

# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND  
END OF SEASON 2022

## RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND AWARDS 2022



PREPARATION  
IS KEY  
*DAN LEAVY*

TAKING NOTHING  
FOR GRANTED  
*JOEY CARBERY*



RUGBY PLAYERS  
IRELAND



**A FRESH  
TAKE ON  
REFRESHMENT.**

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**GREAT TASTE.  
ZERO ALCOHOL.**





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# CEO ADDRESS

**SIMON KEOGH**



**Naturally, most people will judge a campaign on the number of trophies sitting in the cabinet come the season's end. While there are some shiny medals on the shelf, some of our members may feel they left something out there in 2021/22.**

It has been a season of building. In addition to new leadership taking the reins at the IRFU, we have taken a deep dive into the women's programme, the men's national side have started to develop a new identity under their coaching set-up, while our Sevens teams became regular features at the latter stages of the World Series.

On a domestic level, the introduction of South African sides into the newly formatted URC took some adjusting but should only serve to push our teams to the next level. In the same way, our French counterparts have raised their game in timely fashion for the Rugby World Cup.

While we have plenty to work on, we also have plenty to work with. Notwithstanding preparations for RWC2023, our Sevens teams will be eyeing up gold while the Women's XVs will hope to return from an inaugural summer tour with a squad packed with the same fresh energy that accompanied their Six Nations campaign allied to some invaluable experience.

Evidently, there is plenty to get stuck into over the coming season.

Before then, it is important to take stock of the year that has been. What has worked? What hasn't? As an organisation we have taken our own learnings. Such is the fast-paced nature of this industry that there is always scope to evolve.



Our Awards night was one such opportunity. Never before has the night been so well attended by our membership, while the equal spread of categories tallies with our goal of being a diverse and inclusive representative body.

Thankfully, the easing of restrictions has also given us a new lease of life. We look forward to our Annual Golf Classic in August, while September will also see the first instalment of our Hall of Fame event in which two former players will be inducted into a distinguished list of Ireland's greatest rugby heroes.

Such events enable Rugby Players Ireland to support its membership and continue to develop our offerings, as guided by our players. But just as we hope our teams peak for competition, we also have to keep our own performance in check and so over the coming weeks we will take the time to reflect before preparing for a busy year ahead.

We look forward to working with you.

Simon



# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



RUGBY  
PLAYERS  
IRELAND  
**AWARDS  
2022**



SUPPORTED BY

**accenture**

For the first time since 2019 we convened at The Clayton Hotel on the Burlington Road for the Rugby Players Ireland Awards, supported this year by Accenture. Presented by former players Barry Murphy and Andrew Trimble, Ireland's only national rugby awards ceremony celebrates the on and off the field achievements of Rugby Players Ireland's members.



Accenture Men's XV's Players' Player of the Year

**Josh van der Flier**

Accenture Women's XV's Players' Player of the Year

**Sam Monaghan**

AIB Corporate Banking Men's 7s Player of the Year

**Terry Kennedy**

TritonLake Women's 7s Player of the Year

**Lucy Mulhall**

MSL Mercedes Benz Dealerships

Men's XV's Try of the Year

**Caelan Doris v New Zealand**

izest Marketing Women's XV's Try of the Year

**Eve Higgins v France**

Zurich Contribution to Irish Society Award

**Andrew Porter**

Druids Glen Hotel & Golf Resort  
Moment of the Year

**Ireland's Triple Crown Campaign**

Nevin Spence Men's Young Player of the Year

**Cian Prendergast**

WHOOOP Women's XV's Young Player of the Year

**Eve Higgins**



“

I have many great memories from what has been a special year for me, on both a personal and professional level. To be acknowledged by my teammates and opponents in this way is particularly humbling. A special word of thanks to my fiancé and family who continue to help guide me through!

**Josh van der Flier**



“

“This team has been through a tremendous amount this year, we always keep fighting. The bravery these players have shown, past and present, on and off the pitch, is captivating. To be voted by them for this award is an extreme honour and we will continue to fight to put the green jersey in a better place for the next generation.”

**Sam Monaghan**

# SEASON HIGHLIGHTS

## GOODBODY RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND 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.

### RECIPIENTS FOR THE 2021/22 ACADEMIC YEAR

Mia Alcorn	Ed Kelly
Stephen Archer	Conor Phillips
Judy Bobbett	Harry Sheridan
Cathal Forde	Charlie Ward
Marcus Hannan	



## LIA PARTNERSHIP

Through Rugby Players Ireland's new partnership with LIA, the centre of excellence for the education and development of Finance Professionals, a financial wellbeing programme is being provided to professional and elite rugby players across the country.

Built around five core modules, Smart Money Habits provides 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.



## WHOOP PARTNERSHIP

Rugby Players Ireland became the first Irish sporting organisation to partner with WHOOP, the human performance company. A firm favourite amongst many professional and elite athletes throughout the world, the agreement sees WHOOP become Rugby Players Ireland's official fitness wearable partner, while WHOOP have also become prize sponsors for the Rugby Players Ireland Awards.



## PAST PLAYER SUPPORT

The Rugby Players Ireland Clubhouse endeavours to preserve the unique connection that exists between former players. Through personal and professional development services, Rugby Players Ireland supports its members following their transition from professional rugby with a range of offerings including workshops, further education programmes, scholarships, creation of job opportunities and support for their developing businesses.

This season Rugby Players Ireland also partnered with the Irish Heart Foundation to encourage its past player membership 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. "It's only natural that some of these habits and activities take a back seat when the time comes to retire from the game."



## FIVE YEARS WITH HEINEKEN

For the past 27 seasons, Heineken has been a proud partner of European rugby. The 2021/22 campaign also marked the fifth campaign of Rugby Players Ireland's partnership with one of Ireland's leading beer and cider companies.



## VENTURE LEADERSHIP

Venture Leadership is a player only, focused leadership programme designed to develop leadership skills for the future. Comprising 6 modules, the syllabus was developed by Rugby Players Ireland but delivered to over 20 players by established experts from a range of backgrounds including training and development coaches with experience in tech, food, pharma, financial services in global big business and the Irish military. The programme is supported by EU Athletes and the European Commission.



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# COMING OUT HAS BEEN REALLY POSITIVE

The Leinster Rugby scrum-half sat down with Marcus Ó Buachalla of leinsterrugby.ie to discuss his decision to come out and his reasons for doing so.

**NICK MCCARTHY**



**Marcus Ó Buachalla:** Nick, thanks for your time this morning. First of all, how are you?

**Nick McCarthy:** I'm very good, thank you.

**MÓB:** It's been an interesting few months for you to say the least.

**NMcC:** It has. I came out to my teammates in January and I was obviously pretty nervous about doing so, but I'm really happy that I did it.

I struggled with coming out for a while and it was starting to impact on me and my happiness so it was the right decision.

