

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND
END OF SEASON 2023

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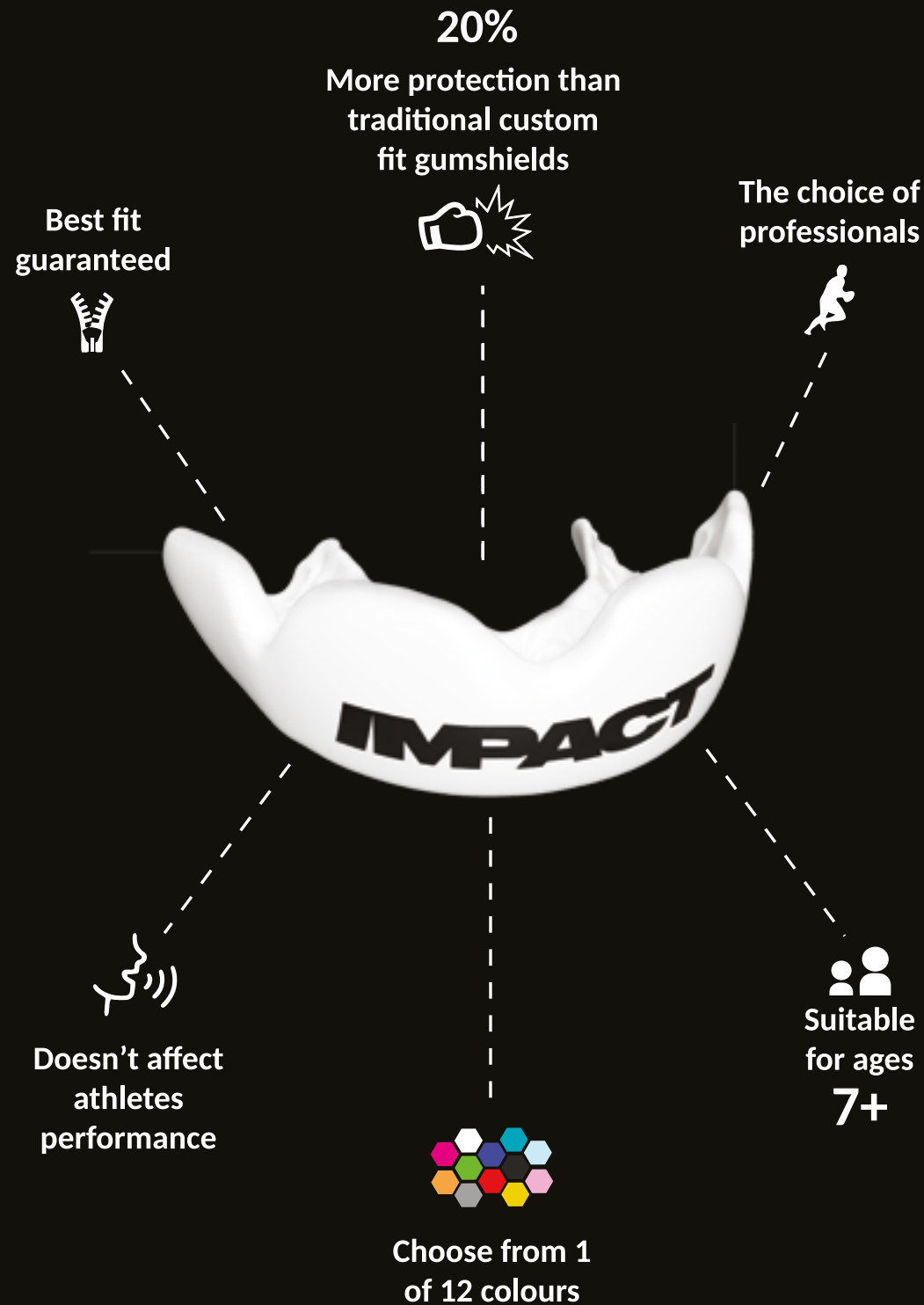
BEING THE BEST
VERSION OF HIMSELF
RYAN BAIRD

EQUIPPED FOR
SUCCESS
ULTAN DILLANE



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A HISTORIC YEAR

CEO Address

SIMON KEOGH

As we gathered for the Rugby Players Ireland Awards once again, I was reliably informed that it was the twentieth year of running the event. Acknowledging achievement is important. Too often the modern world has us racing from goal to goal without giving us time to stop and reflect on where we have come from. It also serves as a great opportunity to show our appreciation to those who underpin the game from the sidelines.

I believe that the support of the game's corporate partners, past players and other valued stakeholders has led to one of the most successful seasons in our rugby history.

This year saw our men's team pick up a bronze medal at the Rugby Sevens World Cup, with the best player on the circuit in Terry Kennedy amongst their ranks. Josh van der Flier was named the World Rugby Men's 15's Player of the Year and he would go on to play a key role in Ireland's Grand Slam voyage – a first to be won on home soil.

Many of the U20 Grand Slam winning team will undoubtedly have been looking up to the likes of Terry and Josh over the years. The impact of our role models on young people, something we keenly explore in greater depth through Tackle Your Feelings, cannot be underestimated.



With our Women's 7s qualifying for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games and the first series of professional contracts on offer to our Women's XVs, young girls throughout the country will now have serious rugby aspirations too.

I have been cognisant of the negativity that has been directed at the women's game over recent seasons. It has been difficult for them to deal with as Aoife Lane highlights elsewhere in this magazine. However, I feel it is important to outline just how proud the association is of the players. Despite all that has been thrust upon the group both on and off the field, they continued on their journey with the resilience that will stand them in good stead no matter what life throws their way.

We have very short memories in sport. When that awards ceremony took place twenty years ago, our men's team were not world beaters. I have great memories of that era as a player and how the game began to give us the opportunities of which we could only dream. Yet I am also keenly aware that it took us years to figure out how professionalism could work effectively in Ireland.

I would urge everybody to give the group time. Time to grow. Time to develop. This will empower them on their journey. With the calibre of people in the Irish game to support them, I have no doubt that we will be back up there with the best in the years to come.

For the first time, our female athletes have formed part of our collective agreement discussions which are currently ongoing with the IRFU. The first of its kind in northern hemisphere rugby, the agreement allows our members contribute and feel valued in the direction of their employment and the game.

Our players can also feel valued through our Player Development Programme. Through this joint venture between Rugby Players Ireland and IRFU, we provide a holistic environment that looks after the person before the player. Our PDP helps the players to develop their skills, confidence and resilience, both on and off the field, thereby creating a more sustainable and successful rugby community.

Our renowned Mental Wellbeing Service for our athletes has also grown with the acceptance from our members and the wider public that it's okay to talk about your mental wellbeing. We continue to be hugely proud of our Tackle Your Feelings Campaign which we run in partnership with Zurich Ireland and

the Z Foundation. Currently our schools Tackle Your Feeling programme is being run in over 70 senior schools around Ireland and growing.

This season our players chose the incredible Laura Lynn, Ireland's Children's Hospice, as charitable partners to Rugby Players Ireland. Our members have participated en masse in various fundraisers while we even managed to convince Connacht's Darragh Murray to cut his trademark mullet raising thousands in the process. One of our key aims is to encourage our members to use their profile to contribute positively to Irish society and this partnership is just one of the many ways in which they have done so.

It's only when you set it out that you begin to realise how much goes on in the background of our game and at this point I would like to thank the Executive Board of Rugby Players Ireland who sacrifice their time for the betterment of our current and past playing members and for Irish Rugby. I am indebted to all of our members on the board for the support they provide me and in particular, our chairperson Peter O'Mahony. Without their advocacy on behalf of their peers allied to the expert knowledge and experience of Maura Quinn, Peter McKenna and Ciarán Medlar, I don't believe the association would be where we are today.

In all, we are in a good place but as ever, there are aspects that can be improved upon. It is this constant striving that continues to excite players and fans alike. Rugby, as a professional structure, is still in its infancy. We have plenty of growing yet to do but we are on the right track.



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



TYF UPDATE

In January, Tackle Your Feelings announced Andrew Porter as the campaign's latest ambassador. Speaking openly about his youth and to help highlight the TYF Schools Programme, Porter explained that he draws his true strength from his support network especially since the passing of his mother, Wendy.

