

# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND  
WINTER 2022

## MORE THAN A PLAYER



A FLOOD IN  
DEEP POOL  
STACEY FLOOD

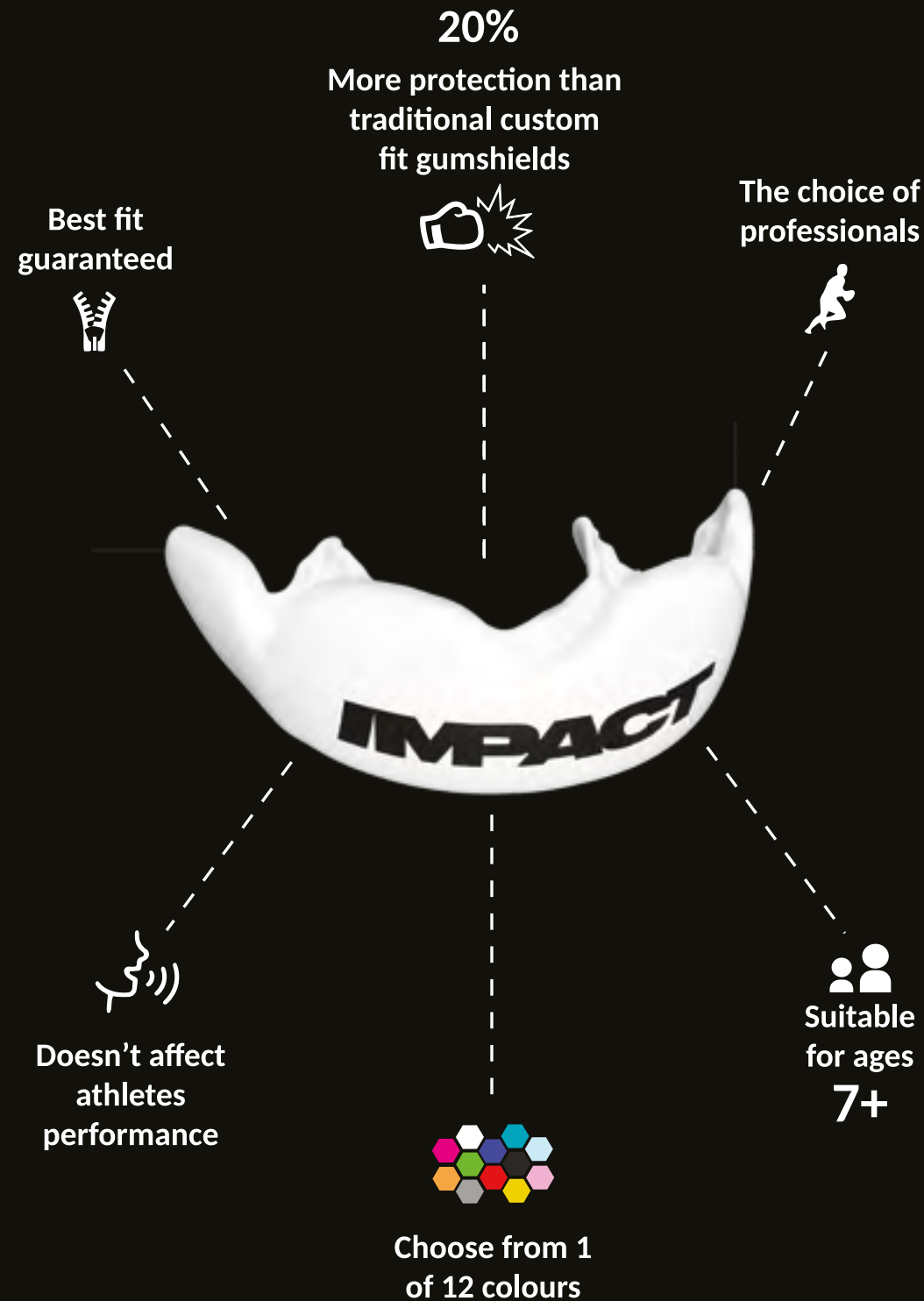
THE IMPORTANCE OF  
COMMUNICATION  
PETER O'MAHONY



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### Directors:

P. O'Mahony (Chairman), C. Griffin,  
D. Heffernan, I. Henderson, P. McKenna,  
A.L. Murphy Crowe, G. O'Shea, R. Kearney,  
S. Keogh, M. Quinn, J. Sexton

## CREDITS

### Published by:

Rugby Players Ireland, Irish Rugby Union  
Players Association, Unit 8, Richview Office  
Park, Clonskeagh, Dublin 14

.....  
**Phone:** +353 1 676 9680

**Email:** [info@rugbyplayersireland.ie](mailto:info@rugbyplayersireland.ie)

**Web:** [www.rugbyplayersireland.ie](http://www.rugbyplayersireland.ie)

**Facebook:** [facebook.com/RugbyPlayersIreland](https://facebook.com/RugbyPlayersIreland)

**Twitter:** @RugbyPlayersIRE

**Instagram:** @rugbyplayersireland

**LinkedIn:** [www.linkedin.com/company/irupa](http://www.linkedin.com/company/irupa)  
.....

Photography by Inpho  
([www.inpho.ie](http://www.inpho.ie)) unless otherwise stated.

Written & Edited by: Richard McElwee &  
Finola Roache

Design by Brian Gillis & Laura Wilkinson  
([brian@loudandclear.ie](mailto:brian@loudandclear.ie))  
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# ON THE UP

## CEO ADDRESS

SIMON KEOGH



**When you land on a good formula it can be easy to sit back and expect things to keep ticking over. Similarly, with the opening of the country following the pandemic one might have assumed that people would take their time in getting back to their feet once again, simply happy to have pulled through.**

Not so. After a difficult few years, businesses, sporting organisations, entrepreneurs and athletes were all quick off the mark in taking their learnings from a difficult few years to see how they might grow and develop into the future.

By now, Rugby Players Ireland is a well-oiled machine. Over the past year 398 players have engaged in our Player Development Programme, we had the return of the Rugby Players Ireland Awards, while we remain the first port of call for our members in need of advice on a range of issues.

Our vision – to make Ireland the best place in the world to play rugby – has us striving to create an environment that helps our members to flourish off the field whilst having a positive impact on performance. Although we cannot suggest that our work alone is responsible for the success Irish teams now enjoy, we do believe that as a key stakeholder we are an important cog in the wheel of Irish Rugby.

By now, other rugby nations throughout the world are looking to Ireland and seeing what it is that we are doing right. For one, they will see that our Player Development Programme has become a reference point in the personal development space. Thankfully, our members are also beginning to see the merits of their engagement and how a balanced life can enhance performance. In 2021/22 our Player Development Managers carried out 1395 consults.

Over the past year we have seen the establishment of the Women's High-Performance Pathway, following a historic tour to Japan. The Sevens programme continued to grow from strength to strength with both teams now a regular feature at the latter stages of the World Series. Our men's national XV's side have also consolidated their status as the best team in the world, with the world's best player in tow.

We are in a good place but we won't be resting on our laurels. Our national and provincial teams have immense aims and ambitions. It falls to us to match those aspirations and ensure that the environment that surrounds them continues to meet their needs and expand their horizons.

Rugby in Ireland is on the up again. At Rugby Players Ireland we are looking forward to playing our part in the next stage of an exciting journey.





# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



## LAURALYNN

Through charitable engagement, Rugby Players Ireland has always supported our members in becoming valued members of the community. Throughout the year we are delighted to see players connect with organisations and go about making a difference on an individual level.

While continuing to support our membership in the management of these relationships, our Executive Board also expressed that in order to make a sustainable impact as a collective, Rugby Players Ireland should seek out a long-term charitable partner. LauraLynn proved to be a popular choice.

The 'Little Moments...Big Impact' campaign focuses on creating special moments and experiences for children and families who avail of LauraLynn's specialist care and supports as well as raising awareness for LauraLynn.

The partnership aims to shine a light on children's palliative care and showcase how it can stretch so far beyond medical care, it's about living, it's full of colour, laughter, and joy and LauraLynn is a place that families can make the most of every little moment.