**MÓB:** How bad did that struggle get?

**NMcC:** It affected me so much that I agonised over my future and contemplated walking away from rugby altogether because I just didn't think I could come out while playing rugby.

But, I spoke to Leo (Cullen) and Stuart (Lancaster) last November and the support that I got from them straight away was unbelievable. They helped and guided me over the months that followed so that I felt more comfortable to come out to the group.

**MÓB:** Why did you feel that you couldn't come out while playing rugby?

**NMcC:** I suppose because it's not really 'a thing'. It's not common for a male athlete to come out in sport, nevermind professional rugby, and it's probably something that I didn't want to believe or accept myself either.

I needed to accept being gay myself before I could address it with others.

I have great friends in rugby but I didn't know how they would take it.

My experience, since coming out though has been entirely positive. I have realised that anyone who cares about you, just wants you to be happy.

**MÓB:** When did you start having those conversations with family and friends?

**NMcC:** Around this time last year I started talking to my close friends, and they were very supportive.

Those conversations continued as I became more comfortable and accepting of myself.

In many other professions you may not feel the need to discuss your sexuality. But I felt I wasn't being true to myself.

Leinster Rugby is built on 'brotherhood' and it's important that we can be open and honest with each other. We spend so much time together, and I now feel very comfortable in this environment being myself.

**MÓB:** What was their reaction?

**NMcC:** Everyone was happy that I could tell them and they could be there for me. Some felt sorry that I couldn't discuss it sooner but again, I had to get to that point myself.

My friends have been unbelievable in helping me to accept that I am gay and to help me embrace that part of my life now.

I'm lucky to have grown up in a loving environment. My parents, my sister, grandparents and wider family, are totally accepting of me and I'm very thankful for their support.

**MÓB:** Take us back to the Monday morning please, Nick, when you addressed the full squad ahead of the scheduled team meeting?

**NMcC:** I only made a quick announcement. But I just remember the room erupting! They were all delighted for me and it was immediately a weight off my shoulders.

I felt they understood my situation. It's hard to perform at your best when you are carrying something, anything, and that's the same for all the lads. For me it was my sexuality, for others it could be stuff at home, or studies or whatever.

**MÓB:** Some people might say we are in 2022 and the times have changed? People don't need to come out and talk publicly like you are doing today?

**NMcC:** I'm a private person so I was unsure about coming out publicly.

But looking at Carl Nassib (American Football player) or Josh Cavallo (Australian soccer player) coming out and Jack Dunne here in Leinster and how he spoke publicly last year about his bisexuality, has helped me a lot. I've had good conversations with each of them and they've been hugely encouraging.

In turn, I feel if I can now help others come out in professional sport or in their everyday lives and make being gay more normal and not a thing to be worried about, then that is a positive.

**MÓB:** How have you coped with the mental strain of the last year?

**NMcC:** I'm feeling happier in myself. I have great support here at Leinster, and Rugby Players' Ireland and Emma Burrows (Leinster Personal Development Manager).

Just being able to be myself is a relief!

**MÓB:** You mentioned the unknown earlier and in particular, how would people react. So how did they react or how have things been with friends and teammates?

**NMcC:** In some ways, nothing has changed, which is great! It really hasn't been a big thing for them, but it was for me at the time.

What has changed is we can be more open and honest about how we're feeling, and I think our relationships have gotten stronger.

**MÓB:** What does the future look like?

**NMcC:** I'm so much happier than I was a few months ago and I'm optimistic for the future.

If one other person, one other kid, keeps playing their sport because they see a Leinster Rugby player has come out and is accepted, that would be a great outcome.

**MÓB:** Finally, if there is somebody out there struggling, what would you say to them?

**NMcC:** I'd love people to see, from my experience, that coming out has been really positive, and the biggest hurdle may be in your own head.

Surround yourself with good people, because anyone that cares for you, wants the best for you.

Your sexuality is just a part of who you are, and life is so much better when you can be yourself.

**MÓB:** Nick, thank you so much for your time this morning, and for sharing your story. Enjoy the summer.

**NMcC:** Thank you.



# HELP & SUPPORT

## **BELONG TO**

Belong To is the national organisation supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) young people in Ireland.

You can contact Belong To at [www.belongto.org](http://www.belongto.org)

## **FINDING HELP?**

Belong To provide support and information for LGBTI+ young people through a number of support services:

Visit a Youth Group: Belong To support youth groups around the country where you can be yourself, meet new people and seek help. Click [HERE](#) for a list of support youth groups near you.

Give Belong To a Call: 01 670 6223  
(Open Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm)

Send Belong To an Email: [info@belongto.org](mailto:info@belongto.org)

**IF YOU NEED URGENT SUPPORT, YOU CAN CONTACT ANY ONE OF THE SUPPORT SERVICES BELOW. MANY OF THEM ARE OPEN 24 HOURS A DAY. YOU ARE NOT ALONE.**

## **24/7 Anonymous Text Support**

If you need support about any type of crisis, you can chat in confidence, 24/7 with a trained crisis volunteer over text. Connect with a trained volunteer who will listen to you and help you move towards feeling better. Here's how the support service works:

1. Text LGBTI+ to 086 1800 280 anytime when you need support. Standard SMS rates may apply.
2. A trained volunteer will listen to you and help you think more clearly, enabling you to know that you can take the next step to feel better.

## **The National LGBT Helpline**

The National LGBT Helpline provides a confidential, listening, support and information service to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. The service is also used by people who are questioning if they might be LGBT, as well as the family and friends of LGBT people and professionals looking for information. The service is volunteer-run and operates Monday to Friday from 7pm to 9pm.

Visit: [www.lgbt.ie](http://www.lgbt.ie) Call: 1890 929 539

## **Pieta House**

Pieta House offers free specialised treatment to clients who self-harm, suffer from suicidal ideation or have made multiple suicide attempts. Clients receive an intensive programme of one-to-one counselling lasting about four to six weeks. They have branches across Ireland in Ballyfermot, Finglas, Lucan, Limerick, Tallaght, Kerry, Tipperary and Galway.

Visit Website: [www.pieta.ie](http://www.pieta.ie) Call: 1800 247 247

## **Samaritans**

Samaritans provides confidential non-judgmental support, 24 hours a day for people experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including those which could lead to suicide.

Visit Website: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org) Call: 116 123

## **Your Mental Health**

Your Mental Health is a place to learn about mental health and how to support yourself and others. Find resources and support services near you

Visit Website: [www.yourmentalhealth.ie](http://www.yourmentalhealth.ie)

## **Jigsaw**

Jigsaw offer a free service providing support and advice to young people (aged 12-25) experiencing mental health difficulties.