Subsequently, James Lowe and Laura Feely joined forces to amplify the TYF Podcast series. Hosted by Dr Hannah McCormack, the podcast features guests including Joey Carbery, Eimear Considine and Andrew Trimble and encourages listeners to rethink their approach to positive mental well-being.

Ahead of the inaugural Unity Round, TYF joined forces with the United Rugby Championship to highlight the importance of inclusivity in our sport. Ambassador Nick McCarthy sat down with Joy Neville to discuss a range of topics including the barriers they have experienced, the pressures they face and how opening up also opens the door for others to share.



SMART MONEY HABITS

Our Smart Money Habits programme was nominated for Best Community Academic Collaboration award at the Education Awards 2023. Developed in consultation with our members, and in partnership with the LIA, the centre of excellence for the education and development of finance professionals, Smart Money Habits is fundamental in future-proofing an athlete's overall wellbeing throughout their playing career and beyond.



LEGENDS ASSEMBLE

For the first time since 2019, the Ireland v England Legends rugby game took place in Dublin on St Patrick's Day. Almost 2,000 people were in attendance at Energia Park to see the likes of Sean O'Brien and Devin Toner dust down their boots for another throw of the dice. However, the presence of Delon Armitage, David Strettle and a few wily Legends players on the English side proved to be the difference on the pitch with England 'running' out 35-24 victors. Some will say that the result didn't matter in light of thousands being raised for rugby related charities... but nobody ever likes losing to their closest rivals.



PLAYER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

Our Player Development Programme continues to support our members off-field development, assists them in maximising the opportunities available to them as elite rugby players and helps to hone their life skills. With off-field considerations coming sharply into focus as the seasons neared an end, various on-site workshops, Transition discussions and career exploration exercises took place.



HERFORM

After months in planning, HerForm kicked-off with our project partners convening in Dublin to map out the initiative. HerForm is being created to develop digital resources with relevance, applicability, and accessibility, targeting the needs and requirements of female athletes as they enter a high-performance environment in sport. The project aims to curate a programme that creates a legacy across Europe by providing a new range of resources and by giving women's sport a louder and united voice. For more, go to page 18.

IN SOLIDARITY WITH WRPA

As players in Wales became involved in a dispute with their union, Rugby Players Ireland and other player associations pledged their support to WRPA Chief Executive Gareth Lewis and the senior players. In a statement released through International Rugby Players, Simon Keogh said: "We have found, through our experience, that forging collective partnerships between a union and its players is key to ensuring success."





The campaign as a whole was a highlight. There were lots of special moments throughout. When you look back you think of Hugo's try against France or the Murrayfield dressing room at half-time when everyone decided to get injured. It's hard to single out a particular moment.

JOHNNY SEXTON
*Druids Glen Moment of the Year
(on behalf of the Irish Grand Slam team)*



It's a massive honour. Dan Sheehan has been phenomenal on the international stage for Ireland and a key player for Leinster, while Tom Stewart is the top try scorer in the URC. To be nominated with those two lads was an honour in itself.

JACK CROWLEY
Nevin Spence Men's XV's Young Player of the Year



It's great to be voted by your teammates. It means a lot. The Olympics is the icing on the cake. We've been trying for so long and my hope is that it helps to grow the game in Ireland.

LUCY MULHALL
TritonLake Women's 7s Player of the Year



I'm delighted. There were some serious candidates in Jack and Harry. I'm buzzing that my teammates would put me in this position.

ANDREW SMITH
TritonLake Men's 7s Player of the Year



I've loved playing even though it's been a tough couple of weeks. I've met some great people and feel really lucky I got the opportunity to make some great friendships.

AOIFE DALTON
izest Marketing Women's XV's Young Player of the Year



I think the try just shows our never-say-die attitude which we had to demonstrate throughout the Six Nations. We never once went out there feeling like we weren't up to the challenge. Even on the toughest days we stuck to the task as best we could.

NICHOLA FRYDAY V SCOTLAND
AIB Corporate Banking Women's XV's Try of the Year



It was a very impressive try. The ball was going to ground and Caelan scooped it back in. There was some lovely interplay between the back and forwards. I think the crowd got louder with every pass!

PETER O'MAHONY
*MSL Mercedes Benz Dealerships' Men's XV's Try of the Year
(on behalf of Mack Hansen v South Africa)*



When my family and I started a GoFundMe in March to raise money for a children's hospital in Kyiv, it was because we felt a bit helpless in Ireland. We never imagined how much traction it would pick up and I am grateful to plenty of my fellow players who rowed in behind it and spread the word. It's lovely for my family to now be recognised by my teammates and colleagues.

ALEX SOROKA
Zurich Contribution to Irish Society Award

This has been a tough year for the team, but we have shown some great examples of our character and resilience. We are an extremely close team and are proud to back each other on the good and bad days. This award could go to anyone in the green jersey this season, so it really is an honour to be recognised and to be able to represent a fantastic group of players.

NEVE JONES
Bank of Ireland Women's XV's Players' Player of the Year

RETIREMENTS

“

I'd love to be playing on with this brilliant group of lads and for this massive club but that's not to be. I want to wish the players and the people of Connacht every success in the years ahead.

SHANE DELAHUNT



“

I am so grateful for all the good times I have had and the opportunities and memories that came with it.

LIAM O'CONNOR



“

As one chapter ends, a new one begins. Excited for what the future holds!

PADDY KELLY

“

I cherished every moment of my career, and it has been such a blessing to play the game for as long as I have.

JAMES TRACY

“

The overwhelming feeling right now is of gratitude for a career that I never even dreamed of having.

JORDI MURPHY

“

Thank you for the memories, the toughest of challenges, lifelong friends, two dodgy ankles and the best of laughs anyone could ask for.

LAURA FEELY

“

I leave the club at peace mentally due to the tireless work of the medical team. Every possible avenue to success was explored.

CHARLIE RYAN

“

Retiring from rugby is the right decision for me and my loved ones. I look forward to embracing new challenges with the same passion and dedication that I brought to the rugby field.

ALEX WOOTTON



“

My life has been truly fantastic to this point. I've always tried to make the most of everything that has come my way. Rugby has given me lots in return but now it's time to make the most of something new.

ROBIN COPELAND



ARE YOU IN?

Collective Fitness is an Irish health and fitness business founded by professional athlete Jack McGrath. Alongside James Norton and Conor Corcoran, the expert team knows exactly what's required to optimize your wellbeing and maximize your performance in life.

In general, the road to better health is often managed by more than one provider. At Collective Fitness, our goal is to ensure that your health is properly managed in one place. This approach allows us to improve our clients' fitness in three aspects: training, nutrition, and injury management

Our team of licensed professionals has either real-world experience in the elite sport/fitness industry or over 7 years of higher education with specific training in the medical and human performance field. With that in mind, we delighted to offer a range of packages to help you reach your fitness goals faster.

EQUIPPED FOR SUCCESS

The European champion has more in his locker

ULTAN DILLANE



As Ulán Dillane made his way back to the dressing rooms following victory over Leinster, the newly crowned European champion was stopped in his tracks as La Rochelle's fans made an unusual request of their heroes. Nonplussed, Dillane and several of his teammates were soon handing over their playing shorts before heading down the Aviva Stadium tunnel in their underwear.

Looking back, he and his business partner probably see it as a missed opportunity. Together Dillane and Séan O'Brien, a former Connacht Rugby teammate, are behind PROPADZ a new padded rugby vest that formed part of Dillane's cup final wardrobe yet remained undisclosed under his yellow jersey.

Amidst his frustration with the inadequacies of traditional strapping methods, O'Brien conceived and developed the PROPADZ concept while rehabbing his way back from a series of long-term injuries that ultimately enforced his early retirement at just 26. In essence, the vest is a practical alternative to traditional strapping while also providing protective in-game support and compression benefits for post-game recovery.

Having hung up his boots, O'Brien spent some time with N-Pro where he furthered his understanding of how science and sport can combine. The experience helped inform O'Brien's thinking and gave him the confidence to progress his own plans. Dillane was one of the first to test the prototype and was so taken by it that he joined the PROPADZ team as an investor and shareholder.

