen guys get too comfortable.

It's something that has been instilled in me from the very start of my career. I was surrounded by world class players and coaches and was learning a crazy amount of stuff. If I hadn't the capacity to take it all on board, I wouldn't be where I am today. That's my discipline – being coachable.



## Jarrad Butler on role models

You always have guys you go to for advice. It's only when you reflect on the relationship that you realise their role in your life. I always looked up to Ben Moen who was captain of the Brumbies when I first moved to Canberra. I've found that most leaders within a group will match their personality. Some leaders are loud and full of energy, others are calm and stern. What I really liked about Ben was how his leadership was interchangeable. He was a really nice guy off the field and a good man for a BBQ, but when you crossed the white line there was no mucking around. He was always very firm before a game. It always struck me how leaders don't have to be the one kind of person. You can adapt to the situation.

## Ciara Griffin on knowledge sharing

I remember the first time I was pinned into a ruck. Heather O'Brien, who was one of my idols, was chuckling away as I gave away the penalty. As she ran off she told me I'd never get caught in that position again. It always stuck with me. I was very fortunate to have both Heather and Paula Fitzpatrick in the Irish squad when I first joined. As far as I was concerned, I was only a young one learning the ropes but they didn't see it that way. I was there because I was good enough and so they tried to bring me up to speed on the systems and the tricks of the trade.

In the team room they'd often sit down with me and played some clips. They'd ask me what I saw and would try to draw things out of me before pointing things out. They taught me how to look at the game in a different way and were more than happy for me to pick their brains. I think it's important that we all remember that we all started somewhere.

## Peter O'Mahony on dealing with younger players

If I'm honest, I've had to work hard on my leadership skills with the younger players. I'm sure plenty will say I'm still too cross or too sharp, but it is something I've given time to! When I first started at Munster it was very cut-throat and to the point. If someone stepped out of line they were left behind. I became very hard on people too because that was what I knew. Nowadays though you have guys and girls coming out of school with a scary amount of ability. There are some lads in there who are ready to play professional rugby but they need help in other ways. A few years ago, I would have been quick to judge them whereas now I appreciate that I've to get those guys around me and bring them on the journey. These are incredibly talented rugby players and they will be the future of Munster and Ireland so they need investment and time. I got a different type of coaching and love, that's just what was the done thing back then and while it may seem like a different time it's all very similar. The end goal is to make the organisation or team better.



## Johnny Sexton on adapting

When I was at Racing 92, I had the President of the club in my ear saying I had been brought in to drive the culture and standards around the place as much as my playing ability. Even though I was just in the door I went hard at it instead of building relationships first. I was a foreigner who had come in and probably cost their mate a place. I lost them for a few months and it was hard to win them back over. It was a tough lesson but I learned a lot about myself.

When I got back to Leinster on the other hand, the culture was nowhere near where it had been when I left and it was crying out for someone to come in and say things weren't good enough like what I'd done at Racing. However, I tried to learn from that experience in Paris, take my time and bed back in. It was a big mistake.

Through those experiences I've learned the need to adapt your leadership depending on the situation you're faced with. You will make mistakes and I still do but they are opportunities to learn and improve.

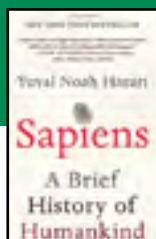
## Recommended reads:



### Belonging: The Ancient Code of Togetherness - Owen Eastwood

"It was one of those books that kept me reading. I really liked the concept of a shared purpose. Eastwood sets out this long line of an organisation through its past, present and future and explains how everything is interwoven. Some of the best organisations in the world always reference their past."

Jarrad Butler



### Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind - Yuval Noah Harari

"I found it fascinating how over thousands of years our personality traits haven't changed. Yet when put into a modern context, it's equally fascinating how we expect people to mould themselves into a new business or structure almost immediately. For me, it emphasises the importance of empathy."

Iain Henderson



### The Chimp Paradox - Prof. Steve Peters

"The Chimp Paradox was good for me although I've cheated on plenty of reading. Stuart Lancaster reads books all the time. If he finds something interesting, he'll share his notes. It's handy because I often find that books are important at the start and at the end with a lot of fluff in between!"