Visit Website: [www.jigsaw.ie/help](http://www.jigsaw.ie/help)

## **Transgender Equality Network Ireland**

Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) seeks to improve conditions and advance the rights and equality of trans people and their families. Their vision is an Ireland where trans people are understood, accepted and respected, and can participate fully in all aspects of Irish society.

Visit Website: [www.teni.ie](http://www.teni.ie) Call: 01 873 35 75

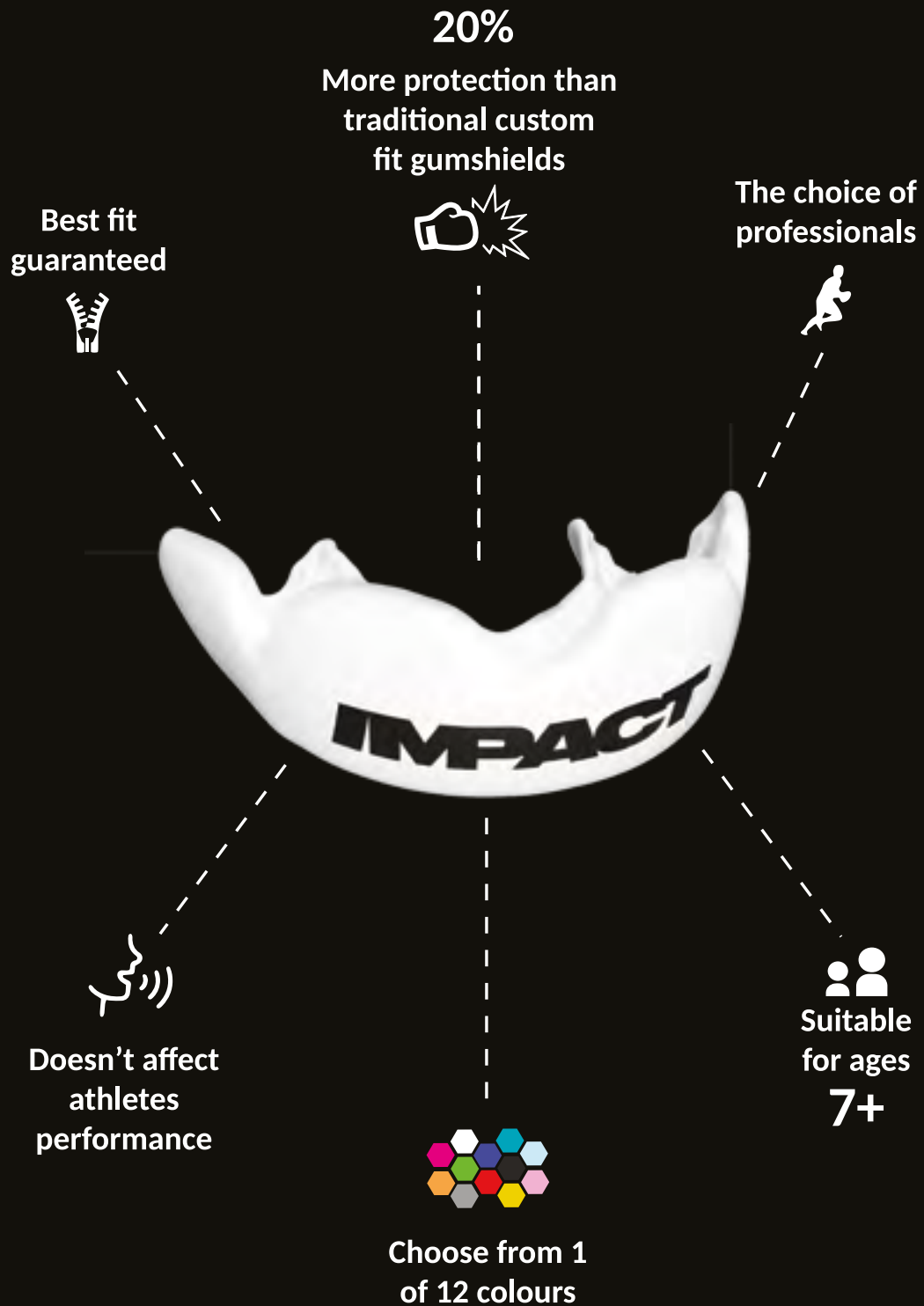
## **Gay Switchboard Ireland**

Gay Switchboard Ireland provides a confidential telephone support service. Listening, support, and information are provided to all callers in a non-directive or judgmental way. The service is available to the LGBT community, their parents, families and friends, and to anyone who has concerns relating to sexuality, including HIV/AIDS related enquiries.

Visit Website: [www.gayswitchboard.ie](http://www.gayswitchboard.ie) Call: 01 872 1055

# IMPACT

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# PREPARATION IS KEY

Whether planned or unplanned the key to successful transitions from the game is preparation, and it is never too early to start.

PLAYER DEVELOPMENT



**Despite the reality of his horrific injury, those who know Dan Leavy best knew better than to bet against the abrasive backrower ever making a return to competitive action. From the outside looking in, the (then) 24-year-old had already accomplished more than most in the game and might have been happy with his lot, yet all Leavy could see was unfulfilled potential.**

Although a return to the Irish fold was mooted within moments of his long-awaited return 573 days later, Leavy vowed to take his comeback on a week-by-week basis. While the call from Andy Farrell never materialised, on each day over the ensuing 14 months Leavy's unrelenting mental and physical resilience ensured no stone would be left unturned as he sought to add to his 11 Irish caps and scale the heights of the game once more.

Not one accustomed to losing battles, the Dubliner finally bowed to medical advice towards the end of the season leading many to believe that his

biggest achievement of all was in toggling out for a senior game again. He will have longed for many more opportunities but ultimately the thrill of running out at the RDS or the Aviva has now been consigned to memory.

Sitting across from him in the Leinster Rugby dressing room, Devin Toner will have been counting his lucky stars. One of the most decorated players in the game, Toner's longevity and durability has him placed firmly at the top of the province's all-time appearances list. Sadly, Toner has also called time on his decorated career of late, albeit with the good fortune of it being on his terms.

Though their respective retirements have occurred in different ways, both Leavy and Toner have arrived at this juncture on similar pages owing to their consistent preparation behind the scenes. Toner is currently studying for his QFAs and is also enrolled in the LIA's 'Smart Money Habits' programme run in partnership with Rugby Players Ireland. Leavy, a graduate of Business and Legal Studies from UCD, has been soaking up plenty of business experience when his rehab and playing schedules have allowed.

In a study carried out in 2019, Professor David Lavalley – the world's first Professor of Duty of Care in Sport – demonstrated the benefits that planning for retirement can have on sporting performance. Using anonymised data from the National Rugby League (NRL) in Australia, the paper showed that players with higher levels of engagement in career transition planning were (a) contracted to their team for longer periods, (b) featured more regularly in team selections and (c) enjoyed longer playing careers overall.