For children with life-limiting conditions, being part of a team sport is not something they often get to enjoy and experience, these games allowed them to take part, be on a team and have fun alongside their parents and siblings, creating special little moments and memories.

LauraLynn CEO, Kerry McLaverty commented: "We are so delighted to be partnering with Rugby Players Ireland this year - this partnership embodies so much of what LauraLynn is all about, teamwork, collaborating and having fun. We are so grateful to all of the players and the Rugby Players Ireland team for helping us to raise awareness and also for creating special experiences and moments for the children and families we support. These little moments have a huge impact and create memories that will last a lifetime for families. We are excited to work with Rugby Players Ireland to create lots more special little moments going forward."

Various initiatives will take place over the course of the season. Indeed, in the lead up to Christmas players across the country braved the elements and icy waters in a bid to raise funds for LauraLynn's Dip In Challenge.





## HELL WEEK

In recent months we have been working closely with Rossa O'Donnell of Odessa Leadership. Having spent 20 years in the Defence Forces, Rossa runs his consultancy practice in addition to being a Special Advisor to Ultimate Hell Week which recently aired on RTÉ One. Earlier this year O'Donnell also presented at our Rookie Camp.

"They key to it all is in the unveiling of vulnerability," he told us in the days before Ciara Griffin, Billy Holland and Fergus McFadden's participation in 2022 Hell Week was announced. "What you see on TV is us taking an express train into the vulnerabilities of the participants."

While Holland was one of three recruits to complete the challenge, all former players earned great praise for the way in which they conducted themselves. McFadden was cruelly denied a place in the final while Griffin demonstrated her immense leadership qualities throughout the series before also falling at the penultimate hurdle.



## PROJECT EMPOWER

After 112 days and over 3,450 nautical miles rowed, Damian Browne and Cushlamachree came ashore in a storm near Furbo on October 3 bringing a historic voyage to an end as he became the first man to complete an unsupported row from New York to Galway. An extreme adventurer, the former Connacht and Leinster rugby player's latest journey proved to be one of his most compelling having been forced to row on his own following Fergus Farrell's withdrawal after 13 days. He returned to the Port of Galway to a hero's welcome.



## MENCAP NI

Continuing a longstanding relationship with MenCap NI, Sam Carter, Luke Marshall, Jordi Murphy, Rob Herring, Greg Jones, Alan O'Connor and Nick Timoney joined Pamela Gilpin on a visit to the charity. Mencap supports thousands of people with a learning disability to live their lives the way they choose.



## WORLD CUP 7S

Our Men's 7s members enjoyed some well-deserved time in the spotlight following their bronze medal at the Rugby World Cup Sevens tournament in Cape Town. The side, led once again by Billy Dardis, came twice from behind to defeat Australia in the third-place play-off having fallen to New Zealand at the semi-final stage.

The third-place finish represents Ireland's best finish at a Sevens World Cup and caps a hugely encouraging year for the squad on the World Series circuit which also included an appearance on The Late Late Show with Ryan Tubridy.



## WORLD RUGBY AWARDS

Our congratulations to Josh van der Flier (Men's 15s Player of the Year) and Terry Kennedy (Men's 7s Player of the Year) on their recent wins at the World Rugby Awards in Monaco. Ireland's most successful night at the prestigious awards ceremony also saw van der Flier, Tadhg Beirne, Tadhg Furlong and Johnny Sexton on World Rugby's Dream Team for 2022.

The brilliant form of both Mack Hansen and Dan Sheehan was also recognised in their nominations for the Breakthrough Star of the Year, while Amee-Leigh Murphy Crowe will have been disappointed not to take home the Women's 7s Player of the Year. Sexton, who was Player of the Year in 2018, was once again nominated in 2022 adding to his growing legacy.



## WOMEN'S RUGBY HIGH PERFORMANCE PROGRAMME

November saw the launch of the Women's XV's Programme which has seen ten players take up contract offers from the IRFU. In all, 29 female players are now fully contracted to the union and will train out of the High-Performance Centre in Abbotstown on a full-time basis. The deal will also see players receive additional bonuses for match appearances, wins, and tournament fees.

While 43 centralised contracts were on offer, a number of players already in the throes of full-time employment opted to continue on their respective career paths. At Rugby Players Ireland, we will work to ensure that players are not unduly affected by their choice and will continue to help them manage their workloads. While we are currently in the development phase of a new Personal Development Platform that will be made available to female athletes (see page 18).

## WORLD PLAYER DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE 2022

Rugby Players Ireland's members were strongly represented at the World Players Association's Player Development Conference 2022 in Nyon, Switzerland in June.

The World Players Association is the leading voice of organised players in the governance of world sport, bringing together 85,000 athletes from more than 100 player associations in over 60 countries.

Over 100 player development managers, including 5 from Rugby Players Ireland – attended the three-day event which focused on planning for the future of player development and wellbeing.





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# THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

Rugby Players Ireland's Chairperson intends to bring his fellow players on the journey

PETER O'MAHONY



**When you're on or off the field, good communication will determine the quality of your work. Before we head out into a game, we will have a clear message to share with the squad, just as a business owner will motivate his team before a big project.**

Through our Executive Board, we are given the opportunity to voice our opinion on matters in the game and receive regular updates on the work of Rugby Players Ireland. As Chair, it's always nice to hear that the players' association is seen as a well-oiled machine but I am of the belief that in order to remain at the top of our game we must keep moving.

Over the years Rugby Players Ireland has established a reputation for having one of the best player development programmes in world sport. On top of that, other organisations regularly come to us for guidance on how to deal with some of the issues they face. We also have a proud reputation for dealing with the mental wellbeing of our members and I'm proud of how the Tackle Your Feelings campaign continues to help shape the conversation.

World Rugby standings count for little if you cannot produce in a Rugby World Cup year, but they do tell us that we are doing things right on the pitch. However, we have to keep thinking of ways to make sure we stay there. The same applies to the work of Rugby Players Ireland.

In the coming weeks and months we will be monitoring the newly launched women's professional programme with great interest. I am excited by the impact that HERFORM (see page 18) will start to have. We will also be negotiating our latest Collective Bargaining Agreement which is the envy of most rugby-playing nations.

The issues around health and brain injury will obviously remain at the forefront of everyone's minds, especially after the stories we've seen in recent months. Player welfare is always at the top of any player association's remit. Looking after their wellbeing is paramount.

Rugby has changed. Looking back at my first European game, it was against Northampton at home and I remember Ronan O'Gara kicked a drop-goal after 41 phases. That game pops up every now and then, but it's worlds apart from today. It was cutting edge at the time but the game has moved on in every single aspect. It was still very physical, but we have bigger, more powerful and quicker men on the pitch these days.

“Over the years Rugby Players Ireland has established a reputation for having one of the best player development programmes in world sport.”





Game psychology and how we thought then was also very different. How we prepare has come on a huge amount. There are a lot more guys tapping into the thought processes, and interestingly it's about taking pressure off even though performance is paramount.

Focusing on results, the global season sits atop the game's likely changes. It's about aligning seasons but you have to fit all the rugby in – there are a lot of big, big games now! If you play international rugby it's very rare you get a break at all and if you do you will miss out on a big one.

By the looks of things, games are only going to get bigger and more frequent, so how they squeeze them all in I don't know. It will become the biggest talking point. When it comes to season structure, I think the athlete's voice is the most important of all. They are the ones who will be in the middle of it.

At the same time, the businesses that are clubs nowadays want to win things. And they need to

**“We will not be bystanders in the decisions that affect our game**

stay afloat. All these private owners around the world are a different animal to what we have here in Ireland. The IRFU have established an incredible system but at the end of the day the four provinces are also a business with the union, and they need to do what's best for them.

In short, there will be plenty to discuss and debate. We will acknowledge what has gone well and aim to address the things we need to correct. The game's various stakeholders will continue to have their own views but thankfully the most important voice is now at the table, a place where we were missing for so long.

It's a very serious responsibility being the voice of the athletes and it's not one taken lightly. We will not be bystanders in the decisions that affect our game. Just as we are open to change and improvement, I hope others will be too.