Johnny Sexton



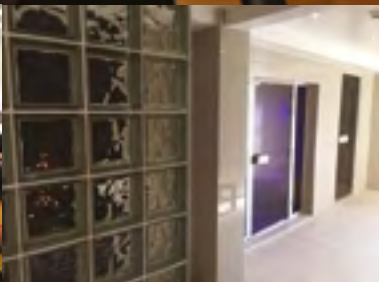
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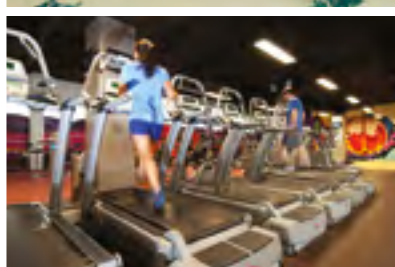
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# A MILESTONE YEAR

The winger joins a distinguished club of both Ulster Rugby servants and law graduates

CRAIG GILROY





**Craig Gilroy is synonymous with Ulster Rugby. From his try-scoring prowess to his charitable work across Northern Ireland, he is one of the province's best-loved players by fans and peers alike.**

Now the longest-serving member of the current squad, Gilroy has joined an exclusive club of players to wear the white jersey 200 times, joining the likes of Rory Best, Darren Cave, Robbie Diack, Rob Herring, Paul Marshall, Andrew Trimble and Roger Wilson.

With European games imminent, Gilroy had little time to mark the occasion. Named as a substitute away to the Ospreys, his partner and family didn't travel to Wales at his suggestion. However, his Ulster Rugby teammates and staff ensured that the moment would not pass without notice.

"Getting to 200 was at the back of my mind but at the front of it was the game plan for the afternoon," he says. "In the end I only got a few minutes and they passed by in a blur so it only really began to sink in when I got back into the changing room and John Cooney said a few words and presented me with the cap.

"Kyle Alexander (Ulster Rugby's soft-tissue physiotherapist) then gave me a video with a message from a few of the players I would have played with over the years. Trimby, Tommy, Rory



Best, Christian Leali'ifano, they were all in there and that really brought it home. I've had an amazing career so far but most importantly I've made mates for life."

At just 30 years of age, Gilroy has no intention of stepping away from the game anytime soon. However, he has been getting his ducks in a row and recently qualified from The Open University in Northern Ireland with a law degree.

Upon his enrolment Gilroy made it clear that his sporting career had to remain the priority and so through regular liaison with lecturers and administrators, the winger was able to step various obstacles in his path. Six years in the making, it has been a long and sometimes arduous road.







"It's easy to throw the towel in when something is difficult, isn't it? It would have been very easy to give it up and just claim back the time for rest and recovery. There were plenty of comments flying around too. Not many people believed I'd pull through... with or without the rugby!"

"When I first started playing professionally about 11 years ago, it was drilled into me about getting a plan in place. Turns out that people saying you can't do or achieve something is all the motivation you need. I knew I was setting out on a bit of a journey but I went in with my eyes open."

Throughout his studies, Pamela Gilpin has remained a source of support in her role as his Player Development Manager. Much to Gilpin's delight, Ulster's most experienced player has been imploring his younger teammates to engage with their off-field pursuits. Others have already followed his lead with former player Robbie Diack also a recent Open University graduate.

"I remember being on Irish camp a good few years ago in Carton House. It's a beautiful spot. There are plenty of walks to do, there's a golf course and obviously you have 30 teammates in there, so you're never stuck for company but during one camp I wanted to catch up on some course work.

"Next thing Trimby burst into my room and saw all my books out, broke himself laughing and went off to tell the lads. I didn't hear the end of it from him, Tommy or Jared [Payne] all week.

"In fairness, attitudes have changed in recent years. Those same lads would be the first to admit it. If anything, younger players are being advised by the older guys to study these days. I think it's important

to structure it into your professional rugby lifestyle as early as possible and build good habits. You can run yourself into the ground thinking about rugby all the time."

Amassing 200 caps in a position that has seen him compete with the likes of Bowe, Trimble, Jacob Stockdale, Robert Baloucoune and Rob Lyttle over the years is no mean feat. He can also throw ten Irish caps into his portfolio. Having been the youngest Ulster Rugby player to make their senior debut back in 2010, Gilroy can already look back on a fine career but his primary focus remains on what is to come.

"It sometimes feels like forever but on the other hand it has passed by with a click of my finger. I have played with so many guys in an Ulster shirt and I've seen it all. There have been some incredible highs but there have been plenty of darks days along the way too. I don't think the public see how difficult it can be in this gig. I've been through the ringer a few times.

"I've a lot to thank Rugby Players Ireland for. They've been very supportive in a number of ways. Before working with Pamela [Gilpin] I tended to just go with the flow but she helped me to see a new direction. She has a difficult job so if I can help influence even one young player to turn to the books then I'll be happy.

"I'm far from done yet though," he adds. "I've been really enjoying my rugby so far this season while putting on an Ulster shirt and scoring tries feels just as euphoric as it did at the start of my career."