"It's been really cool to see lads genuinely wanting one," Dillane says of the vest which is now a common ingredient of players' kitbags across Europe. "The whole concept of PROPADZ is you could basically wear a vest and you can slip in or take out any of the gel pads that you don't need. Luckily lads seem to be liking it."

"It's only the start but I got on board purely because of how much I thought it was needed in rugby. It is such a comfortable thing to wear. Hearing other players speak so well of them is so satisfying. It definitely has a place in the game and it's definitely got a good future."

It seems Dillane does too despite what many may have felt when it was announced he was leaving Connacht Rugby last year. Now with a Heineken Champions Cup medal in his back pocket, Dillane can feel justified in leaving Galway and Ireland behind him.

His decision to depart the Irish province after a decade campaigning in their colours was not one taken lightly but it did acquiesce to a wish from his



late mother, Ellen, that he might one day play in France, the country of his birth. His father still lives in Asnières-sur-Seine on the outskirts of Paris and where Dillane grew up before moving to Tralee with his Kerry-born mother, aged seven.

Throughout his career, his mother's influence can be found. Indeed, as they settled into life in the Kingdom she offered Ulán and his brother Cian a fiver each if they would join Tralee Rugby Club in an effort to channel their ferocious energy in a sporting direction.

Later, when Dillane was turned away by the Munster U19s, she also helped anchor a swaying ship. Even if life as a professional rugby player was not to be, she told him, he could still play for fun. Her support ultimately kept the show on the road until Nigel Carolan took heed of his talent and brought him to Galway. Dillane would go on to make 127 appearances for Connacht.

"Leaving Connacht last year was one of the hardest decisions I ever had to make," he acknowledges. "I will be forever grateful to all the coaches and wider staff who I worked with there. They all helped make my dream of becoming a professional and international rugby player a reality."

"I also got to play alongside some incredible guys both for Connacht and Ireland, many of them will be friends for life. With both teams on the up it might seem strange that I decided to move on but I felt that the time had come for me to experience a new challenge in my career."

“Leaving Connacht last year was one of the hardest decisions I ever had to make. **I will be forever grateful to all the coaches and wider staff who I worked with there.**”

"It's been great to see everything going so well at home, especially the national side. Everyone here has been very impressed by how they've been performing. As happy as I am for them to win though, it's naturally felt a little bittersweet. There's a chance I could have been part of it all if I had stayed but you can't dwell on it too much.

"Once you're gone, that's it," he acknowledges. "There's not much I can do about it. You talk to the national coaches and you make an informed decision based on those conversations. I made my call."

It's quite remarkable that at just 29 and as a newly crowned European Champion, Dillane can now only look back on an international career that afforded him 19 caps. Since debuting in 2016, he was part of some famous days in green yet his Test career played out in fits and starts with Dillane often found railing against threats to his international aspirations. On this occasion however, he chose to pick his path on his own terms.

"Not getting to go to the World Cup in 2019 broke my heart a bit," he concedes. "I didn't want to go through that again. And I had a very, very good opportunity: to come here, work on myself and produce my best game. I'm sure I made the right choice."

While Dillane can rest assured that his decision has been vindicated, leaving Galway was no easy thing. However, the presence of several formidable Irishmen at La Rochelle, the stocking of Barry's Tea in local stores and an aptitude for speaking French helped soften the blow.

"The positional change was probably the biggest adjustment actually," he says of his move to the backrow. "After I had signed and they had a look at the squad and who they had coming through in the various positions, they had me ready to slot in there for a couple of games because of players going up to the national camp. I filled in and luckily it has all worked out.



“
Not getting to go to the World Cup in 2019 broke my heart a bit. I didn't want to go through that again.

"Donnacha [Ryan] was a big help. I knew him from my early days in Irish camps and he's still the same person. We obviously have more of a player-coach relationship now but all the lads say the same thing – he's just the soundest fella going. He's such an approachable guy, wants to help, wants you to develop.

"As for ROG, well I expected a real intensity and he hasn't disappointed but it's always done for the right reasons, to get the right reactions out of players. He knows what to say at the right times. People might have different experiences of it but he really understands players and the lads love him."

Footage of the celebrations both in Dublin and back in the port city of La Rochelle certainly paint a picture of a contented, familial squad. Many have suggested that the cohesion and culture of a group made up of individuals from all parts of the globe represents O'Gara's greatest feat.

While Dillane might not have arrived in the Bay of Biscay with the same sprinkling of star dust as UJ Seutini or Teddy Thomas, the way he has conducted himself both on and off the field has endeared him to the La Rochelle faithful. Much to O'Gara's liking, he is a person of considerable substance and, as the PROPADZ team would probably insinuate, an example that what goes on underneath can be just as important.



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WE LEARN AS MUCH THROUGH ADVERSITY AS WE DO THROUGH SUCCESS

A PDM's Perspective

AOIFE LANE



As Player Development Manager (PDM) with the Irish Women's squad, I look after the players' off-field development and support them in the development of their life skills. This ranges from career guidance, education, wellbeing and social engagement.

While there is a focus on their transition from the game and putting the building blocks in place for that eventuality, there are also many different transitions that occur throughout their career. We have to be ready to help players to deal with injury, deselection or other situations where their athletic identity is threatened. It can feel like a complete loss of control in what can be a very regimented world. My role is to empower a player to take control of their personal development so that they have the capacity to place all their focus on where it needs to be.

Unfortunately, the Irish Women's squad have had a lot thrown at them of late. They have quickly learned that different standards are now expected of them as professional athletes. Yet having the ability to deal with the additional pressures being placed upon them is not an innate skill either. Just as wins are heightened in intense environments, losses can accentuate all the other worries in a player's life. It has been my job to ensure that those concerns don't compound the defeats.

Learnings

I think it's important that we don't confuse the men's game with the women's game. They both carry very different considerations. While the men sit proudly atop the World Rugby tree, we have to accept that the women's game in Ireland has a long road ahead of it before it can covet a similar global standing. We are in the first year of a professional programme and with that has come many learnings for everyone involved.

There are several categories of players within the current Irish squad. On the one hand you have IRFU contracted players who are supplemented by some of the 7s players. On the other, you have non-contracted players and those based abroad who land in for competition. It's rare that you have a collection of players in a professional environment leading vastly different lives.

For the most part, I am a sounding board for them to chat through all that is going on in their respective worlds. Players engage to varying degrees and at different points in the season, and you often end up feeding the hands that are hungry – those who are keen to develop and grow with my help.

That being said, nobody ever slips off my radar. Some players prefer to go it alone but often it's just a case of educating them a little better on how we can support them or how they can even use us to their advantage. Whether or not they are in active contact, I'll always pick up the phone or check-in via text. I'm also over in the High Performance Centre for player meetings several days in the week. I think it's important to be in the building as much as I can, if even to say a quick hello and make a connection. That can be a massive breakthrough.

Support Network

Thankfully, I have an amazing group of Player Representatives to lean on too. They are naturally supportive beings and as senior members of the team they also have a good sense of where their teammates are at. With a number of younger players in the squad it has been especially important to have that support system in place.

For example, one of the younger girls was due to sit an exam the day before a recent Six Nations game. She wasn't sure what to do or where to turn and was under a bit of pressure. A Player Rep made me aware of the situation and we were able to sort the issue at hand. It was also an opportunity to discuss with the player how we can manage similar situations better together next time.

We have all been very excited by the young and talented players coming into the system yet from a PDMs perspective what I see are young women who are not only experiencing a high-performance environment for the first time, they're also in their first job! It's very daunting and there is so much for them to consider. While I will always be supportive of a player's on-field ambition, there does come a time when I have to remind them that this gig won't last forever.

A lot of my work with the younger players is explorative. We look at their interests, assess where they see themselves in the years to come and map out a plan to help get them there. Now that we've almost had a full contracted season behind us, I think the girls are realising that you can't put all your eggs in one basket. A few have picked up injuries and couldn't play a part in the Six Nations. With that comes something of a silver lining in that it forces them to check back in with life away from the game.