It's all about how we communicate our goals and ambitions.



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# LET PEOPLE SEE YOU

Tackle Your Feelings' latest ambassador, the Irish prop's life is one big message

LINDA DJOUGANG



**Linda sits happily, swinging in her chair. As people come into Rugby Players Ireland's office, they know that the Irish prop is already in situ. Her laugh reverberates through the building. Life for Linda is good. And by virtue of osmosis, it seems everyone else's is too.**

Of course, there is plenty for Linda to be cheerful about. Firstly, she is one of 29 players to commit to the IRFU's Women's High-Performance Programme. No doubt as she boarded a flight from Cameroon as a nine-year-old, she could never have imagined that one day she might call herself an professional athlete. Not to mention an Irish Rugby one.

Growing up in Rush as her father set about laying the foundations for a better life in a new country, Linda played her part by integrating in the community through school where she excelled in track and field events. For a while, her sporting ability was the only thing that set her apart.

"When you're nine all you're worried about is who is going to be your friend and who'll play with you. You don't see the differences. You're not thinking: 'oh, I'm black.' It has only been as I got older and was made more aware of it that I begin to understand that I am from a different place.

"Growing up in Cameroon I didn't have to ask for permission to go into my neighbour's house. You just go in and play. Then after school one day I remember my father saying: "ok, this is not home" and explained to me that I can't do that here in Ireland, I had to ask for permission. I found it strange having to make plans to play in the park with my friends. There was a time to play and a time not to play.

"I think there was more joy to being a child back home. We created our own fun with whatever we could find. I will always remember the pure happiness of running around with a wheel and stick. We might not have had much but when your parents smile, the world is great!"

Despite some teething problems adjusting to life in a new country, on the whole the culture was never too much of an issue for Linda. Of course, the food, the climate and the language took some getting used to but ultimately, she thought little of leaving her traditional garb at the door and getting on with things in the Irish way.

There was much to love about her new home too. She was welcomed with open arms, enjoyed her classwork and made many great friends. Yet while Ireland was embracing a more diverse identity, Linda began to recognise that she had lost something of her own. And it was gnawing at her.

She needed the real Linda Djougang to stand up.

**“When you're nine all you're worried about is who is going to be your friend and who'll play with you. You don't see the differences.**





"My first memory of Ireland is seeing a lot of white people!" Linda admits. "I'd never seen that many in my life! I remember looking out at the scenery and thinking about how green and pleasant it was but behind it all I was just confused by everything. I didn't really know what I was here for and not long afterwards I had to accept that this new and strange place was now my home."

"I was upset when I was realised I wouldn't be going with my friends back to school in Douala but as a child, what can you do? At the end of the day I just wanted the other children to play with me. You want the world to accept you and so you do what you can to fall in line."

It was by trying to fit in that Linda first came into contact with an oval ball. While serving an internship at Grant Thornton, Linda signed up for a tag rugby team hoping it might be a bit of a leveller with the people in suits. Armed with little more knowledge than a YouTube clip, she togged out and hoped the event would pass without incident.

"I don't know how I played that day!" she recalls. "How do you explain to someone that you can only score by passing the ball backwards? It's weird!"

"I didn't know where to go most of the time so I followed the referee around and minded my own business until someone passed me the ball. I was amazed by such a strange object but I couldn't stop to think too much because people started chasing me and so I started running."

"I ended up running the length of the pitch. My teammates were screaming at me: 'PUT THE BALL DOWN! PUT THE BALL DOWN!' I just dropped it, and their faces told me I shouldn't do that..."

Thankfully, the Linda was also in the throes of her nursing education at Trinity College. She was a quick learner by nature and while getting herself up to speed on the rules of the game, she found that rugby gave her a sense of freedom she was so badly missing.



Hopping on the 33 bus from North County Dublin into the rugby heartland of Dublin 4 to play initially with Wanderers before crossing the road to Old Belvedere, at times Linda felt she was leading a double life. However, she believes this was to her advantage. None of her family or friends understood her new and peculiar passion. And so rugby was entirely hers.

It also opened doors. As she sat at the World Rugby Awards in Monaco in November, Linda was humbled by the memory of being invited to train with Leinster Rugby after less than a season in the game. She admits that she could barely pass the ball at the time, yet she squeezed into the squad and recognised that many others hadn't. Within herself she knew that there was more that she could offer and so further milestones were soon in her sights.

"I remember hearing the Irish national anthem at my first women's game. When I heard it the goosebumps ran up my arm and I knew I had the ambition to wear the green jersey. I was like, 'yeh, this is it, this is home.' If something makes you feel like that, it's part of you and you should never question it. I started to practice singing it in my room."

"Coming to somewhere like Ireland, getting an education, making the most of opportunities – I'm living the dream of my ancestors. It's a generation of dreams and I'm lucky enough that I can make it happen in a country where I feel accepted."

“  
I remember hearing the Irish national anthem at my first women's game. **When I heard it the goosebumps ran up my arm and I knew I had the ambition to wear the green jersey.**



"Even though those dreams were beyond them, my ancestors were my role models in the way they approached life. Now it's my opportunity to be a role model for the next generation. You have to be a good person before you are anything else. Every single day that's what I think of – being a good and kind person. Everything flows from that."

"I think it's quite powerful that I play a sport that inspires others, especially now that they might one day be able to say they are professional. But now that we are growing in profile, it's important to let the world see you for you, how resilient you are, how you keep going no matter how many times you are knocked down, how you enjoy it."

"To be the best person you can be, you have to be yourself first and foremost and I fell in love with rugby because it allowed me to really be me."



# HERFORM



**In 2022 Rugby Players Ireland was successful in our application for European Commission Erasmus funding. This is the first time RPI applied as an Erasmus program co-ordinator and the association will manage the HERFORM project for the next 36 months.**

Together with our partners, Spanish Women Futsal Players Association, NYFA Sweden, South African Cricketers' Association, Tw1n and the German Sport University Cologne, Rugby Players Ireland will create a Personal Development Platform that will be available to female athletes in Europe.

HERFORM's content will be based on the results of detailed research conducted with European female athletes over the coming months, including members of the Irish Women's XVs and Irish Women's 7s rugby squads. The aim of the platform is to create personal development modules that will help athletes balance life and sport, allowing them to excel at both.



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# BELIEVE IN WHAT YOU DO

One of the world's best props on how his support network helped get him there

ANDREW PORTER



**Andrew, your Dad plays a central role in your TYF clip. Can you explain why?**

Dad has always been a hugely inspirational figure in my life. He introduced me to rugby at Old Wesley when I was four years old and was my first coach too! I have so many memories of being with him in the clubhouse and annoying the old lads!

He gets to most of my matches and it's always great to see him there. I remember doing a lap of honour after we'd won the Grand Slam in 2018 and I saw him in the crowd. It was very special. When I look back on it, the biggest day in my career, it's hard to think past that moment with him.

I feel like he's not only a great mentor and dad, but he's also one of my best friends too. I think it's important to have someone like that in your life, someone you can always go to and ask any bit of advice. I feel like he's still a coach in many ways.

**What's the best piece of advice you ever received?**

I think I have to give that one to my mum. It's a quote she had written down that I found after she had passed away. It's a screensaver on my phone now.

"Do work you believe in, believe in what you do. Everything else is a waste of time."

They say you'll never work a day in your life if you enjoy what you do. That's important for me and for anyone - just do something you enjoy. I'm in a very privileged position where I can do what I love for a living.

**What impact did your mum's loss have on your family?**

The loss of my mum definitely brought my family closer together. It wasn't just my immediate family either - it was aunts, my uncles, cousins... it brought everyone closer together. Losing someone with the sort of influence she had, brought everyone together. We became a very tight-knit group.

**Do you think that challenges bring families and teams closer together?**

I think the good days bring people close together too. When I first got involved with Leinster, the senior players spoke about the big days in the club's history. They talked about the changing room after big Heineken Cup wins and how they wanted us, as younger players, to one day share in that success and experience those emotions.