No doubt Andrew Trimble and Darren Cave's record of 229 caps remains firmly in his sights.

“

When I first started playing professionally about 11 years ago, it was drilled into me about getting a plan in place. **Turns out that people saying you can't do or achieve something is all the motivation you need.**



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A NEVILLE HOTEL



# A REALIST

Having decided to step away from the game at 25, the former Munster Rugby player recently qualified as a teacher

CIAN BOHANE





**With the majority of the squad in isolation, Munster Rugby fans were left scratching their heads as they tried to figure out what team the province might field for the side's European games prior to Christmas.**

Members of the academy were suddenly thrust into the spotlight as a batch of players plying their trade in the AIL willingly volunteered to subject themselves to training ground punishment meted out by the likes of Peter O'Mahony and co.

Some romanticists even began to look to the past. For a moment, when pressed by his 2FM Breakfast colleagues, you could tell Donncha O'Callaghan was considering whether he could get a few minutes. No doubt several of his former teammates wanted a few more.

Though his mind may have wandered in that direction, Cian Bohane has long come to terms with the notion that his rugby days are behind him. Aside from an emergency cameo in UCC's defeat to Garryowen last October, Bohane's identity is now firmly planted on the door of his Presentation Brothers Cork classroom.

Highly thought of during his time with the province, the Corkman's time on the field was limited by injuries and competition. At just 25 he chose to look in a new direction. Now, almost five years down the track and with Bachelor of

Education degree in PE and History from UCC in the back pocket, he believes his decision to step away has been vindicated.

"I was close with Jonny Holland and would have seen what he had to go through," Bohane shares. "The reality of him finishing up really struck a chord with me and so I began to step away and see things a little bit more objectively. Most lads will only do that when they're getting on and the end is in sight. I bucked the trend a little bit."

Bohane met with Rassie Erasmus in January 2017 to inform him of his decision to walk away. It wasn't a decision that came to him overnight. Indeed, he believes the seed was first sown as he made his way to pre-season training some months previously.

"I was living with my good friend Niall Scannell at the time," he remembers. "I mentioned the retirement thing to him in passing a few times, but I don't think he really believed I'd follow through with it. But Niall Scannell's career was on a different trajectory to mine. He was an Irish international and already a stalwart of the Munster team."





"It's not as though I fell out of love for the game," he points out. "There was a context to my decision. It's something I try to teach the kids at school – to respect people's choices, let people be. Any young lad from Munster would struggle to understand someone would walk away from that opportunity."

"There's a lot of short-term gain by playing professional rugby but what was going to be the benefit in the longer term? I wasn't going to play for Ireland. Another contract or a short-term deal somewhere was just going to prolong the inevitable. You have to be prepared to have an honest conversation with yourself. I felt I needed to cut the chord."

Bohane is eager to stress that his experiences merely paint his own picture. He remains a fervent supporter of Munster Rugby, of his former teammates and their endeavours. Crucially, while he'll always be proud to have represented the province, his identity is no longer that of a former player. He is a teacher.

"My story is not a case-study used to get lads out of the game. I absolutely support people in their rugby careers if that's what they want to do. In my own case, I was lucky because I always knew I wanted to be a teacher whereas I appreciate that some lads simply don't know what the next step is and cling onto the game for security."

He notes that a few players have reached out to him for advice as they begin to consider their options. It can be a daunting process but as part of the Quercus programme in UCC, Bohane was fortunate to have had plenty of people to turn to. He is more than happy to play that supportive role for players going forward.

"I have had a lot of help throughout my life so I think it's only right to pay it forward. I suppose a few players started to reevaluate things during the lockdown so they wanted to know what the change was like. As much as I say my transition was pretty seamless, it wasn't as easy as stepping away and going cold turkey. I know that for some the grass isn't always greener either."



**My story is not a case-study used to get lads out of the game. I absolutely support people in their rugby careers if that's what they want to do.**



"Personally, retiring wasn't the shock I thought it would be and a lot of that is because of my support group. To be fair to people like Marcus Horan, they had me warned about some of the challenges - that I'd be kicked out of the WhatsApp groups, that the phone would stop ringing, that people wouldn't ask me for coffees like they used to. I was prepared for all of that.

"The identity piece took a bit more work but I think having that season to psychologically prepare gave me the time to come to terms with my new purpose. My family had always kept me grounded to so when I walked into that lecture hall, there wasn't going to be any air of supremacy."