Balancing Act

I think the players appreciate that they need diversity in their lives. They all have their own talents away from the game. Very often elite athletes are accustomed to high levels of achievement and expectation. It tends to go with the territory. As much as I am delighted to have them coming through the door, I'm not always waiting for them with a college prospectus. Sometimes it's simply a case of reintroducing them to who they are.

For the non-contracted players, I try to help them balance all they have going on in their lives. In order to take part in the Six Nations, several players had to take leave from work. We have teachers, physios and engineers who will have employers that need to be communicated with. Sometimes having a different



source explain what is being asked of their employees can be helpful. Several others are in the middle of demanding college courses so there is a significant logistical piece there too.

I have also had to place great importance on supporting the group's leaders over these past few weeks. They take on a huge amount of responsibility that stretches well beyond what they set out to do on the field. It's really admirable to see them looking to set an example for the younger players but with that leadership comes plenty of introspection. It's important that we create a space for them to talk through their thoughts and help them to be the leader they want to be. As much as they want to guide the young players, they also are also a crutch for the squad to lean on. The knock-on of that is that they need to lean somewhere too.

Perspective

I've been working with the women for three years now and I think it's fair to say that it has been the most challenging Six Nations. The way the campaign has gone, it's inevitable that players will be affected and in that sense it's been a hard slog. While I greatly respect the dedication of the group, it can be hard for some players to reconcile what they're committing to the game with the negative attention.

With a growing profile, comes added scrutiny. I've seen a lot of what has been written and said in the media and while I appreciate that there is plenty yet to do, I think a bit more understanding and

empathy is needed for the players on the frontline who have had to negotiate the noise over the last few weeks. Just as there's no point dressing up where we are, there's no point dredging up the past either. Much of it is beyond the players' control.

Change is still happening. Win, lose or draw there's no denying that our female players are now availing of opportunities that were a pipe dream not so long ago. We can't ignore that growth. Now it's time to give the players and staff left carrying the can a good and proper chance. Encourage them. Empower them.

Teamwork

I work closely with IRFU staff like Gillian McDarby (Head of Women's Performance and Pathways) and Alana Gattinger, who has joined recently as the Women's XVs National Team's Programme Manager. From the conversations we've had, I know we're going to work well together. We're already looking at what next season might look like for players and how we put more structure on the education in the schedule.

At the very least, we intend to build modules that will help them all to become better rugby professionals. I have no doubt that through our plans we will build robust people who can perform on and off the field. Each department will have their own KPIs but if everyone works together we can create an environment that will help these players to grow and flourish as both athletes and, more importantly, as people.

It hasn't been an easy campaign for anyone. Thankfully, I'm glad to be able to rely on the

support of my team at Rugby Players Ireland. By now we are all aware of each other's busy periods. As if the Six Nations wasn't busy enough, as manager of the Rugby Players Ireland Foundation it was also my role to run the Rugby Legends activity on St Patrick's weekend while I also manage our Mental Wellbeing Service which is available to our members on a 24/7 basis and is a vital component of our offerings.

There's been a lot going on and over the past few months I have had to learn how to practice what I preach a little better. As well as having a very practical function, the role of a PDM will tend to be a caring and empathetic one. As a result, it can be hard not to take on a player's worries as your own. You want to be there for them around the clock. To some extent, that goes against what I try to impart on them as their PDM. I have to remember to set boundaries because I can't be fully entrenched all the time. I need to protect my space that sits outside of the rugby bubble. Develop my interests. Stay connected to family and friends. I need to be at my best when I am available to the players.

The squad is comprised of an exceptional bunch of women, individually and collectively. I'm in awe of what they do and the sacrifices they make to be there. Even when the chips are down they have this inner resolve to see things out. We learn as much through adversity as we do through success.

Nothing beats a player passing an exam or seeing a graduate getting the job they've been after. I've seen people thrive, having benefitted from the wellbeing service. The tide will turn for this team too. All these wins, big or small, make what I do worthwhile.

“
Change is still happening. Win, lose or draw there's no denying that our female players are now availing of opportunities that were a pipe dream not so long ago.



INTRODUCING HERFORM: EMPOWERING FEMALE ATHLETES FOR SUCCESS IN HIGH-PERFORMANCE SPORTS

HerForm, a groundbreaking initiative, is poised to revolutionize the support system for female athletes entering high-performance settings. HerForm will conduct research to inform Player Development Programs for elite female sportspeople, offering insight into the unique challenges they face as they enter professionalised environments.

Funded by the European Commission, HerForm acknowledges the obstacles encountered by female athletes in achieving career and life success. The initiative aims to address critical barriers and enhance athletes' overall well-being, purpose, and achievements within high-performance sporting environments.

The findings from HerForm will ultimately guide the creation of relevant, applicable, and accessible digital resources tailored to meet the needs of female athletes across Europe and South Africa as they transition into high-performance sports. These resources will equip them with the necessary tools to sustain their careers.

At the heart of HerForm's approach is an athlete-centric focus on research and content creation. The project places significant emphasis on understanding and meeting the specific needs of female athletes, ensuring that all resources and guidelines revolve around their requirements. Through this approach, HerForm strives to make a lasting impact across Europe, amplifying the voice of women's sports and delivering a new standard of resources.

Led by Rugby Players Ireland, HerForm is a collaborative project involving six partners, including TW1N, German Sport University Cologne (DSHS),

Asociación de Jugadoras de Fútbol Sala (AJFSF), National Youth Sports Association (NYSA) Sweden, and the South African Cricketers' Association (SACA). These partners will work together to curate an extensive program benefit female athletes throughout Europe and Africa.

In addition to female athletes, HerForm's target group includes service providers who work with athletes, such as sport coaches, player development managers, dual-career advisors, educators, lifestyle coaches, sport psychologists, mental health experts, and career counsellors. Academic professionals specializing in sports, education, psychology, and related fields will also benefit from HerForm's resources.

HerForm's objective is to equip practitioners from the project partners and future institutional applicants of the digital training hub and hybrid training program with cutting-edge research and top-tier resources, enabling them to provide the highest quality support to female athletes.

With HerForm, a new era of support and empowerment for female athletes is on the horizon. Join us in shaping a legacy across Europe, where women's sports will be celebrated, and their voices amplified.

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BEING THE BEST VERSION OF HIMSELF

The Leinster and Ireland forward has taken on a strategic role with Tackle Your Feelings

RYAN BAIRD



Back in early 2020, Ryan Baird landed into Rugby Players Ireland's offices and laid out his plan. "My goal is to play for Ireland this summer," he said. "I need to make sure I have everything covered off."

Sometimes you take the enunciation of lofty goals with a pinch of salt but such was Baird's conviction that it was hard not to sit up and take notice.

There was no denying Baird's undoubted talent. Injuries aside, he had enjoyed some underage success with Ireland in 2019 and the Leinster academy were making positive noises. Yet his eyeing up of a seat on the Irish tour to Australia seemed markedly optimistic.

As it turns out, he wasn't far off.

While the pandemic ultimately put paid to anyone's plans that summer, Baird was called into Andy Farrell's squad at the next available opportunity. Injury conspired to hamper his involvement in the remaining fixtures of that year but a few months later Baird earned his first cap as a substitute in Rome.

"I am hyper focused," he reveals. "When I go into training I'm always looking, analysing, preparing. Johnny [Sexton] spoke with us at the start of the season and he basically told us we have to be

obsessive about all we do at work to right the wrongs of last season.

"Then I completely switch off when I get the chance because you can't remain up there all the time, otherwise you'll run out of juice. You go up and then come back down to recharge or do whatever it is you need to do."

Baird's keen self-awareness hasn't always been thus. Growing up he was plagued by doubt and says that it is only in recent years that he has started to think, question and understand. In so doing he also began to reframe his journey and appreciate that, all things considered, he is a good guy who happens to be a fine rugby player.

"I'm getting to know myself very well," he says. "Three years ago I don't think I would have had such a deep understanding. I don't think every 23-year-old has to think like I do but when you are in a high-performance environment you have to grow up quicker than maybe if you were in college.

"There's a lot at stake in this game. There's a pressure to perform for your teammates. A pressure to perform for the fans. It's a business at the end of the day so you need to win to ensure you'll get paid and keep everything afloat."