The findings complimented the growing number of European sports policies which state that all athletes should be able to participate in environments that promote long-term personal growth and wellbeing, in addition to sporting excellence.



It is said that it is in our moments of fragility that we discover our true inner strength. As Leavy worked tremendously hard to return to the field and Toner worked equally hard to stay on it, both also understood the need to pick up the pace in other ways and began to test the waters of corporate Ireland using their network and some of the skills learned as professional sportsmen.

“Rugby players have unique opportunities available to them during their careers,” Dr Deirdre Lyons, Head of the Player Development Programme (PDP) at Rugby Players Ireland says. “They’re exposed to some of the most influential people in society, they work in highly pressurised environments, learn invaluable life skills, possess a strong support network and enjoy a public profile of their own.

“Yet instead of making the most of this unique position when at the peak of their powers, many wait until they enter the final phase of their career. This can induce some anxiety as they face into the unknown which can also impact on their performance.

“As with any player, it was inevitable that both Dan and Devin would have to retire at some stage. Whether planned (in Devin’s case) or unplanned, as

in Dan’s situation, the key to successful transitions from the game is preparation, and it is never too early to start. Though he will be disappointed that his rugby career has been curtailed, Dan Leavy can rest assured that he made the most of the opportunities available to him.

“Unfortunately, it takes instances such as Dan’s to highlight the need for players to be prepared. We need to use the example both he and Devin have set to encourage others to follow their lead. Both players will benefit from the way in which they will have positioned themselves to prospective employers in terms of their education and experiences, along with the many transferable skills they will have learned during their time in the professional game.”

Rugby Players Ireland’s PDP, which is jointly funded by the IRFU, ensures that all professional rugby players in the country currently have access to a Player Development Manager (PDM). According to World Players, the exclusive global association of organised athletes across professional sport, the role of the PDM is to promote the personal development and wellbeing of players through empowering them to take ownership of their own development both on and off the sporting field.

“

Unfortunately, it takes instances such as Dan’s to highlight the need for players to be prepared. **We need to use the example both he and Devin have set to encourage others to follow their lead.**





This service also extends to academy players, sevens players, retired professionals and the national women's programme. With a PDM catering for each grouping, the support is individualised, having grown from just one PDM fulfilling this role prior to 2012. Some of the supports provided to players include help with education, career planning, financial education and mental wellbeing.

While her team has engaged with the vast majority of players, Lyons accepts that some athletes are reluctant to engage in career transition planning programmes for fear of it detracting from their core business of performance, or the fear of their coaches and support team holding that perception. This comes despite a general acceptance that retirement from sport can often prove to be a major loss for professional athletes.

"No matter the circumstances of their retirement, any player will find the period of transition difficult.

**“  
No matter the  
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From exiting What's App groups to trying to establish a new identity away from that of a 'rugby player' many players experience feelings of loss following retirement from professional support. As PDMs, what we try to do is ensure that that process is less difficult than it needs to be.

"This is where the stories and experiences of former players can be so important. They're delivering the same message but with a voice that echoed around the same changing rooms for so long. Nothing beats that authenticity and relativity."

As intrepid off the field as they have been on it, Leavy and Toner will undoubtedly become significant players in their new worlds. While the determination, character and drive that marked their playing careers will stand them in good stead in the office, their legacy on the professional rugby community may be more significant than they appreciate.

# ANNUAL REVIEW

## 2021/22 SEASON

At the heart of the Rugby Players Ireland/IRFU Player Development Programme is our individual interaction with players. When conversations with players around off-pitch development are individualised, holistic and meaningful to them, engagement increases, and players feel motivated for action. Restrictions due to Covid-19 was still in place in many teams at the start of the 2021/22 season so PDMs were limited in their individual face-to-face contact. Many meetings however continued to be conducted online using video calls. Group work was also curtailed at the start of the season until national restrictions lifted later in 2022

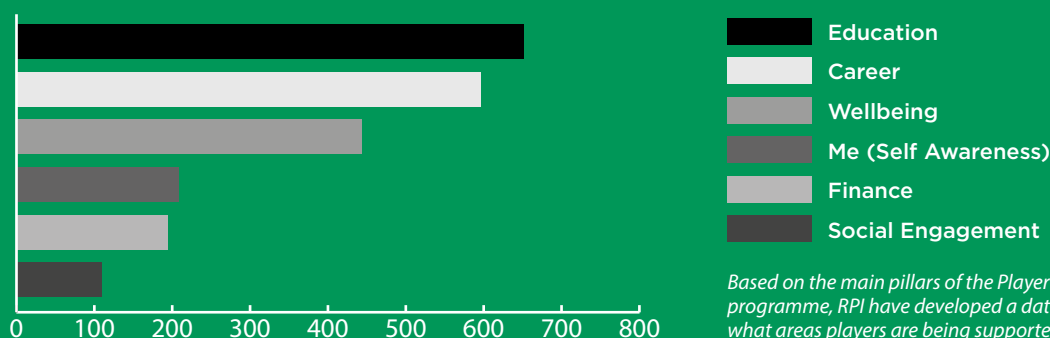
# 356

PLAYERS ENGAGED WITH A PDM IN THE 2021/22 SEASON ACROSS OUR ACADEMY, SENIOR, 7S, WOMEN'S AND PAST PLAYERS. A 22% DECREASE FROM LAST SEASON.

# 1386

THANKFULLY AS RESTRICTIONS LIFTED THERE WAS A LARGE INCREASE IN FACE TO FACE MEETINGS (FROM 19% LAST SEASON TO 41% THIS SEASON). PDMS CONTINUED TO USE VIDEO CALLS WITH PLAYERS (19%), AND ALSO ENGAGED WITH PLAYERS VIA TEXT/WHATSAPP MESSAGE (17%), PHONE (12%) AND EMAIL (11%)

### What do players want to talk about?



### Who did we work with in 2021/2022?\*

PLAYER STATUS	NO. OF CONSULTATIONS	% OF CONSULTATIONS
SENIOR & DEVELOPMENT	560	40
ACADEMY & SUB-ACADEMY	304	22
7S**	199	14
WOMEN'S 15S	128	9
RETIRED AND RELEASED	143	10
OVERSEAS**	52	4

\*\* Includes players from the men's and women's game

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# TAKING NOTHING FOR GRANTED

Tackle Your Feelings ambassador Joey Carbery on how he takes control during challenging times

JOEY CARBERY



**Rugby pitches are not known to grow in size but when you play the All Blacks impossible is nothing. A hush descended on the Aviva Stadium as Luke Pearce pointed to the posts and most of those looking on took to burying their head in their hands. Joey Carbery stood over the ball on the halfway line. It was a pivotal moment.**

"It's a mental thing, it comes down to pressure," Carbery's Auckland-based grandfather later told the New Zealand Herald. "Even professional golfers miss a three-foot putt. I knew he was perfectly capable of nailing the kick but he's coming back from injury, coming off the bench, and 51,000 people are watching. It was a mixture of excitement and also a concern."