Bohane has certainly endeared himself to the UCC community. In November he was unveiled as the inaugural winner of their Eamonn Ryan Role Model Award, named after the Cork Ladies football manager who passed away in January. Now as both a teacher at PBC and Assistant Coach at UCC, Bohane is keenly aware of the influence he can have on young players.

"I just try to be who I am and if that is perceived as good role-modelling, well then I know of plenty more role models out there. In my own life I looked up to people like Axel. He was some player but he was also a caring man. He was the one who made me go back to the books when I got injured.



“

**I just try to be who I am and if that is perceived as good role-modelling, well then I know of plenty more role models out there. In my own life I looked up to people like Axel.**

"That changed my approach to pretty much everything. It certainly changed my approach to the game. You talk to guys like James Coughlan and they would say that having a different outlet actually kickstarted their career.

"I've seen too many young kids drop out of education to become a professional athlete. I enjoyed that life but there's also a hidden side of sport that young people don't think about. They only see the glamour and the Instagram posts but they don't see the flogging or the mental torture you go through when you're injured or not making teams.

"I'm not saying that they shouldn't follow their dreams but pigeon-holing yourself into sport is counter-productive. Nobody is one dimensional. You do other things and it can benefit your career. Of course, you have to be organised, you're injured or not making teams. They only see the glamour and the Instagram posts but they don't see the flogging or the mental torture you go through when you're injured or not making teams.

"We all have our dreams but sometimes you have to be a realist."



# AHEAD OF THE GAME

As Elite Player Manger with N-Pro, the recent retiree is giving back to the game

SEAN O'BRIEN



**It seemed rather appropriate that Séan O'Brien be on hand to launch an innovative new partnership between Cistercian College Roscrea and N-Pro, the Galway-based sports tech company. The relationship will see pupils in first and second year at the school wearing the most advanced rugby headgear in the world for contact training and matches.**

Having been forced to retire following a concussion injury earlier this year, O'Brien took up a role with N-Pro as Elite Player Manager. The position allows O'Brien to keep his foot in the rugby door while also gaining exposure to the wider operations of a growing business.

"Funnily enough, I wasn't one to wear headgear during my career but coming towards the end I was beginning to try them out and get used to them," O'Brien reveals. "When the opportunity came up to work with N-Pro I thought it was kind of poignant for me to get involved. I thought it would be a good way to give back to the game that gave me so much and make sure that players don't have to pack it in like I did."

O'Brien sincerely believes that N-Pro are a massive part of the solution going forward. His beliefs are backed up by comprehensive research that

demonstrates how linear impacts to the head have been reduced by up to 75% when compared to other scrumcaps, while brain stress is also reduced by an average of 34% in compared to those not wearing headgear. With N-Pro the only manufacturer to meet World Rugby's new trial requirements, the company is well positioned in the international market.

"In my opinion, N-Pro and equivalent products that will eventually come onstream are going to be mandated across the board, like what we've seen in hurling. They have spent the past number of years showing the utility of the product and at this stage it's... pardon the pun here - becoming a no-brainer for a parent to insist that their child wear headgear.

"For that reason, we have found the uptake to be massive particularly amongst teenagers. We have placed a focus on that age group from a business strategy perspective but it's also been influenced by a number of senior players wearing them in big games. It's not an easy adjustment the further into your career you go. I spent the majority of my career without using one but younger players find it easier to transition into wearing one.

"Nothing will ever beat the rush of running out onto a pitch in front of thousands of people to play a rugby game but seeing schools and clubs mandate N-Pro has been a great source of excitement."

“

**Funnily enough, I wasn't one to wear headgear during my career but coming towards the end I was beginning to try them out and get used to them.**







While O'Brien is currently revelling in his role with N-Pro, he is also continuing his studies in Psychology out of the University of Derby. A graduate of law from NUIG, O'Brien now has multiple strings to his bow and credits Dr Deirdre Lyons with keeping him on track.

"Deirdre has been a bit of a life saver," O'Brien claims. "I'd be pretty lost without her. She has kept me on the straight and narrow throughout my career and as I've come out the other side. I've a huge amount of time for Deirdre and her team.

"Professional sportspeople are a hard group to deal with. Trying to convince rugby players to broaden their skillset when they think they have it so good already is an almost impossible task. I was one of the lads pursuing an education and I still had the mindset that rugby was never going to end.

"Even though my parents always emphasised the importance of an education, my life goals were confined to a rugby pitch. Early in my career the application to my studies was laughable. I was cramming to creep across the line. All of a sudden the rug was pulled from underneath me and Dee's constant reminders about keeping an eye on the far side were ringing in my ears."