Though part and parcel for a professional sportsperson, it remains a big burden for anyone of his age to bear. What's more, Baird is also a Sport Scholarship student at Trinity College where he is studying business and computer science. It's a fine balance to maintain yet such is Baird's attentiveness that very little, if anything, passes him by.

"I am hyper focused, when I go into training I'm always looking, analysing, preparing."





“Honestly, I have this hyper awareness I would say. Like I could tell you every pair of shoes that the lads wear. It’s weird and was my downfall for a while because I’d notice things like conversations too. I’d see the coaches talking and I’d assume that they were talking about me. I would completely fabricate something in my head and end up taking it very personally.

“Then I read a book called The Four Agreements. I had heard Aaron Rodgers (quarterback, Green Bay Packers) talk about how it transformed his life. It had four lessons that I keep referring back to: Be Impeccable with Your Word; Don’t Take Anything Personally; Don’t Make Assumptions; Always Do Your Best.

“I go back to that book from time to time because it isn’t hard to slip back into the old habit of taking things personally. It’s human nature. A big thing for me was selection. It kind of threw me off a few times last season. I’d go in of a Monday and Leo [Cullen] would tell me I’m not playing at the weekend.

“I remember coming back from injury before the Champions Cup quarter final [against Leicester]

in 2022. I felt I had been awesome in training but then I wasn’t even named on the bench. It completely screwed with my mind for the rest of the week. I was an absolute mess. I let Leo’s opinion and words affect me.

“So now every Sunday heading into a game week I think to myself: ‘it doesn’t matter what Leo says to me tomorrow, I’m going to train to be a better player. A better version of myself.’”

It’s a mentality that has reaped rewards this season. Baird played a key role in Ireland’s Six Nations campaign and he now finds himself in a prestigious Grand Slam club. Baird was also integral to Leinster’s Champions Cup journey and with a Rugby World Cup looking large on the horizon, the Dubliner’s stock continues to rise by the game.

With his growing profile also comes added responsibility of course, but Baird has always worn the mantle of role model well. He is supportive of several initiatives including Family Carers Ireland and FoodCloud, a not-for-profit social enterprise working to tackle the twin issues of food waste and food security.

“
So now every Sunday heading into a game week I think to myself: **‘it doesn’t matter what Leo says to me tomorrow, I’m going to train to be a better player. A better version of myself.’**

For some players, acknowledgement that they occupy a position of significance in the Irish sporting and social landscape often comes late in the day. However, from his early days as a promising rugby player Baird recognised the positive change he could make both on and off the field, just as some of the biggest role models in sport had taught him.

“I watched a lot of tennis with my brothers growing up. I used to love watching Rafael Nadal play. I loved the way you could never count him out. He just dug in and dug in. Sometimes at training I’d be thinking what would the likes of Tom Brady do here? What would Kobe [Bryant] do?

“There’s a great documentary on Netflix about the US basketball team at the Olympics. The team was struggling and Kobe was brought in to play. One Friday evening the team went on a night out and came back around 5am and what do they see? Kobe is in the lobby ready to go to the gym.

“They say Kobe only lived off four hours sleep and while I’d be a bit cynical about that stuff I think the mindset behind it is very true. As an elite athlete you have to ask yourself: is there something more

“
I’m hugely fortunate for all rugby has given me. I love watching it. I love the freedom it gives me.

I could do here? If you feel you haven’t done enough, you probably haven’t. I think that also applies to life in general.

“I would be very inquisitive and I’m very fortunate that I’m in a position where I can meet people and use the time I have outside of work to research and look into things and ways I can move forward and help others to do the same.”

While the world might seem to be at Baird’s feet, it took him a while to find them. Like most, he too had his challenges growing up. At times he felt like he didn’t fit in other than on the sports field. His experiences have therefore led to his involvement in the Tackle Your Feelings Schools programme, with the Irish international set to play a strategic role in the campaign’s development.

“Growing up I never really had a close friendship. It was very hard actually. My mom would always say that just a few minutes after school finished I’d be back on the couch at home and watching TV. It was only much later on and as I played more rugby that I developed better friendships because I was hanging out more often with them, out on the pitch.





"I guess it gives me a huge appreciation for the friendships I have now because not everyone has that. It's one thing my mom always drilled into me: be nice to other people. If you see someone on their own or not quite fitting in, make them feel comfortable. Bring them into your conversation. You were in their shoes once."

Laden with medals and accolades, rugby has clearly been good to Baird. Though he won't be making any assumptions, it's conceivable that given the players who will surround him for years to come, more Grand Slams lie in wait. Yet even he would concede that the game's greatest gift has been in how it has empowered a young man who hasn't always found things so easy.

"Have you heard of the sunk cost fallacy?" he asks. "It's this idea that when you've dedicated a lot of time to something you feel obligated to stay in it. You feel guilty for walking away from it. I think that if you're not enjoying something and it's not bringing some level of happiness into your life then you really have to question it. A lot of people get stuck in that hole."

"I'm hugely fortunate for all rugby has given me. I love watching it. I love the freedom it gives me. Sometimes I close my eyes and visualise myself running out the tunnel and I still get goosebumps. I love standing there for the anthems and seeing people really going for it in the stands. I enjoy it and as a result I put my heart and soul into it."

"That's not to say you don't have any bad days. You only need look at the Champions Cup final. Good or bad, there is always an experience to learn from and I wouldn't change anything about how I got here because those experiences make you who you are today."

"I still ruminate in my head about loads of stuff too so I'm still learning as I go. Figuring things out. Nobody ever gets to 100% and I don't expect to either, but I like to think I'm maybe 5% better than who I was before."

"I'm trying my best, and that's all you can ask for."

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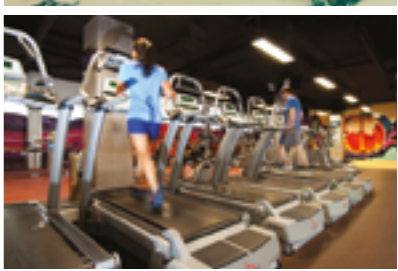
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A CAFFEINATED TRANSITION

Former winger now flying it with new coffee shop

MATT HEALY



As he ambled home through Ranelagh after school every day, Matt Healy thought plenty about a career in sport but very little about where the journey might take him. Less still about the life that lay beyond it.

All was going to plan until the talented scrumhalf was released by the Leinster sub-academy. Disillusioned by his future, a chance switch to the Lansdowne wing served to invigorate him and ultimately earned him a contract at Connacht Rugby where he would go on to score 58 tries in 151 appearances. Capped once by Ireland, the Dublin 6 native and his young family have since settled in Galway and have now embarked on a new adventure that's brewing with enthusiasm.

"I had heard plenty of people talking about the importance of having a passion outside of rugby throughout my playing days," Healy says, reflecting on his first year at the helm of My Little Flower, a cosy little coffee shop in Oughterard. "I didn't really think I had one to be honest. I was interested in coffee and other things, but nothing seemed glaring enough to pursue.

"I was enjoying my rugby too and so it was only as the finish line started to close in that I began to put a bit of thought and work into what I was going to do next. It was from talking with people like Dr Deirdre Lyons I realised that my passion was right there in front of me all along.

"Why did I love rugby so much? It was all in the detail and the work that goes on behind the scenes. The games are unbelievable to experience but in all they probably account for 10% of the effort you put in. I loved the 90% that people don't get to see. The preparation. The nutrition. I loved the lifestyle. I loved the schedules and the habits. The process was my passion."

Generally, coffee formed part of Healy's daily routine, leading him to Zarah and Dan, owners of Calendar Coffee - a seasonal roastery in Barna. The more he got to know the duo the more he was taken aback by the newfound significance he discovered within this humble beverage. Where once coffee had served as an excuse to take some time out, he soon appreciated that much like matchday, a cup merely represented the last piece of the jigsaw.

Still though, coffee felt like something to enjoy rather than pursue and so Healy remained undecided on his future as he entered the final year of his contract at Connacht. For Healy, his wife Rachael and their two young daughters, Dublin was unavoidably alluring. With family nearby, it seemed like an obvious starting point.