He needn't have worried. In what was a clear demonstration of faith that had otherwise been lacking in the media, Conor Murray - who usually assume responsibility for the rocket launchers - stood aside as Carbery took centre stage. Just as it

was on his remarkable Test debut in Chicago, ice was running through his veins.

"One of the most challenging aspects of being a player would probably be the pressure you're under to perform," Carbery acknowledges. "It's a privilege to represent Munster and Ireland but with that comes responsibility. You don't want to let anyone down. You want to leave the jersey in a better place and do everyone proud. It can be tough.

"I try to look past that and concentrate on what I can control. It comes down to training and getting everything up to speed in the week of a game. If I've ticked the boxes in my preparation, I will feel more confident going into the weekend. It focuses your mind on the job at hand rather than worrying about the occasion or the people you're representing."

Carbery's ability to shut out the world is an invaluable asset in a sport that trades on the smallest of margins. However, Carbery is equally aware of his responsibility to step out of the rugby bubble. Having recently linked up with Aware as an ambassador, Carbery has also joined ranks with the Tackle Your Feelings campaign.

**“  
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"Before my injury I would have been quite a stubborn guy," he admits. "I didn't think I needed anyone's help and wanted to go my own way. Even when I made my first comeback I was aware that people were questioning my durability so I pretended that everything was grand when in reality I was in quite a bit of pain and was just making things worse.

"I was so angry and frustrated. It was so disheartening to be told we had to start all over again with the rehab. It got to the point where I had to start being honest with myself and the people around me. When I reached out and explained how I was feeling I had this genuine sense of relief because it unleashed a lot of built-up emotion.

"I never wanted to be a burden on anyone but the realisation that people just wanted to help me out was a big moment. There were a lot of tough days but somehow they knew how to help me draw positives from the situation."

Perspective is one of his stronger suits these days.

“

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"You have to take full advantage of every enjoyment factor you get from rugby," he believes. "There are so many bad days along the way that even the smallest of victories should be celebrated.

"I remember a small win I had. Each week I got my schedule from the medical team and it was based on a traffic light system. One day I had green across my chart and I was on top of the world. Those little wins were my motivation and have led me to days like that against the All Blacks."

A New Zealander by birth, Carbery was always cognisant of his Irish heritage. Yet while long haul flights to Dublin were a regular feature of his summers, the gravity of a permanent move undoubtedly prompted some early tests of his resilience.

"It was only when I sat on the plane that the severity of the move began to sink in," he recalls. "To that point I had been so excited. I always loved sharing stories of Ireland and my mates loved hearing them, but I was still very young and probably didn't realise how much things in my life were about to change.





“

**I REMEMBER A SMALL WIN I HAD. EACH WEEK I GOT MY SCHEDULE FROM THE MEDICAL TEAM AND IT WAS BASED ON A TRAFFIC LIGHT SYSTEM. ONE DAY I HAD GREEN ACROSS MY CHART AND I WAS ON TOP OF THE WORLD**

“I always liked to think I was Irish but obviously I was kiwi cultured and the smallest of things brought that home to me. In New Zealand we don't wear shoes to school but over here you're in a full uniform with socks, shoes and everything! There are a lot of similarities between New Zealand and Ireland but some things are definitely very different and I had to adjust.”

Change would seem to be a recurring theme throughout Carbery's young life. From moving his life across the world to trading the RDS for Thomond Park and all the setbacks in between, the 26-year-old has developed the coping mechanisms to deal with most challenges.

“For me, the process of change is the same everytime. The reasons may change but I deal with

it by focusing on what I want to get out of it. I moved to Munster because I wanted to play consistently at 10. Leaving Dublin was a big thing for me but I focused on why it was happening – I wanted to do all I could to become a better 10 and I believe I have done so.

“It goes back to the support group who helped with me out with those decisions. I learned to express my views and take the opinions of the people I respect on board. Sometimes I heard things I didn't want to hear but if you value the opinion of someone for their advice, you've got to value their criticism too. It's coming from a good place.

“To be able to bounce things off someone is something too many people take for granted. You might want to detach from rugby or go on a big, long rant about it, yet they'll hear you out.

“Knowing you're not alone and knowing that you'll go through the good and the bad together makes standing over that ball so much easier. Celebrating the wins with them becomes very special.”

# TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS

## TYF 2021/22



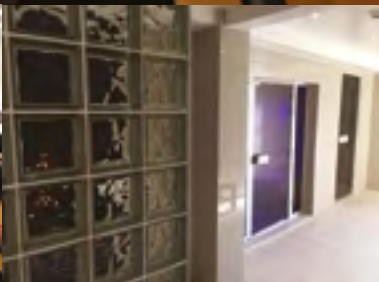
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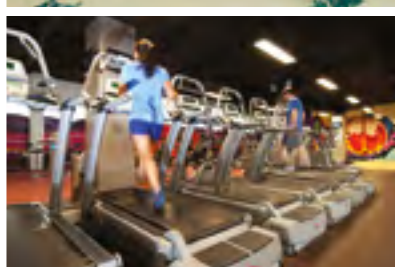
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# ALWAYS GROWING

Ireland's record-breaking Dream Team member reflects  
on a positive season

AMEE-LEIGH MURPHY CROWE

**There was an air of inevitability as Barry Murphy and Andrew Trimble proclaimed Amee-Leigh Murphy Crowe to be the TritonLake Women's 7s Player of the Year at the Rugby Players Ireland Awards in May. Top try scorer on the World Series, Murphy Crowe also became an undisputed member of the HSBC Dream Team, having helped Ireland secure fourth place on the series.**

"It's been a great season," the Tipperary flyer acknowledges, "but I try not to get hung up on the awards. It's amazing to receive recognition for your work but they're small picture things. For any player it's a case of getting the best out of yourself so that the team can be as good as it can be.

"If you told me last year that we'd finish as high as we did, I'd have snapped your hand off. It was really satisfying to perform and get the results to match. Medalling in Spain was historic, Langford too.

"Players on other teams were asking us what we were doing differently," she admits, "but it's hard to set aside all the work we have done for so many years and how the programme has grown in that time. Nothing has really changed. We just started to execute the opportunities we had always created.

"That being said, the way we finished out the season in Toulouse against Australia in the semi-final left a bit of a sour taste... I'm not going to lie. I guess it shows how much our standards have risen. We know we still have plenty to work on in a World Cup year."



Had results gone differently, Murphy Crowe may have had to balance another World Cup in her schedule. Now also an established member of the Women's XV's backline, her penchant for the whitewash wasn't enough to get Ireland across the line in last year's qualifying tournament in which losses to Spain and Scotland put paid to their plans to be on a plane to New Zealand later this year.