From the off you felt like you were part of that journey and that was an incredible way to set the standard and bring everyone in. They were showing the way. They needed us to follow their lead. One of the great strengths at Leinster is knowing that everyone is rooting for the same thing. Brothers pulling in the one direction. We all want to win but we want to enjoy the process along the way too.

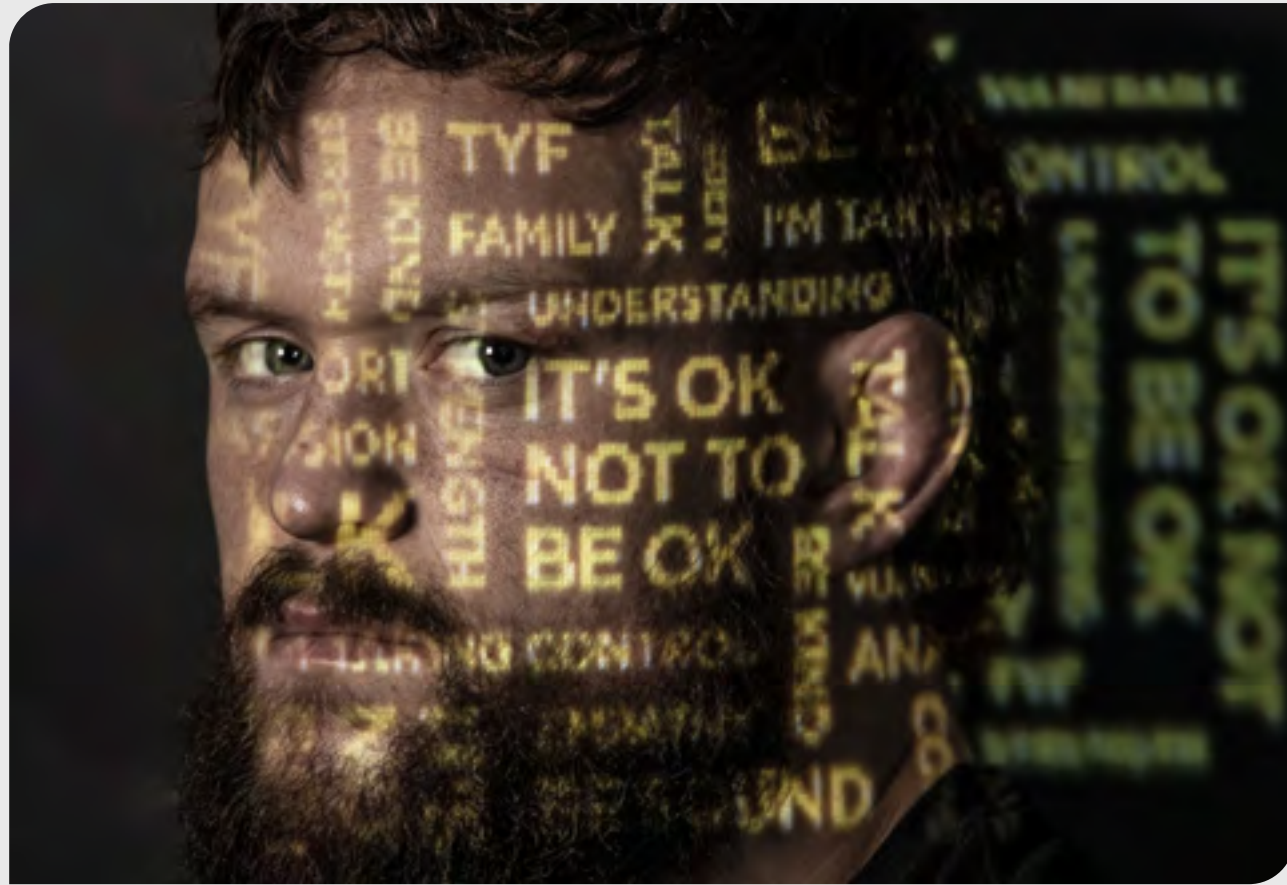
**What is your biggest motivator?**

My family is a major motivating factor. My dad, my sisters, my fiancé Elaine, my dog even! Family is the most important thing in my life.

**“Do work you believe in, believe in what you do. Everything else is a waste of time.”**



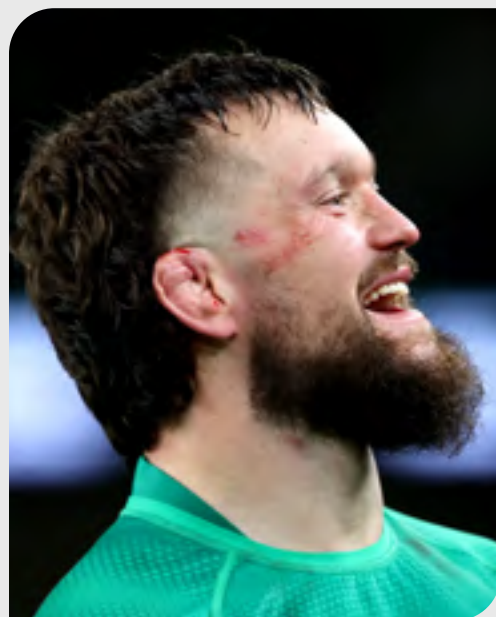




*You clearly have a strong support network, who do you speak to mostly?*

He might be one of my biggest fans but my Dad can also be one of my biggest critics, especially when it comes to my rugby. He says it as it is and I think you need those people in your life. It goes both ways. Nothing is off limits.

I grew up with the stigma that guys should keep things to themselves. That things just go away after a while. Obviously, that's not the case. When you don't talk issues of any kind compound and worsen



after a while. Being able to unburden myself by simply having a chat with people like Dad or Elaine is incredibly beneficial for my mental health and wellbeing.

Elaine is a great partner. She also keeps me very grounded! I am able to tell her anything. A lot of the time I try to leave my job at the door when I come home but there are some things that I love sharing with her and she's the exact same. I love being able to talk to her about what I do even if it takes a bit of explaining sometimes. It's great to have someone like her there, someone who is so supportive. It's not easy when I'm away in camp for the Six Nations or on the other side of the world on tour.

*Can you give any examples of how Elaine has supported you?*

Just as she has been there to enjoy the good times with me, she has also been by my side through the bad times like the days after I got injured in Glasgow before going on the Lions tour. The Lions was one of those things I wanted to do for my whole life. I remember watching all the tours growing up as a kid and being fascinated by it. Being selected was one of the greatest feelings of my career. To be ruled out so close was probably the worst.

I remember picking up the phone to her on my way back. I'd usually joke about things like injury to mess with her head, so I don't think she believed me at first. I wish I was joking. It was always going to take a while to heal emotionally but the hardest part was opening up over those first few days.

It would have been easy to sit there and feel sorry for myself but you need to talk it out otherwise it'll manifest itself in negative ways. Elaine was an incredible listener and she helped me to see some of the silver linings. It's very important to have people who can put things into perspective. Thankfully, it was only a relatively minor injury. I still had a career in front of me. The timing of it was obviously a massive blow but I don't regret what I had to go through. You're always going to have bad days and what matters most is how you react to them. They are huge learning curves.

### Why was it so hard to talk about?

In some ways it seemed like I was accepting my fate, that I was giving in to the reality of it. I also felt a bit awkward because you're essentially burdening other people with some pretty crap stuff and you're not sure whether they'll want to hear it. You don't want to ruin their day.

That's where the people you surround yourself with are so important. People who will listen to you and not cast judgment. You're not putting your problems onto them, you're sharing your thoughts, making them aware and in their own way they'll help you make sense of it for yourself.

I have an amazing family, loads of great friends through rugby and friends I grew up with. While I generally pick up the phone to ring Elaine or my Dad first, there's an army of others messaging me or trying to call. It's great to know how supported you are, especially in the tougher situations. Rugby has widened my circle a little. It's crazy the effect it can have but I take comfort from the fact there's so many people who take an interest in what I'm doing. I might not talk to a family member or a friend in an age but the rugby opens the door for them to reach out.