He chatted at length with friends who were already traipsing up the career ladder in various tech roles and other high-flying industries. He also reached out to former teammates who had manoeuvred into powerful positions in Dublin's corporate sector. Yet something wasn't quite scratching the itch and so he arranged to sit down with Ronan Loughney for an alternative perspective.

Loughney's path was an unusual one. Capped by Ireland, the Gaeligeoir earned a business degree during a 12-year career with Connacht Rugby. A leader both on and off the field, Loughney's advocacy saw him appointed to his players' association's Executive Board alongside Johnny Sexton and Peter O'Mahony. In his final season, his peers awarded him a Medal for Excellence at the Rugby Players Ireland awards for his off-field commitment to their game.

In all, Loughney's CV might well have enabled him to walk into any job he so desired but as tempting as the open doors may have been, something was amiss. Ultimately, Loughney vowed to remain true to himself and out of his passion for woodwork established his own bespoke furniture business. The conversation landed Healy at something of a crossroads.

"I came away from that chat and began to see things a little differently. On the one hand I could go to Dublin and hold down a steady, safe and comfortable role doing something I had absolutely no interest in, or I could do something I was passionate about that would get me up every morning and drive me to succeed. The decision was pretty clear-cut in the end."

“I was enjoying my rugby too and so it was only as the finish line started to close in that I began to put a bit of thought and work into what I was going to do next.”

Healy touched base with his old friends at Calendar Coffee, who had just relocated to a bigger site in Oughterard. When he first informed them about his impending retirement, they had suggested he open his own coffee shop near their new premises. Initially, the thought seemed daunting.

It raised more than a few eyebrows when Healy opened My Little Flower on the town's main street once he'd hung up his boots. He had previously joked with friends about the idea but having a coffee shop in such a quaint part of the world seemed too fanciful to many of them. Yet as soon as Zarah and Dan opened his eyes to the possibilities, he quickly began to see the bigger picture.

"It was a leap of faith but the more I thought about it, the more it made sense," Healy says. "I wasn't a coffee snob by any stretch, but I had always enjoyed it and having struck up a friendship with the guys at Calendar Coffee I began to develop a real interest into the whole process and the journey a coffee bean will go on before it lands into that cup.

"The whole thing was a challenge," he admits. "I had to quickly master my coffee-making skills while getting to grips with all the other aspects of running a business at the same time. I had to identify a location, register the business, negotiate leases and decide how it should look and feel. It was all a bit of a whirlwind but it immediately it gave me a structure and sense of purpose.

"I think the fact that I couldn't really think about much else actually proved to be a good strategy for me getting over the retirement too. I've barely had time to visit the Sportsground and so it was only when a couple of the lads were out there recently talking about their end of season awards that it began to hit home."



While it was hardly enjoyable, Healy recognises that his gradual phasing out of the Connacht picture helped shape his approach to the transition. Matches were fewer and far between meaning that weekends were to his own choosing. It gave him an opportunity to mull things over.

He thought about the past. The tries. The European nights. The sideways rain. Thriving under Pat Lam and the week of the PRO12 final. He also thought about Ireland. About Joe Schmidt. About the Irish caps he left behind him. About the unbelievable talents of those that got in his way.

In the end, he didn't need more time. Having only played once for Connacht all season, enough was enough. Even though he knew the writing was on the wall, he didn't instruct his agent to look elsewhere. He knew his future was going to look markedly different. He had done his thinking, talking and planning. He was ready to go.

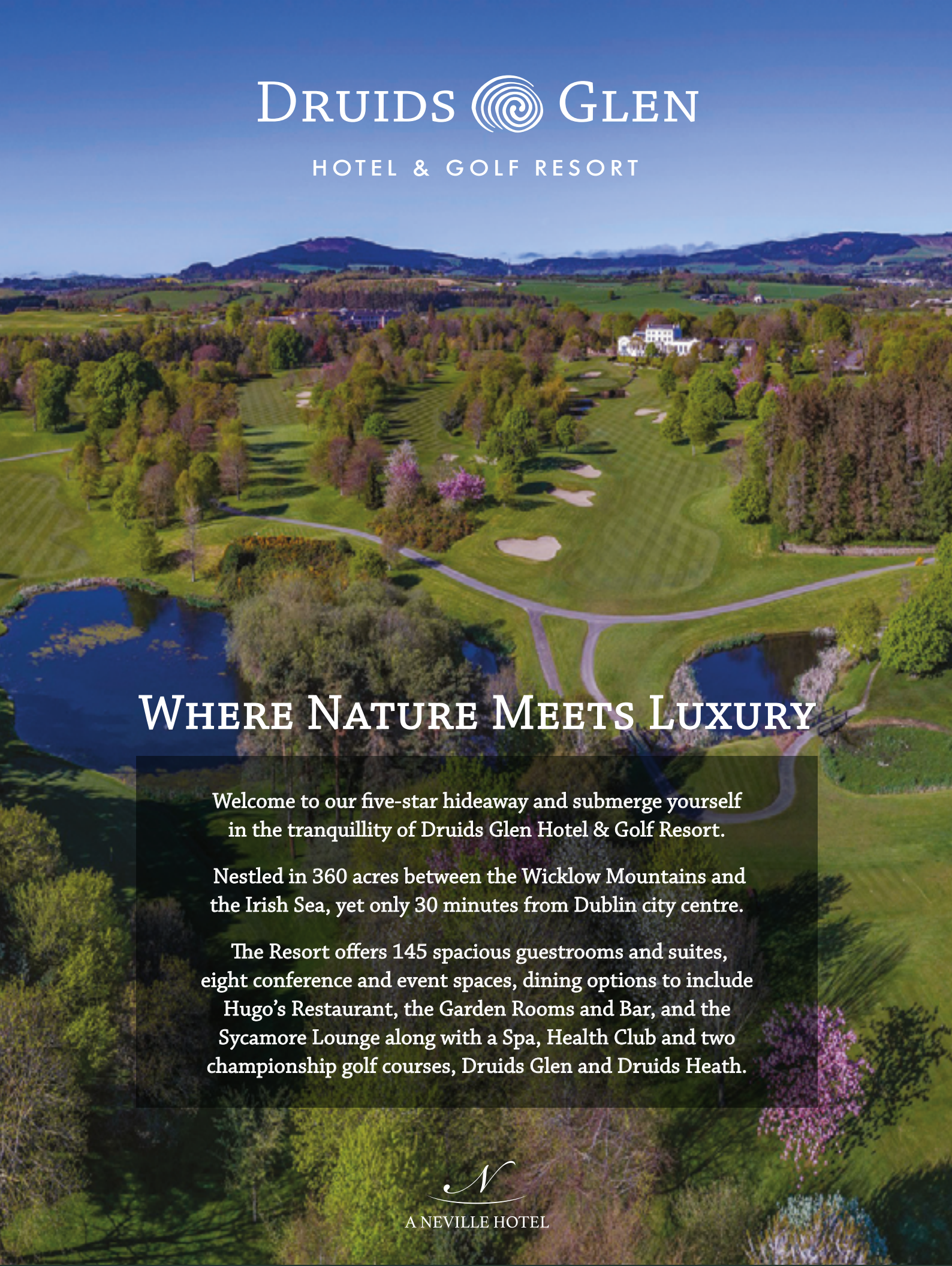
"In my retirement statement I mentioned that rugby can be ruthless. I think I was referring to those last few months when I wasn't getting picked even though I was fit, healthy and training well. I felt I could add real value but wasn't being given the opportunity to. I suppose Connacht decided to put their energy into other players who were staying around whereas the old competitor in me wanted to play more.

"I have no regrets about how I approached things whether it was in those final months or at any stage in my career. It's easy to get lost in what might have been had I worked harder or played better but I firmly believe that I was always true to myself.

"I remember around the time of being called up by Joe Schmidt for the tour to South Africa and I already just knew I wasn't his type of player. For example, Pat Lam empowered Tiernan [O'Halloran], Niyi [Adeolokun] and I to play the game as we saw it. It was a bit free and loose, without much emphasis on us making tackles or defensive reads. Joe, on the other hand, was 100% focused on wingers making big hits.

"Joe simply had a different way of doing things and put massive emphasis on certain things. It just didn't match up with how I played the game and what got me into contention in the first place.