With her involvement on both 7s and XV's fronts, Murphy Crowe has become a well-recognised figure across the women's game in Ireland and abroad. With it has come added responsibilities and the increased demands of affiliated sponsors who have recognised her value.

"It's great that companies are showing more faith and seeing more value in female athletes. It isn't all take, take, take either. Any company I have worked with have also been very helpful in terms of building my personal brand. I can't complain. It's the kind of support the women's game has been crying out for.

"Personally, I found there was quite a shift in my profile after the lockdown which took a bit of getting used to. On the 7s circuit we wouldn't get to have much face time with fans so I was really moved by all the young girls who would come up to me after the Six Nations games to tell me how much I inspired them. That to me is a bigger win than anything - more than any award or number of followers you have."

Murphy Crowe's growing stature in the game has also seen her appointed to Rugby Players Ireland's Executive Board. As a representative for the Irish 7s squad, she sits on the committee alongside the likes of Peter O'Mahony, Garry Ringrose, Iain Henderson, Dave Heffernan and Billy Dardis, while a representative of the XV's squad to replace Ciara Griffin will be determined in the coming months.



"The players' voice is the most important in the game. I don't understand committees that are often made up of people at a remove from the field. I appreciate the different perspectives but surely players need to be at the heart of any decision that ultimately concerns players?"

"Sitting on the Rugby Players Ireland board has been a very good experience for me. I do a bit of work with Perpetua Fitness but that aside my time is limited to build my off-field experiences. It's been great to get insights into the other squads and while some things are relatable in each team, we can get ideas from other members on the best way to go about things.

"To make that happen you need to be part of the conversation and help direct things in the right way. The board gives me that platform."

As part of her role, Murphy Crowe has also become a WHOOP ambassador on behalf of her players' association. As the first Irish sporting organisation to partner with WHOOP, Rugby Players Ireland's members have access to exclusive offers from WHOOP which will help them to gain unparalleled insights into their recovery while positively impacting their health and wellness behaviour.

"I've had it six months at this stage and I absolutely love it. In training we have GPS data but nothing that monitors our recovery which is also a huge part of being a professional athlete. If your body is a little off, it will give you a heads up. If I didn't have that information I might plough on and ultimately do more harm than good.

"When I'm doing my own work, I find it really useful to see how hard I've pushed myself. It's based off your heart rate which is very interesting. I also have the benefit of GPS intelligence so I can get a really full picture of my performance and where I might need to make adjustments.

"I guess it's another example of how things develop. Rugby itself is constantly evolving so there is always going to be something to work on.

"I approach each session as a new opportunity to grow because no matter how many awards are to your name, you are never the finished article."

# WHOOP<sup>®</sup> X RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

We speak with Ronan Jones, European Marketing Manager  
at WHOOP and Meath footballer

## **Why would you choose WHOOP over other fitness wearables?**

WHOOP is different to most wearables in that it is extremely focused in what it does - the device itself has no screen and is non-invasive by design, while within the app, every bit of data you see is there for a reason. Ultimately, WHOOP is designed to measure what matters most when it comes to your training, sleep, recovery as well as your overall health, while also coaching you through how to improve in each of these areas.

## **What are the benefits in partnering with a players' association?**

No matter the sport, player's associations are highly regarded as reputable and trustworthy sources by the playing members whom they represent. By design, they are there to work on behalf of their players, with their best interests in mind. As such, in partnering with these trusted organizations it helps to add credibility to our brand and what we stand for - no respected players association would engage in a partnership that did not add value to its members.

## **As an elite-athlete, how does WHOOP impact on your sporting career?**

WHOOP helps me to keep myself accountable - whether it is making sure that I am dedicating enough time to sleep, or helping me to understand how to improve my recovery, having access to the data as a daily reminder has been a huge help.

## **In your opinion, what are your favourite WHOOP features?**

Though I use most of the features on a daily basis, for me it is the WHOOP Smart Alarm, which vibrates each morning to wake you up at the optimal time. I used to hate being woken up by my iPhone alarm, so having this feature to gently wake me up has meant that I feel a lot fresher from the minute that I start my day.

## **Professional sportspeople already have ample access to a range of experts, where does WHOOP fit in?**

Ultimately WHOOP is there to empower each user at an individual level. In a professional environment level, almost everything is monitored when it comes to how the players are training

and performing when they are with the group - where WHOOP comes into it is helping individuals to understand what they need to do when they're not in the gym or on the pitch, so that they can show up and perform when it matters. It is incredibly important that players are in control of their sleep and recovery outside of the group environment, and WHOOP is designed in a way that helps them to keep this in check.

## **Can non elite-athletes get as much out of WHOOP?**

Absolutely and what we've seen time and time again is that the 1% or 2% gains that an elite athlete can get out of WHOOP, can be a 10% - 20% gain for a regular individual. Though most 'non-athletes' aren't training at the same level as the top pros, they have other stressors and time commitments, like work, family life, commutes as well as trying to fit in exercise amongst everything else etc. which can leave individuals feeling burnt out if they are not taking care of themselves physically. It is the balance between stress and rest, strain and recovery, that leads to improved performance - regardless of what performance looks like for an individual.

## **Where are WHOOP going to go next?**

At WHOOP, our ultimate goal is to help people better understand what they are doing, how it is affecting them and where they have areas for improvement. WHOOP will continue to act as a coach in that regard, and the platform is only going to get smarter as time goes on.



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# GETTING STARTED

The Georgian prop is dipping his toes into the business world

VAKH ABDALADZE



**Over the past number of months, Vakh Abdaladze's thoughts will have regularly ventured back to his home in Georgia. With Ukraine under attack, the country of his birth lies in a precarious position. For the Abdaladzes, it also stirs traumatic memories of the Russo-Georgian war of 2008.**

As devastating scenes play out over the news, the prop is reminded of returning home from school in Castleknock Community College to the distressing cries of his mother as she frantically punched the numbers of her Kutaisi-based family into her mobile phone. Then there was the fear that gripped the household as they realised that their uncle Giga had gone to the frontline.

Several years before war ultimately broke out in the region, Abdaladze's father Nikola (a former Georgian international) had resolved to secure a better future for his young family in Ireland. He didn't want them growing up under a cloud of Russian intimidation and felt that in Dublin they could forge their own path without the constant need to look over their shoulder.

Welcomed with open arms into Blanchardstown, the Abdaladzes also found solace in the sizable Georgian contingent that had already decamped to Ireland. Amongst them were the Soroka family, with whom the Abdaladzes have formed a close, supportive bond, made all the more remarkable by the fact that Alex Soroka duly followed his

compatriot's footsteps to Leinster Rugby.