*What would you say to a 16-year-old Andrew?*

16-year-old me is very different to the person I am now. First off, I'd be telling him to be himself. Too many people are afraid to be themselves these days, especially the younger generations. The problem is that they get used to wearing a mask and they assume it is who they are. Genuine people are much harder to find.

I think that's the impact that social media has had on us all. There's a perceived image of what people should be like. Their online profile can be very different to the real version of themselves. They change who they are just to fit that cookie cutter. Being yourself is one of the most important things you can do. Everyone else is taken.



## A man with a beard and tattoos, wearing a black t-shirt, is crouching outdoors. He is holding a white and green oval object with the text "TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS" on it. A large, brindle-colored dog is sitting next to him.

*Are there any other strategies you use to overcome challenges?*

I made a promise to myself to come back better and stronger after that injury before the Lions. To sharpen my axe again I had to do a lot of mental work first. It's just as important as your physical training when you're a rugby player. In fact, in every walk of life being mentally strong and resilient is hugely beneficial. It's something I've really tried to work on when I've faced adversity.

I probably wish I had some of these skills when my Mum passed away. I was only 12. At the time I didn't really know what was going on. I had to deal with a lot of emotion and anger. It's not something a child of that age should be exposed to, yet I do believe I am stronger for it.

I'm not saying everyone needs to experience trauma like that but it has definitely made me more aware of my emotions and how I can take control of them. Each and every day is still a learning day in terms of what life can throw at you but what you have been through in the past helps you to deal with things. It has made me a far more resilient person than I might have been.

I'm not sure I'd be as driven as a rugby player or, more importantly, as a person if I didn't go through it. My number one goal in life is to be the best person I can be. To be the best person for my Dad, my sisters, my fiancé, my dog. To do my best for mum. I know she is watching over me.



# TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS

## THE REALITY OF SEEKING MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT IN RUGBY

Rugby Players Ireland has released findings that promotes guidance to mental wellbeing services across the world of sport on supporting professional athletes to seek support for mental health-related concerns. The study attempts to get a better understanding of both the barriers and enablers that players encounter when seeking help for mental health related concerns, so that supports for players can be enhanced, help-seeking promoted, and discussions around mental health issues normalized.

The research, conducted at the University of Derby by Dr Deirdre Lyons (Rugby Players Ireland) and supervised by Dr Phillip Clarke (University of Derby) with collaboration from Dr Rob Dempsey (Manchester Metropolitan University), has recently been published in the Journal of Clinical Sports Psychology. Conducted over the course of the 2021/22 season, the study explores the experiences of male professional rugby union players who have accessed Rugby Players Ireland's mental wellbeing support service.

Key findings of the study note that while rugby players are as likely to experience a range of mental health-related issues as the rest of the population, there is a tendency for elite male rugby players to delay or not seek formal help for their mental health. This hesitancy is largely derived from a preference for self-reliance, a perception of negative reactions of their teammates, coaches and team support staff, and difficulty in recognising and acknowledging mental health challenges in the first place.

### Other findings include:

- The clear need to improve mental health literacy in professional rugby, especially early in a player's career.
- Mental health should be a key component of player development in elite performance environments, and beyond.
- Campaigns such as Rugby Players Ireland's Tackle Your Feelings have the potential to normalise mental health experiences in professional rugby by using stories from playing peers.



Further research is also being undertaken to explore the changes in a player's mental health across the playing season as well as exploring perceived social norms and help seeking intentions amongst playing groups.

Dr Deirdre Lyons, Head of Rugby Players Ireland's Player Development Programme, believes the findings will help to further inform and improve mental wellbeing services in professional sport.

"At Rugby Players Ireland we are always looking at ways in which we can improve our services. Mental health and wellbeing has been a key focus for several years and has led to the establishment of our Mental Wellbeing Service. Our hope is that this study will help guide sporting organisations to improve mental health supports for players, promote help-seeking and initiate education and awareness programmes that will help provide players with the language and skills to discuss mental health issues in their high-performance environments."



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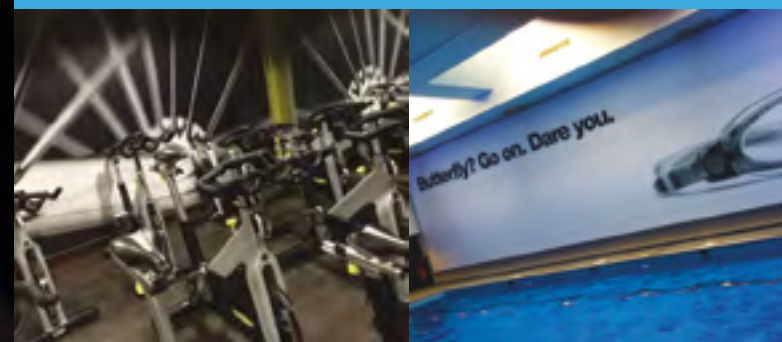
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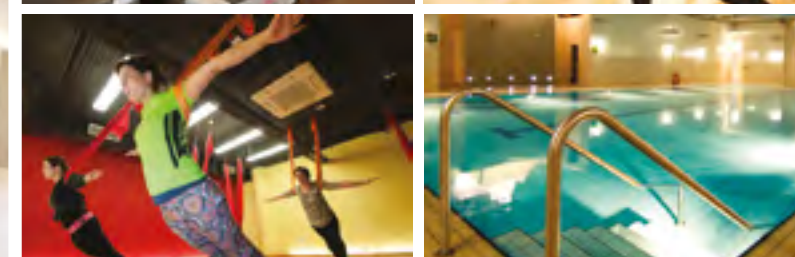
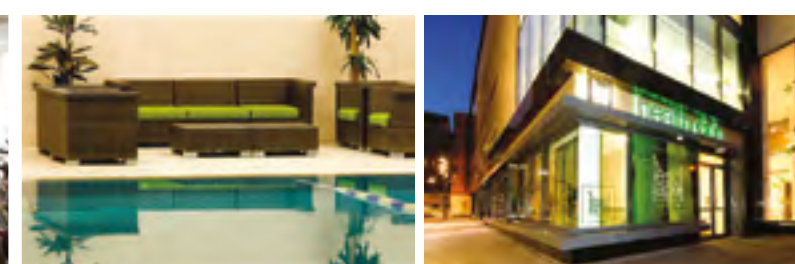
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# A FLOOD IN DEEP POOL

Ireland's dual star on using her experience on and off the field

STACEY FLOOD



Not many of us could count Dubai, Cape Town, Hamilton and Sydney amongst our next destinations. For Stacey Flood, all represent familiar territory. A few World Series events into her eighth season with the Irish Sevens, Stacey Flood continues to relish the challenge with the same determination that might have been expected on her first outing for her country.

"I'm one of the crusty dusties," she informs us. "[Amee-] Leigh [Murphy Crowe], Lucy [Mulhall] and I have been around the block a few times at this stage and that's what the young ones call us. I'm their Auntie Stacey."

The youngest of six children, it's certainly a new type of role for the Dubliner. First capped by the Sevens in 2015, for years the talented Clanna Gael Fontenoy footballer had been accustomed to assuming the mantle of plucky youngster in any squad of which she was a part. Now others are turning to her to lead the way.

"I'm not sure the younger crew take much guidance from me..." she says, throwing her eyes to the heavens. "Lucy is the real motivator but I'm happy to help where I can. Use my experience."

"In fairness, we're probably taking more from them," she continues. "The new girls that have come into the squad have brought great energy to the set-up. I think that became really important to our identity last season. There's quite a mix of people in there now which also demonstrates how the programme is growing."



"You have Erin King who is the maddest person I know. You can't help but bounce off her enthusiasm. Then there's Béibhinn [Parsons] who is an unbelievable athlete and will only get better learning from the likes of Leigh who is the best at what she does. It's a good generational mix and even though only a few years separate us, there are more differences than you'd think!"

"It's hard to explain but it all just clicks. The young ones make you feel their age and you start living your best life again! It's great fun and feels very fresh. We enjoy each other's company and want to work for each other. It's not just a team, it's a friendship group."

"As fun as Sevens sounds, it can be a very challenging commitment at times so the group that surrounds you becomes very important."