"Just as I wanted to play for the right reasons, I want to live for the right reasons too. It's an approach I take to everything I do. For enjoyment and fulfilment, and I get plenty of both at My Little Flower."



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A NEVILLE HOTEL

WRITTEN IN STONE

With a dynamic blend of sporting passion and whiskey craftsmanship, Ogham Whiskey aims to replicate the on-field success of the Leavy brothers

ADAM LEAVY



In a world where sporting heroes can struggle to find their footing after retirement, the Leavys were always going to be an anomaly. Just as they defied many odds throughout their respective 7s and XVs careers, the brothers are now blazing a trail through a strong liquor field with the launch of Ogham Whiskey.

Reflecting on their launch in May which was supported by rugby players throughout the country, Adam expressed his delight at how the product had been received. "It was a busy week but a successful one, so we were delighted with it," the Olympian said. Indeed, the response to their first release was nothing short of exceptional with Ogham Whiskey selling out in less than 24 hours despite there being no formal activation.

Instead, the Leavys and their father Donal relied on their network of influential connections while Doug Leddin, a familiar name in the whiskey industry, also played a key role. "Doug knows

the industry inside out and has access to a huge network within the whiskey world. Once we got them on board and spread the word through our own community, everything else fell into place."

Delving deeper into the origins of Ogham, Adam revealed that plans for the whiskey began long before their rugby careers came to an end. The Dubliners had regularly mused about setting up a micro-distillery on their family farm in Castletown-Geoghegan in Co. Westmeath.

The Leavy's return to their midlands roots is not the only nod to the past. Their whiskey pays tribute to the enduring influence of the Ogham alphabet on Irish culture and heritage. This tribute is beautifully represented through the carefully crafted bottle design, featuring embossed Ogham lettering that holds hidden elements.

The whiskey also holds further hidden messages, including its 7-year-old age statement, specifically chosen to honour Dan's playing number and Adam's role in an esteemed Ireland 7s team – the first to secure both core status on the World Series and their place at the Olympic Games.

“Through the likes of Rugby Players Ireland, we were always aware that our rugby careers would be short-lived and so we decided to get moving on something a few years ago while we were still playing.”



“It wasn’t an overnight hunch,” Adam says. “A lot of thought went into every aspect. Through the likes of Rugby Players Ireland, we were always aware that our rugby careers would be short-lived and so we decided to get moving on something a few years ago while we were still playing. I’m glad we had that time to think it all through.

“I think when Dan won the Grand Slam we began to see our USP and Doug gave us the extra bit of encouragement we probably needed. Once we decided it was a direction we wanted to go in we started what turned out to be a very lengthy and meticulous process to get to where we are. We left no stone unturned in selecting the right taste profile and then the development of the brand saw us through multiple prototypes.

“When you look back now it’s actually funny just how bad some of those early ideas were and how far we’ve come but it’s all part of the journey. We’ve landed on a design that stands out from the crowd and we’re very happy with it but most importantly, it is the liquid that will ultimately set us apart.”

Inevitably, the Leavy brothers’ frustrations were tested at various stages of Ogham’s development. However, Adam believes his close relationship with Dan helped carry them through the nagging moments of doubt.

“People say you should never get into business with your family or partner but I don’t know if that’s all that true,” he says. “I love working with Dan. If anything, being so close to him has helped me to share how I really felt about different things along

“**People say you should never get into business with your family or partner but I don’t know if that’s all that true. I love working with Dan.**



the way. Sometimes you can be a little closed off in typical working relationships because you can’t help but think that everyone has their own agenda whereas we have this implicit trust in each other.

“With a shared passion for it, we could focus on our common goals and aspirations. Dan wouldn’t be involved unless he wanted the best for it and in order to get it all right, we knew we had to be upfront and honest with each other. It’s not personal. It’s just how it is in the changing room too. Every player is accountable for their actions. It’s very black and white. I guess we applied the same mentality to this venture.”

A commerce graduate with an MSc in Finance, Adam’s background complements Dan’s people skills and aptitude for negotiation creating a well-rounded team dynamic. Having left his role as an Investment Analyst at Wayflyer, the younger brother has been focusing his efforts on getting Ogham off the ground. Whilst he intends to return to the corporate world, for the moment he is enjoying the ways in which he has been adding to an already unique combination of attributes.

“**I’ve now seen at first-hand how much work it takes to build a business. There’s a lot of blood, sweat and tears that have to go into it**

“I’ve really enjoyed testing my entrepreneurial instincts. It was probably the piece I was missing from my portfolio. At the end of the day, when you’re working in finance the majority of your work is about buying and selling but I have found that you need to have a certain level of empathy when it comes to dealing with business owners.

“I’ve now seen at first-hand how much work it takes to build a business. There’s a lot of blood, sweat and tears that have to go into it and I see how taking the step to sell up can be a massive life decision for people. Having this perspective adds another feather to my bow for when I do go back in, but I’ll leave that for another day.”

Content to have traded tackles for tipples, the Leavy’s Ogham adventure is set to continue through a number of limited releases in the coming months. In the interim, they will continue to build out the brand and grow their network.

Though it has been years in the making, Adam and Dan are only setting out on their journey. However, having transitioned their mindset from the intensity of the rugby pitch to the depths of whiskey barrels, they have already shown that they are brave enough for the challenges that lie ahead.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Maeve Óg O'Leary guides us through her average day as a professional athlete based out of the HPC

MAEVE ÓG O'LEARY



7am

Wake Up & Breakfast

On the average morning I get up at about 7am. I will have prepared my gear and overnight oats the night before so I can get out the door quickly in the morning. Fuelling before arriving to training is hugely important. Since starting our full-time contracts in November, it is something our nutritionist Emma Brennan has been putting great emphasis on so now a good breakfast is a feature of my morning routine.

7.15am

Leave for HPC

I live in Blackrock so I give myself plenty of time to get out to the IRFU High Performance Centre (HPC) in Abbotstown. Meabh Deely usually collects me. I really enjoy the commute in the car. Depending on the day we will either chat, listen to music or sometimes I'll catch up on some video from training or games. It is a good time to get your head in the right place before starting training.

8.30am

Monitoring and Individual Prep at the HPC

The first thing I'll do when I arrive to the HPC is some monitoring and individual prep. This time is important for getting your body in the best place possible ahead of a day of training. I'll do some mobility exercises, some other physical work and go through some mental preparation. If necessary, I'll check with in with the physio too so we can catch any niggles or small injuries. Unfortunately, injury is part and parcel of the game. I had to miss out on our tour to Japan last summer after tearing my hamstring. Injuries are very frustrating but a very real part of what we do so this time in the morning to nail down prehab is essential.



9.00am

Coffee

After a good start to the day, I usually head up to the TYF Players' lounge for a coffee. The girls and I use this time to catch up with each other before the real work begins. Making coffee on the barista machine is still, and always will be, a novelty, so we have a bit of craic with that. We try to use the lounge for down-time between sessions and not bring any rugby into it. It's important to have switch off periods here and there throughout the day. At about 9.30 we'll head down to get strapped and ready for our pitch session.

10am

Pitch Session

This is where the real work starts. Our pitch sessions will vary depending on the stage of the season and the current goals that have been set for the team. Sessions will have been outlined at the beginning of the training block or at the beginning of the week. Each day we are provided with a detailed plan so we can properly prepare and as soon Ed Slattery (S&C) calls on us, we're switched on and ready to go. Some sessions are short and sharp while others will involve more volume on the GPS. It can be hard when there are no games in the calendar but the off-season is a huge opportunity for us to grow, learn and get better as a younger playing group. Our next competitive fixtures will be in the WXV later in the year so this training is ultimately building to that.

11.15am

Recovery

After our pitch session, recovery becomes the key focus. Emma will ensure we have some snacks ready to begin the recovery process immediately. I will usually head for the hydro-pools in the HPC to keep my body feeling as fresh as possible. The ice-bath is usually where we live after heavy contact sessions or a heavy conditioning session – although these don't happen every day.