With a degree in business from DCU, Abdaladze's academic journey had already gone some way to justifying his father's decision before increasing attention turned towards his performances on the rugby field. Though initially overlooked by the Leinster academy, a series of impressive showings for Clontarf in the AIL meant that Abdaladze's potential could no longer be ignored.

A relatively late starter in professional rugby terms, the prop quickly progressed to a senior deal yet only a handful of appearances have followed since 2018. Now 26, lockdown and a significant injury have conspired against his continued rise but a return to fitness and form in recent weeks has seen the Georgian rewarded with a new deal.

Both on and off the field it seems, Abdaladze is poised to take the next step in his career. In addition to doing business at scrum-time, Abdaladze has recently established 'Taste of Georgia' – a wholesale distributor of Georgian wine in Ireland.



"I reflected on things a lot when I was out with my injury," Abdaladze says. "All sorts of thoughts go through your head because you have so much time to think. Every eventuality plays out in your mind and the scarier ones tend to stick. I didn't know if rugby would be shelved for months, years or for good so I needed something to pour myself into."

"At the back of my mind I was always interested in setting up a business and my thought process was to link Georgia and Ireland somehow. Whenever I've managed to get home, I'd visit a few vineyards and do a few tastings. At first I was always going for the free wine and food but over time the business plan for 'Taste of Georgia' just clicked."

"The pandemic has meant that it's been a bit of a slow burner but it has kept me ticking over. I really began to embrace a new identity as an entrepreneur. I've enjoyed the process of learning more about wine and being able to tie it to my heritage has been something I hadn't anticipated that I'd appreciate so much."

While Abdaladze does not purport to be a connoisseur, Georgia's rich history in wine has not escaped him. Indeed, many believe that it was in Georgia that humans first discovered that grapes stored in containers throughout the winter turned into wine, a belief backed up by archaeology, artefacts and DNA dating back 8,000 years.

“

**At the back of my mind I was always interested in setting up a business and my thought process was to link Georgia and Ireland somehow.**



taste of georgia

Through Taste of Georgia, Abdaladze hopes that the people of Ireland will be able to sample some of the finest produce his homeland has to offer. While the stock has been secured, his main challenge has been getting it into the right hands. Another steep learning curve.

"We're very much at a starting point and so I've been picking things up on the go in terms of pitching to clients. I've actually been really nervous cold-calling off-licences on sample runs. You can't help but think they're looking at me as a pure cowboy but thankfully they appreciate the story and have enjoyed the wine and that has got the ball rolling in terms of stock going out."





"You learn so much from just getting out and doing things. I have my degree but nothing really compares to dealing with the Revenue, getting my accounts in order, getting sales over the line. It's been a real baptism of fire but I really believe in what Taste of Georgia can achieve so I'm determined to see it through."

A member of the Ireland squad that finished second at the World Rugby U20 Championship in 2016, Abdaladze has a great affection for his adopted country. However, Georgia firmly remains home and one day he hopes to return there permanently to reunite with family.

"As I get older, I'm finding a greater affinity to Georgia," Abdaladze says. "When I was a kid we used to play football late into the evening until my mother stood at the door and shouted down the estate in Georgian. In general, the Georgian culture stands out but as a youngster growing up in Ireland you just want to fit in so I used to get very embarrassed by it. I found that I began to shy away from my nationality."

"As I've grown older and have been able to visit and understand Georgia a little better, I've learned that we are a very passionate people. It's something I've grown to embrace and love. I remember my first home game at the RDS and hearing my mam above every other person in the place. It brought me back to those football matches as a kid, but that time I could not have been prouder."

Unfortunately, the matchday experience and the sensation of his mother's voice ringing through his ears has been all too lacking in recent seasons. He hopes to address that over the coming campaigns, eyeing up opportunity wherever he can get it.

"Playing matches again has been such a relief," he continues. "I made my initial comeback at the tail-end of last year but in my heart of hearts I knew I wasn't at the standard I expected of myself. I got back playing with Clontarf again and that really lit a fire underneath me in terms of my own game and why I play rugby. It was an absolute joy."

"Playing rugby at any level is something I took for granted and I've probably felt the same way about being Georgian."

**“  
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Georgian.**

# NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The Connacht, Ireland and Lions centre on his love  
for his adopted country

**BUNDEE AKI**



**There are many dimensions to being a rugby player but few consider the sacrifices that individuals make for the good of their future and that of their family. While the residency rule has drawn plenty of criticism, few could question Bundee Aki's love of Ireland and commitment to the Irish cause.**

When the New Zealander first signed for Connacht back in 2014 it marked a major coup for the westerners. Though largely an unknown quantity on this side of the globe, the arrival of the Super Rugby winner was a signal of intent by a side that had grown tired of wallowing in the shadows. Connacht's subsequent rise in fortune was due in no small part to the Aucklander who has since become one of the most recognisable characters in Irish sport.

Heading into his tenth season with the province, Aki remains in Galway despite reports of several lucrative offers for his services. Though such speculation will always attach to the best players in the game, Aki's performances for both Connacht Rugby and his adopted country have served as confirmation of his loyalty to rugby here. Indeed, his allegiance has roots in his first night in Ireland.

"I remember walking into the Connacht Hotel when I first arrived," the Lions centre recalls. "My whole family and I were welcomed with open arms. Everybody had obviously done their bit of research



and knew our names. For me, it was nice to get that introduction on a personal level but the way they made my family feel so welcome was very special."

"To be fairly honest, I'm a person that when someone does so much for you and your family, they deserve the best from you. It is good business for me but what they've given to me and my family, the lifestyle that we have over here in Galway, I don't know if I'd get the same treatment somewhere else, do you know what I mean?"

In order to find better opportunities for his young family, Aki had to leave several close relatives behind in New Zealand, including his eldest daughter. He admits that his mind inevitably wandered back home to them regularly in those early days. There was no way of ignoring how he felt and so he learned to deal with his pervading emotions.

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**There are so many lovely, happy and friendly people in Galway. They go out of their way to say hello or wave across the street.**





"There are so many lovely, happy and friendly people in Galway. They go out of their way to say hello or wave across the street. I think of people like Deirdre Lyons who is such a lovely, lovely lady. She's always been on my case and from day one was always asking after my family.

"Being surrounded by such love from early on helped to take my mind off being so far away from home. Knowing that people cared about us and wanted to reach out made me feel more secure that everyone is looking out for you and your loved ones. I had to get on top of things because knew I had to be in the moment to make better connections with those who were making such an effort with us.

"I guess it also helped me to focus on the job I came here to do."

Within a few years of his arrival Connacht claimed the PRO12 title, while he also had a central part to play in the Irish Grand Slam of 2018. Four years further on and with a Lions tour to add to his credentials, Aki has plenty of experience and learnings to impart.