Now a multiple medallist on the World Series stage, Flood is proud of how the team has progressed over the past year. Silver in Seville was followed by bronze in Canada, consolidating their status on the Series. While the squad has benefitted from the influx of talent, the Dubliner also believes that the new-found perspectives of the squad elders have played their part.





"It's not a popular opinion but I believe that the pandemic did a lot of people a favour. Like, I had a great lockdown experience. Obviously, I was conscious of what was happening but on a personal level it felt like the first time since I joined the Sevens programme at 18 that I got a total break.

"I enjoyed having that time at home to reevaluate things like my values and priorities. I got to figure out who I am a bit more, think about what I want to do with my career. It opened my eyes to the realities of the world and that one day I want to be able to pay a mortgage and all the things that go with it.

"Don't get me wrong, I was delighted to get back training and call myself a professional rugby player again. Rugby remains of huge importance to me, but life isn't supposed to end when it's over. Covid-19 took it away from us in an instant and that can happen at any time in our careers. I've learned to savour it while I'm still in there."

It's a year since Flood first started working with Deep Pool Financial Solutions. A chance introduction through rugby has led to her enjoying a new lease of life off the pitch in her Sales Development role. Her confident and chatty demeanour certainly lends itself well to the position, traits that she believes have been well honed on her extensive travels.

However, despite having almost 60 Irish caps to her name across both codes, Flood doesn't necessarily believe that a woman's rugby profile yet has the power to open doors to new clients. Instead, she is proud of how her value to Deep Pool has been established on merit.

"It was my first proper job but I wasn't that scared," she reveals. "I'm the kind of person who goes with the flow, goes with what's going. It's a bit like how I play the game. I jumped in and hoped people would like me and that I'd be good at whatever jobs they gave me. It has worked out really well.



"I really appreciate the value that they [Deep Pool] see in me. They see me as a high performer: an individual who is focused, resilient and motivated. If you're in elite sport you're bound to have those attributes, otherwise you won't survive. They see all the things I can do as opposed to the things I can't.

"At the same time I think it's important to tack [rugby] onto my professional identity," she continues. "My role is about building relationships. Rugby is very important to me as a person so I don't see why I should shy away from it. I don't feel it takes from my work. If anything it adds key competencies to my skillset."

Recently Flood was one of several players to be offered revised terms by the IRFU, meaning there will be further demands placed upon on her time going forward. However, such has been her application to her desk job that Deep Pool are keen to keep her involved, enabling her to work to her own schedule where possible.

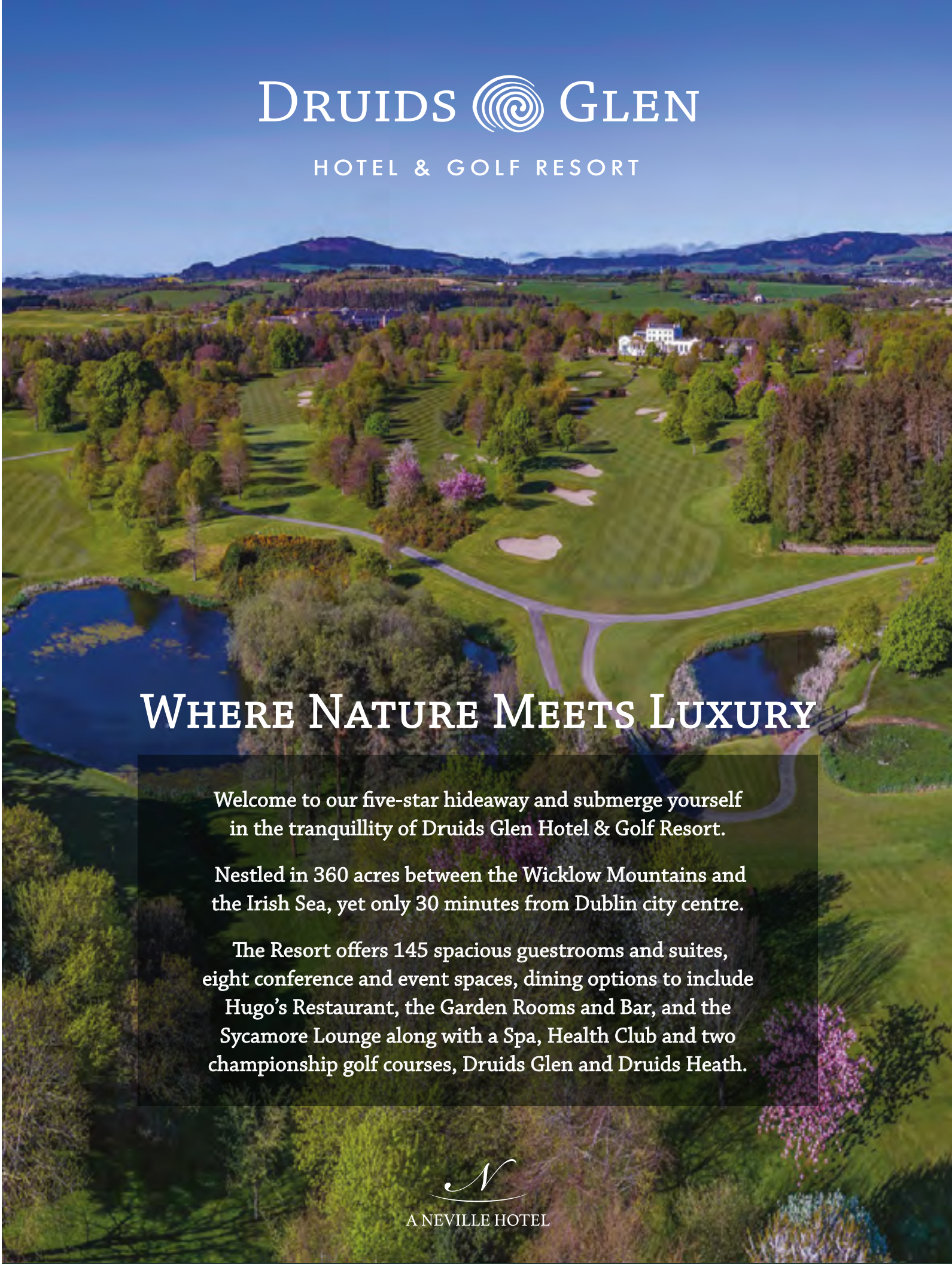
"Some people might think it is a lot to take on but it's something we've all been used to," the technology management graduate says. "A lot of the girls are studying and a lot of the older crew are holding down jobs. If you are infatuated on one thing, you can become obsessive and that ultimately goes against the nature of Sevens rugby and enjoying the game for what it is.

"It's about striking the right balance. When you take a break and switch focus, you start looking forward to getting back out onto the pitch again. That enthusiasm means you'll perform better at training and in turn that brings about the results we're after on the World Series.

"My hope is to push onto the next level now with both Ireland and Deep Pool. For me, they both go hand in hand. You get out of it what you put in.

"Focus on what you can do, not what you can't."

“Don't get me wrong, I was delighted to get back training and call myself a professional rugby player again. **Rugby remains of huge importance to me, but life isn't supposed to end when it's over.**



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# FIONA COGHLAN



HALL OF FAME

## CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1. Having taken up rugby at UL, Fiona was called into the Leinster squad in 2002.
2. Fiona made her Irish debut in 2003. Upon retiring, she was capped 85 times by her country.
3. Fiona was made captain of Ireland in 2008, a role she held for six seasons.
4. Fiona led Ireland to their first victory over France in 2013.
5. She would go on to lead Ireland to a historic Grand Slam.
6. She was named the Irish Times Sportswoman of the Year 2013.
7. Fiona played an integral role in a famous victory over the Black Ferns at RWC 2014.
8. Despite retiring in 2014, Fiona dusted down her boots to lead out the Barbarians for the invitational side's first ever women's game in 2017.
9. Fiona is now a regular pundit for RTÉ and a key advocate for the women's game.
10. She is the first woman to be inducted into the Rugby Players Ireland Hall of Fame.