11.45am

Lunch

Lunch may seem early but after a busy morning we are usually ready to eat. The food at the HPC is great with Alan, Maurice and Jeremy preparing fresh meals for us every day – something we are hugely grateful for! There is always a great buzz around the kitchen and dining areas and it's always nice to mix with the different squads in the building.



12.30am
Rugby Education

Rugby Education is a really important part of the full-time programme. It will vary from Video Analysis tasks with our Analyst Cian O'Brien, a nutrition workshop where Emma will share some tips and new recipes with us. Aoife Lane from Rugby Players Ireland also comes in to deliver workshops which help with our own personal and team development both on and off the pitch like time management, budgeting and goal setting. These things can always be a bit of craic and I find that we often learn from each other the most in these sessions. Most days Aoife will be in the building and will meet with players throughout the day for a quick chat or to give us a hand with any issues or ideas we may be having. Personally, I have found Aoife's advice great in sorting out college and work alongside the rugby calendar as these things usually clash and can be difficult to manage.

1.15pm
Gym

Since being in the full-time programme, I love getting to gym with my teammates because they really push me on while having Ed around the place for any guidance or questions is huge. We have speakers all over the gym allowing us to stick on some great tunes – I think the girls will agree that some of the players taste in music can be very questionable. The gym is a huge part of my game, and it is evident how much it helps when I get onto the pitch. I have been lucky that my brother Shane is also developing a career as an online fitness coach – he has been able to help a lot with my gym and conditioning before I was in the programme. He is currently playing for Toronto Arrows and spent a number of years with Connacht, helping them to their PRO12 win in 2016. He is always there as a sounding board for me.

2.15pm
Recovery

We place a huge amount of emphasis on recovery at the IRFU. In the past it hasn't been a luxury we could really avail of. You were often running from one place to the other, getting to lectures or work and recovery was restricted mostly to your sleep. Now we have lot of opportunities and ways to recover – it usually depends on what works for that individual.

2.45
Time for Home!

Once recovery is done, we are finished up for the day. I usually have to get on the road pretty quickly to make it home and get set to start the next part of my day. I work part-time at the Public Relations agency Wilson Hartnell. I am on the sports sponsorship and marketing team there and I really enjoy the work I do. They have been so supportive of me throughout signing my contract with the IRFU and during competition time. I do think it's very important to have interests outside of rugby. It helps to give me perspective and I enjoy being able to focus my energy onto different things.



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GIVING BACK

RPI Executive Board Member reflects on a rugby career that taught him so much

PETER MCKENNA

THEN

Peter played 41 times for Leinster from 1997 to 2003.

NOW

He practices law at his firm McKenna Durcan, living in Blackrock with his wife Gillian and three sons Matthew (10), Ollie (7) and Andrew (3).



“Why not? Why not you?”

It was a mantra of his father Arthur that always drove, and never left, Peter McKenna.

“If you have an interest in something, I suppose why not tug on that string and see what can happen? That is what I have tried to do, when I have felt brave enough!” he says.

“My dad always had this thing of ‘why not? why not you?’”

Peter stretched out his education from CBC Monkstown to study Law in UCD, adding on a post-graduate higher diploma in Business and an MBS in Management Information systems.

He branched out into co-commentating on rugby for Setanta Sports, even writing a book ‘Rugby Explained’ to break down a complicated game, and was involved in founding the Irish Rugby Union Players Association (IRUPA), now known as Rugby Players Ireland (RPI).

It is 20 years since Peter last laced his boots for Leinster. Time does fly.

“I know you look back wearing rose-tinted glasses, but, it truly was a wonderful time and experience,” he says.

“I was in the prime of my life and health, and I got to play a really good standard of rugby with some exceptional players and teammates.

“Looking back now, from the comfort and confines of my desk, it truly was a gift in many ways. Back then, a typical day might involve lifting weights in the morning, followed by a coffee and a chat with your mates, and an afternoon spent playing international standard touch rugby as a warm-up to your training session with the likes of O’Driscoll,



Horgan, Hickie, D’Arcy, Dempsey and so on. Sometimes we were even sent home for a two-hour snooze in the afternoon!” he smiles.

Peter’s Leinster career began in 1996 when he played for one season, as the provincial game was turning from amateur to professional.

“In 1997, I turned down the offer of a contract in favour of studying for my Masters. At the time, nobody really knew what a professional rugby life at the provincial level would entail.”

Back then, for Peter, his studies and rugby were in a constant battle for his attention. Ultimately, he signed a one-year, part-time contract with Mike Ruddock in 1999.

“I had started my traineeship as a solicitor in 1998 with Donal Spring & Company. My boss was Donal Spring, the ex-Ireland number eight. He was great. He fully supported my decision to play rugby and put my legal career temporarily on hold.”

“I went part-time for a year to test the waters and to see if it was for me. Actually, I think I am the very last person on a part-time contract to have played for Ireland.

“That started my four years as a professional where I was able to continue with my studies at Blackhall Place in the background. It was a nice balance.

“I put those recently learned legal skills to use in helping to set up IRUPA (now RPI) along with fellow players Liam Toland, Mike Mullins, Justin Fitzpatrick and Dan McFarland.

“It was such an interesting time. We had only formed in 2001 when, in late 2002, the IRFU proposed to disband Connacht.

“This galvanised us as a group and the players came together to challenge the proposal, along with the many thousands who marched on Lansdowne Road.”

In fairness to the IRFU, they changed their position, got behind Connacht and the rest, as they say, is history.

In 2003, Peter was offered another contract with Leinster. It just didn’t feel right. Leinster had lost to Perpignan in the Heineken Cup semi-final. Coaches Matt Williams and Willie Anderson were heading to Scotland. Other friends in the squad were moving on too.

“I was 29 and I knew I was going to have to restart my traineeship which would continue for two more years,” he shares.

“I knew that’s what I had to do. I felt that I should do that sooner rather than later.”

It was only when he stepped away from the game that he realised what an exceptional environment it was in which to earn a living.



"In the normal workplace, it can be a different environment. I love the law and I continue my interest in technology as chairperson of the technology committee of the Law Society. I like what I do. But, it is not the same."

"In the professional rugby environment, everyone is pulling in the same direction. You all want the same outcome. You are all there with the same passion and for the same reasons. And Leinster created an environment to allow you to thrive if you were willing to work hard."

Peter saw many men come and go at Leinster and, in his time, he learned one immutable truth.

"Hard work trumps talent, pretty much all the time. Hard work and talent trumps everything else," he says.

"In 2000, I tore ligaments in my ankle playing for St Mary's RFC two weeks before I was due to play for Ireland A. My main concern that night was to get on the crutches to get back to make last orders in the bar at St Mary's, which I did, by the way, but I was out for five to six weeks.

"Fast-forward a year or so, Girvan (Dempsey) suffered a similar injury and I saw it as my chance to try and play ahead of him for an extended period of time. But he was only out for three weeks.

"I couldn't figure it out. How did he get back so soon? He later told me how for the first few days after his injury, he would get up in the middle of the night and ice his ankle every four hours to get the swelling down.

"It highlighted for me that I was still in amateur mode, whilst Girvan had converted fully to professionalism."

"The lessons I learned from watching the top calibre players we had at the time were the benefits of

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focus, certainly the power of discipline and the value of hard work."

When Peter retired, he stayed at the heart of the game by co-commentating, writing the book, and playing with Old Belvedere RFC in the All-Ireland League, but, not unexpectedly, he found himself acutely drawn to where the law and rugby crossed paths.

"I have always believed passionately about player welfare issues, with a deep desire to help make Ireland the best place in the world to play rugby.

"I felt that if the right contract environment existed for players, it would help play some small part in keeping our best talent here and attracting talent in.

"One of my proudest achievements as a legal advisor to RPI was being involved in drafting the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the IRFU, RPI and the Players in 2019.

"It was progressive, pioneering and the first such agreement in northern hemisphere Rugby. It's something Irish rugby should be very proud of."

Peter retired from professional rugby in June 2003 but there was an unexpected swansong when Leinster coach Gary Ella came calling to help fill a hole in the Leinster squad left by the departure of Ireland's internationals to the World Cup in October 2003.

"I went back in for four games to help them out. I can't tell you how lovely that was. Only then did I realise how much I missed it. And still do" he adds wistfully.



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