"Settling into Galway was made easier by having Mills Muliaina around. He had left the Chiefs a few months before me and knew the ropes, so I was able to lean on him. You can find your comfort zone a little quicker when you know what to do and what's expected of you in a new place. It's important to help people.

"I like to think I've played the same role for guys who have come in from abroad over the years. I've taken them into my household and invited them out to dinner or for coffee. They mightn't say it but I know they feel the same way as I did, so I can relate and look out for them. I think people tend to stick around the club because they build such strong bonds off the field.

"They certainly don't stay for the weather!"

A winner of the coveted Supporters' Player of the Year at the Rugby Players Ireland Awards following Ireland's Grand Slam triumph, Aki is a firm favourite across the Irish rugby community. He moves quickly between colloquialisms, has

earned praise for singing the anthem and he even knows that once he passes Athlone, the deluge begins.

"My eyes were opened to the kind of people that live here when I played my first game on a cold, windy Friday night at the Sportsground. When I first arrived, I wondered why there wasn't much shelter at the Sportsgrounds but then you realise that the rain goes sideways in Galway and so there's not much point.

"Galway on a sunny day is such a different place. The traffic doesn't move and I don't know where everybody comes from. Those days don't happen very often though and yet regardless of the weather everyone is just as happy. Hail, rain or shine everyone, everyone embraces their environment.

"The same goes for our matches. Regardless of the conditions, regardless of how the game is going, the fans stay right to the final whistle and rally behind us. They support you through thick and thin. It's a very tight-knit community.

"I think I was surprised to realise how rugby could be so important to Irish people. The loudest stadium I've ever been in was when we played against New Zealand in November. It was something special. When the crowd started belting out the Fields of Athenry, the hairs stood on my neck.

"Honestly, it's a place to be. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."



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# TWO WEEKS IN SEPTEMBER

In years to come, people will look back upon the 2021/22 season as a seminal moment for the women's game in Ireland. Indeed, many will look towards a couple of weeks in September as being the real turning point.

An 'unacceptable error' at the women's interprovincial series in Energia Park was compounded days later by the failure of the national side to qualify for the Rugby World Cup following defeats to Spain and Scotland.

The incidents prompted an unprecedented statement of intent from a group of 62 players who had simply had enough.

Strongly worded but also calm and considered, the document issued to the Department of Sport set out the reality that players past and present had lost faith in the IRFU's leadership of women's rugby. Within hours of the letter being made public, government officials sought out meetings with stakeholders to clarify the issues.





Ultimately, the IRFU formally accepted a comprehensive range of recommendations set out in an independent review previously in motion with an additional €1million investment in the women's game, growing the annual budget to circa €4million, and the creation of a new role of head of women's performance and pathways.

Rugby Players Ireland responded to the announcement with the players' association saying it was satisfied that its Player Development Programme had been recognised as an important means of support for the players as they navigate their way through their rugby careers and beyond. It also acknowledged the cooperative approach all sides had taken in the weeks before the findings of the review were published.

Simon Keogh added by saying that he was confident that the review marked "the first step in a new journey for the women's game. Through the Executive Board at Rugby Players Ireland, we will seek to ensure that the recommendations are implemented in a real and meaningful way."



While politics inevitably played a prominent role in the women's game throughout the season, there was plenty to be positive about as the campaign began to grow legs. Although the likes of Ciara Griffin, Lindsay Peat, Claire Molloy and Anna Caplice said their farewells, the newly-installed coaching set-up in Greg McWilliams and Niamh Briggs got to grips with their new charges.

Over the course of the Women's Six Nations, several established players took on more prominent roles in the squad with Nichola Fryday assuming the captaincy and the likes of Enya Breen also demonstrating their leadership potential with influential contributions. Niamh Byrne, Christy Haney, Molly Scuffil-McCabe, Anna McGann, Aoibheann Reilly, Vicky Irwin and Aoife Wafer all tasted international action for the first time with several more fresh faces introduced into camp.

Following an invitation from World Rugby to assist Japan prepare for the Rugby World Cup, the Ireland Women will travel to Japan this summer to face the Sakura Fifteen in a two-Test Series. The back-to-back matches in August will form part of a summer development programme for the young side. Building on the momentum of the recent TikTok Women's Six Nations, an extended Ireland squad will come together for a series of summer camps at the IRFU High Performance Centre before travelling to Japan in August.



# #BREAKINGTHEBIAS

The Irish and Ulster Rugby scrum-half spoke to Tackle Your Feelings about how she worked on her self-confidence to continue on her rugby journey

KATHRYN DANE

**The hardest thing about being a young girl playing rugby is that no one expects a young girl to play rugby. When I first started playing there were no girls teams, so I played with the boys, which I loved but they never had a changing room for me at matches so I had to share with the referees.**

It was tough when opposition players would automatically write you off for being a girl but they quickly changed their minds when I ran rings around them. I was actually really good at that age but there was no pathway for me to progress so I had to stop playing rugby at 12 because I wasn't allowed to continue with the boys.

In the beginning the coaches weren't really sure about letting a tiny little girl play rugby but I remember my parents convincing them to let me play. My parents gave me the confidence to keep playing by making sure I got every opportunity I could. They brought me to every training session, summer camp and blitz going on in the country.

Coaches and referees also gave me the confidence boost with a handshake or a pat on the back at the end of games. They always reminded me that size isn't everything and that my footwork and ball skills could take me really far some day.

There have been a few big moments in my career but I felt that rugby was the sport for me when I played one of my first ever rugby blitzes and won player of the tournament. The boys on the team really embraced me as one of them and they were so pleased for me. My sense of belonging to that team was unrivalled and I think I fell in love with rugby at that moment.

I'm in such a fantastic and fortunate position, but I have my wobbles too! I can sometimes feel overwhelmed by it all. I worry about things and don't always have the greatest self-esteem in the world, but I do have the most supportive people around me. They have helped me to see what I could achieve.

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

I fed off those pleasant moments, when people made me believe what I could achieve rather than what I couldn't, especially as a young girl in sport. As a result, I'm very conscious of what I say to children no matter what their ambitions are. You can build them up or break them with a few little words. I feel I have a responsibility to make the most of an opportunity to get more women involved in sport at an elite, professional level.

So, I would say to any young girl to give it a try. Make your parents take you to trainings, summer camps and women's rugby matches. Give it a try, I promise. Rugby will open so many doors for you, you'll make friendships for life and no matter how big or small or sporty you are, rugby will be a place for you.





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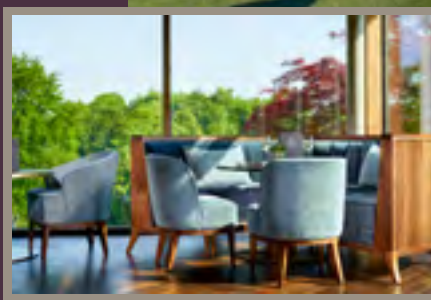
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