### WHAT THEY SAID:

"The ultimate teammate, Fi made everyone around her play better. She made sure to keep everyone level-headed too and had no time for bullsh\*t or egos. Her main aim was to have us all on the same page so that we could get the best out of each other. Fi was the best captain I ever played with. She'd never ask you to do something she wouldn't do herself."

*Jenny Murphy*

"Fi was our North Star who led through her actions. Solid, reliable and prepared she was always the first name on the teamsheet. Throughout her career Fi strove to push standards even though any ol' pair of boots would do her once they had studs and laces. She was the kind of person who was last out of the changing room so she could make sure it was left the way we found it. She has this innate sense of respect for people and this is what made her such a good leader."

*Marie-Louise Reilly*





# TOMMY BOWE



## HALL OF FAME

### CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1. Tommy's Ulster Rugby debut came in 2004.
2. Within months he would score for Ireland on his debut against the USA.
3. Tommy won the Celtic League with Ulster in 2006.
4. A folk hero was born in Cardiff as Ireland won their first Grand Slam since 1948.
5. Tommy was named IRUPA's Players' Player of the Year in both 2008 & 2010.
6. Having left his home province in 2008, Tommy joined the Ospreys where he won a PRO12 title in 2010 at the expense of his old rivals at Leinster.
7. Tommy cemented his reputation on the world stage at RWC 2011.
8. A star performer in South Africa in 2009, Tommy had to wait until Australia in 2013 to become a Lions series winner.
9. In 2015, Tommy returned from injury to play his part in Ireland's Six Nations triumph.
10. Tommy retired in 2018 and is now a familiar presence on our screens as a TV presenter.



#### WHAT THEY SAID:

"Tommy played like his personality. He did whatever suited him! Rugby is very regimented these days but before it really took hold, Tommy conformed just about enough to pacify coaches. They knew that at a crucial time in a crucial game, Tommy would be the difference."

**Darren Cave**

"I remember he went and got married before the World Cup in 2015. It was the pre-season from hell for Tommy. He said he had been doing some running while on honeymoon in the Maldives but it wasn't the kind of running that Joe Schmidt would have had in mind. It got to the point where Joe was moving cones for him. That's how important he was to the team."

**Andrew Trimble**





# THE HUNGRY HOOKER

To keep him out of trouble as a kid, the recently retired Jonny Murphy was put to work in the kitchen. It's all started to pay off.

## JONNY MURPHY

### Jonny Murphy was removed from the group.

It had been a long day for Jonny Murphy. Kneading, rolling, whipping and blending, he was determined not to leave any piece of dough unturned as he sought to keep up with insatiable demand.

Returning home from a day's work in his industrial unit in Galway, the recently retired hooker finally had the couch in his sights when his phone started to light up. He braced himself for the inevitable nightly barrage of WhatsApp memes, gifs and witty retorts.

Instead, one swipe after the other, the notifications kept catching him off-guard. Numerous groups were suddenly out of bounds and the last embers of his life as a professional rugby player were extinguished.

"I'd always said that I'd rather jump than be pushed," Murphy says. "Eoghan Masterson was the first to leave the team group over the summer and it put the shits up me because I knew it meant that I was going to have to get it out of the way too. It was like ripping off a plaster, but I was ok with that one. I had some control.

"Getting kicked out of the secondary groups though... S&C; nutrition; lineouts – well, that was what ended up packing the biggest punch. It showed to me that no matter how prepared you think you are, the

transition is never easy. Players invest so much time into their rugby, mentally and physically, that calling it a day is always going to be a big shock to the system no matter who you are.

"It's just ironic that getting kicked out of the groups I never liked getting notifications from in the first place proved to be the real kick in the balls!"



In counting Ulster Rugby, Rotherham Titans and Connacht Rugby amongst his employers, the former Irish underage international built a commendable rugby CV throughout his career. Yet having been highly regarded in his youth, Murphy might feel that his potential was never truly fulfilled. The Banbridge man spent much of his career flying under the radar, capably deputising for any number of Test hookers, always awaiting the opportunity to make the position his own.

"I would have loved to continue playing," he admits. "We all dread that moment when it eventually ends. There were actually a few options on the table too but having consulted with a few professionals we felt it was the right time to stop.

"I have never been the greatest at making big calls like that because I have this habit of doubting myself but in this instance I had to listen to the advice and as a result there was no double guessing the decision. That certainty helped me to throw myself into the baking."

As a youngster growing up in a busy household in Donaghcloney, Murphy spent much of his childhood with his grandparents. There he would potter with his grandfather and help his grandmother work her magic on any ingredients at her disposal. Murphy has now found his way back to the wholesome scents at the hub of the house.

Thus began the story of The Hungry Hooker.

"Getting in my Nanny's way all the time paid off in the end!" he jokes. "To keep me out of trouble she would give me little jobs in the kitchen where she could keep an eye on me and so I got a feel for baking. I did a bit here and there over the years but it wasn't until we had a coffee morning at Connacht in aid of Galway Hospice before the lockdown that people began to sit up and take notice.



"I threw a few treats on the table and thought little of it until a few of the lads started to pipe up, asking where the cakes had come from. I put up my hand. "F\*\*\* off Jonny! There's no way you made that..." It turns out they believed me quick enough though when they realised I could rescue them when they forgot their missus' birthday!

"From there it turned into a bit of a tradition. If I knew we were due to have a tough session I'd bake protein balls or fifteen to have afterwards. Everyone went mad for them. In fairness, the support from the Connacht lads was a massive factor in giving me the confidence to back myself with it in the first place."

Having been further encouraged by his girlfriend to exhibit his wares on Instagram during the lockdown, Murphy began to see the potential market that lay beyond the Sportsground. As the country delved deeper into darkness, people started reaching out to the Hungry Hooker for a little bit of joy in their lives. Coffee shops soon followed.

However, as restrictions eased the demands on Murphy's time increased. In addition to vying with Dave Heffernan, Shane Delahunt and Dylan Tierney-Martin by day, the northerner was also in the process of completing a Law Degree at the Open University by night. He graduated earlier this year, something which would have seemed a far cry not so long ago.

"When I was younger I dropped out of my A Levels as my new school went back on their promise to release me for my club. I wanted to play for the Ulster Youths and that ambition greatly outweighed doing any exams. It was ludicrous when you think of it, a very ballsy move. I'm not sure I'd let my kids do the same but on the other hand I like to think it shows how committed I was to my goals.

"To this day we still have a running joke about the Youths/Schools divide. If you rock up in a fancy new item of clothing you are branded as being 'Schools'. Someone like Jack Carty would be pretty familiar with that nickname. Then you've got the likes of Tommy Farrell who was a schools player, but he just mullocks on and loves a hearty big meal from The Huntsman in Galway – a four and four with pudding and brown bread.

**“I’ve gone from sharing a changing room with 40 guys to spending the majority of the week on my own**





“Thankfully, everything worked out in the end. In fairness, people like my dad backed my decision. Just like me he has a stubborn streak and a real willingness to work, traits that have stood me well in my career. I also leaned on the knowledge that he used to cause a bit of mischief as a child, so he had no option but to be in my corner!

“I owe a lot to my parents and little sister Emma for everything they did for me throughout my rugby career and beyond. No career in the game would be possible if it wasn't for our families and the amazing support networks we each have behind us. Sometimes it can be under appreciated, even the great work Rugby Players Ireland do.”

Indeed Murphy's development is due in no small part to the help and advice he has sought along the way. During his time in Belfast, Pamela Gilpin was on hand to help him through his Sports Science degree at Jordanstown before Dr Deirdre Lyons picked up from where her colleague left off when he landed into Galway. He has also relied on the support of the Connacht Rugby network, with Kevin Nugent of Tribe Hospitality proving to be a valuable ally.

“I'm lucky that I've been able to turn to people who have been able to give me a leg up,” Murphy acknowledges. “I kinda throw myself into things and with the baking I was soon racking up quite a few 18-hour days because I had no real plan in the beginning. I was learning everything on the job. I always knew the first year was going to be a challenge but at the back of my mind I knew it was also an opportunity to grow and so I was open to listening to others.