A Galway native, O'Brien came through the Connacht Academy having represented Ireland at under-18, under-19 and under-20 level. He was also captain of the Ireland under-20s at the 2014 Junior World Championships. When his body allowed, O'Brien made 60 appearances for the province following his debut in 2015 and was considered a leader of the side in the mould of his predecessor, John Muldoon.

"I do look back on my injury record and think of what could have been if I had kept a clean bill of health and built a bit of momentum. You have to understand that I lost something that my life's aspirations were angled around for so long. I don't feel like I maxed out. There's plenty of caps and achievements I left behind. But that's life.

"Retiring at my age wasn't nice but I'm trying to put a positive spin on it. Over the years my mind did drift to my schoolmates and how they were beginning to progress in their careers. Starting at the bottom rung of the ladder wasn't something I was looking forward to. The way I see it, I can make up the ground a little sooner than I expected.

"All things considered I'm thankful for what happened more than regretful for what didn't. We all want the perfect career but you can probably count on one hand the amount of players who meet that reality.

"Now I have an opportunity to make the most of my next chapter."





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# THE SHAPE I'M IN

Building good habits on and off the field

STACEY FLOOD





## For Rugby Sevens star Stacey Flood, the initial lockdown period in 2020 served as a period of reflection.

"I think it was a good reality check for a lot of people. It was a time to look at your life," the 25-year-old says.

"I've been in the sevens programme full time since I was 18. For me, it was an opportunity to ask myself, am I still enjoying this? Do I still want to play rugby?"

The Rathmines player says her answer to both questions was a resounding yes.

"It gave me that clarity that yes, I do still want to play, and I really enjoy it, and it's something that not everyone gets the opportunity to do."

Money has also been on the young player's mind recently, as she's fronting a new financial wellbeing programme from LIA, the centre of excellence for the education and development of finance professionals, in partnership with Rugby Players Ireland.

While the average person's financial life involves earning income over the course of a multi-decade

career, professional rugby players follow a different trajectory.

Stacey says the Smart Money Habits programme is a great resource for players like herself who feel like a rookie when it comes to finances.

"Everyone loves spending money," she says. "But financial wellbeing is really important. That's why I got involved... I want to be a bit smarter with my money."

### ***What shape are you in?***

I am getting back into shape, I am playing sevens and recently had a stint with the fifteens. Sevens is a bit different. So I am just trying to get my body back fit and healthy.

### ***What are your healthiest eating habits?***

For me, it's everything in moderation. So, 80% is good, 20% is not so good. If you start saying to yourself you can't have X, Y or Z you're only going to want those things more. So eat well and build good habits but let yourself have that treat or have that meal that you think you shouldn't be having. Some people enjoy that glass of wine, the chocolate or the pizza and that's ok.

“

**It gave me that clarity that yes, I do still want to play, and I really enjoy it, and it's something that not everyone gets the opportunity to do.**







**What are your guiltiest pleasures?**

A glass of red wine on Friday evening.

**What would keep you awake at night?**

I find it really easy to switch off. I'm lucky in that sense. And I don't drink coffee after three o'clock in the day, that helps.

**How do you relax?**

I play a lot of PlayStation. 'Call of Duty' mostly. When you're playing those games, you can't think about anything else which relaxes me a lot. It takes your mind of everything else.

**Who are your sporting heroes?**

My sister Kim. Growing up there weren't a whole lot of women in sport. There was Sonia O'Sullivan but I wasn't mad into athletics. I always wanted to play ball sports. Kim played for Dublin and Ireland. I kind of followed in her footsteps.

**What's your favourite smell?**

On a cold day, it's probably the smell of my dad's homemade stew.

**When was the last time you cried?**

After the Scotland game when we didn't qualify for the World Cup. I cried that day, and the day after. I wouldn't be much of a crier but it was like grieving a loss.

**What traits do you least like in others?**

A non-team player, selfishness and greed.

**What traits do you least like about yourself?**

I'm quite loud. It's good in a way but sometimes I am maybe too vocal.

**Do you pray?**

I always say a prayer to St Anthony when I lose something.

**What would cheer up your day?**

Going for coffee. Seeing my friends and family. Good music. Good weather. When it's sunny, everyone is in better form.

**What quote inspires you and why?**

Fail to prepare, prepare to fail. My dad always said that and it has stuck with me.

**Where is your favourite place in the world?**

My bed. I've travelled the world with the Sevens, I've been to amazing places, but whenever I get home, all I want is my bed.



**I find it really easy to switch off. I'm lucky in that sense. And I don't drink coffee after three o'clock in the day, that helps.**

*Stacey was speaking to Nicole Glennon of the Irish Examiner*

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