“I've also been able to rely on the support of guys like Jack Carty, Tommy Farrell and Gav Thornbury. I've chatted pretty openly with them about retirement and when you break it all down it's not the rugby you miss, it's those connections and friendships.

“Of course, you still have those relationships but in my case I've gone from sharing a changing room with 40 guys to spending the majority of the week on my own. It's a tough adjustment to make and so from that perspective being



busy has been helpful. I'm not twiddling my thumbs thinking I should be back in there. As long as I'm not busy being a fool, I'm happy.

“I actually called out to Matt Healy's coffee shop in Oughterard recently. A kid at a table beside me bought one of my treats and was passing comment on it. I sat there mortified incase Heals would point out who I was and I braced myself for the judgment. Thankfully the little fella said, 'this baker knows what he's doing!'

“I've never been one to toot my own horn. I prefer to put my head down, get on with things and fly under the radar.

“But in fairness, that little interaction made it all worth it.”



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# TAKE A CHANCE

Despite retiring through concussion, the former scrum-half has no regrets about giving his dream a shot

ROWAN OSBORNE



**In his documentary *After the Roar*, Brian O'Driscoll reflected on his transition from professional rugby and the various challenges it posed. Notably, even though he enjoyed one of the most decorated careers in the sport, the former Irish captain remarked how he felt a 'little envy towards those still playing.'**

Consider then how Rowan Osborne must have felt when the 25-year-old was told to pack up his things with just a handful of senior appearances to his name. Having received specialist medical care for concussion it was determined that the scrum-half should retire in the interests of his long-term health.

"A few weeks after my retirement was decided I was back at Thomond," the former Leinster and Munster player recalls. "I was in the crowd and looking out at 30 players I knew well, and it struck me that I'd never be out there with them again. It wasn't a nice feeling and I thought to myself that I'd rather be anywhere else."

"Having my career cut short definitely played on my mind for a while," he admits. "It all seemed to just melt away before my eyes, with every passing day the pro rugby dream was dying. It was stressful because I felt like the whole situation was out of my control. I started asking why I put myself through it in the first place, it wasn't nice so I'm glad I'm out the other side."

Thankfully the passing of time has been kinder to the Kildare man. The initial bitterness has subsided. Perspective has also enabled him to flip the narrative and be grateful for the opportunity to have been a professional sportsperson at all – no matter if it were just 13 senior games and not 13 years.

He bucked the trend too, emerging from relative obscurity to land a Leinster contract in 2019. Having only cemented his place in a strong Trinity team the previous year, Osborne revelled in the foundations laid by an impressive pack (featuring Dan Sheehan) assembled to lay siege on 1A of the AIL. He knew eyes were on the side; but never did he imagine any on him.

For Osborne, Trinity wasn't just about the rugby. While he did what Tony Smeeth asked of him, the mechanical engineering student never let it consume his life and was he able to enjoy the college experience. Indeed, the closest top-level rugby ever loomed on his horizon was when he called by the RDS with some Clongowes friends to support their good mate, Will Connors.

"The call from Leinster felt like it was out of the blue, really," Osborne tells us. "One of the last games of the 18/19 season was a colours game in UCD. I was



actually quite sick that day and the weather was horrific so I was very close to crying off but it was a massive game in the context of the season, so I sucked it up. Thank God I did – I ended up getting man of the match!

"When I got back to the changing room I wrapped up and started flicking through my phone. I vividly remember a message from an unknown number which read, 'well done today, you know you can still play professional rugby if you want to.' Turns out it was from Noel McNamara who had coached me at school and was already a massive influence on my career. He told me Leinster were short on 9s."

"I got in on a trial with a few other AIL lads. I was thrown in at the deep end but I managed to hang in there. I always felt like I was able to step up to the next level without ever really standing out. The AIL was great for me in that it hardened me up, and the way Tony wanted the game played was very similar to what they were looking for in Leinster, especially for their scrumhalves."

"Those few weeks were a blur to me until I sat into my car after I had signed my first contract. I took a moment to let it sink in. I was a professional rugby player."

Familiarity breeds comfort and so Osborne was pitched in with Connors in a Limerick hotel ahead of his full debut at Christmas in 2019. Initially named on the bench before being informed he was starting on the journey down, Osborne struggled to sleep with the nerves racing through his system. Thomond was daunting. So too were the expectations of his teammates. His good pal merely laughed it off, telling him to relax and to enjoy it in his typically laidback style.

**“I was in the crowd and looking out at 30 players I knew well, and it struck me that I'd never be out there with them again.”**



"I could be myself around Will but beyond that I was trying to keep a hood on how I was really feeling. Ross Byrne could probably tell I was sh\*tting myself which probably wasn't a good thing for his game either but he put me at ease. I actually managed to enjoy that game until Joey Carbery put a beauty of a ball in behind me after 60 minutes. Then Leo [Cullen] hooked me. I was spent! That game was a real highlight, my whole family were there, including my Tipperary grandparents who pretended to be Leinster fans for an hour!

"It's an intense environment but you learn to enjoy it. When I first went in, the little mistakes would stay with me for the day. There was one session where I threw about seven shockers in a row and I thought, 'OK, this is it. There's no way I can be here next week.' But in fairness, coaches understand you're not a robot. They understand the pressures players face and that mistakes are natural. It is learning from them that's important.

"I'm usually pretty stoic about things and try not to get too emotional either way. I have always been of the mindset of taking things as they come; but when rugby became my job the dial quickly changed. Once you're in, you're all in. The months start to fly by, and contracts start to run down. You're constantly thinking ahead. I wanted to give it a good whack for ten years or so and see what happened.

"Lying in bed these days you mull over things and think of the what-ifs but in the grand scheme you have to recognise that you're luckier than most. There's a lot of really talented guys out there who never got the chance that came my way. Plenty who could easily slot in.

"There are negative emotions still in there, but they are fleeting now. Of course, it would have been easier if I didn't have to deal with my injury, but you can't live with regret. I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if I didn't take my chance. I'm just delighted it happened at all and I continue to focus on the positives. I think it's important to be optimistic in every situation, and look forward."

In recent weeks, Osborne has seen some of his good friends in the game take centre stage. His housemate and fellow Naas Rugby Club man Jimmy O'Brien has established himself on the international scene, while his old housemates Paddy Patterson and Ben Healy starred as Munster overcame a Springboks Select XV in Cork. Where once he might have wished it was him, Osborne is now happy to see them plough on.

"I watch games these days and all I really care about is my buddies doing well. I'd be lying if I said there wasn't an ounce of envy but that's probably part of the life cycle of an athlete.

"I remember being back at Naas RFC with Jimmy and winning all around us as kids. Naas has been a big part of my journey and the club is in my blood. My Dad took me and my brother down one day



**You have to recognise that you're luckier than most. There's a lot of really talented guys out there who never got the chance that came my way.**

when my Mum thought we already had too much on our plates. That makes us the fourth generation of Osborne's that played for Naas. My Leinster debut jersey is in the clubhouse.

"It has all come full circle because I live with Jimmy now. Will is there too. We're all good mates, although it is weird when they head off to training while I'm trying to navigate the real world."

For now, Osborne is happy to test the waters. Most recently he has been working with TEKenable, where his former teammate Conor O'Brien is also on the books. Thanks to Marcus Horan he also secured a scholarship position on a data science bootcamp in which he is currently enrolled.

As a young and physically able man, Osborne has also been seeking out other outlets. A return to the GAA is under consideration although the risks will have to be weighed up before such a move comes to pass. For now, Rugby Players Ireland's partners at Dartry Health Club are happy to facilitate Osborne as he keeps his fitness ticking over.

"I actually did the Marathon du Médoc through the vineyards in Bordeaux in fancy dress," Osborne reveals as he takes the last drop of his coffee. "I went over there with my brother and a few friends in September. You stop for a sample every 2-3km! It was incredibly difficult but fun to test myself in a different sporting arena to the rugby pitch.

"That's just how I want to approach things now. I want to get out there, enjoy things, explore places and make the most of opportunities that come my way. Take my chances. Even if I knew what way my road was going to lead, I'd still have followed this path.

"On we go to the next challenge."

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