

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

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ONE STEP AT A TIME

JAKE FLANNERY

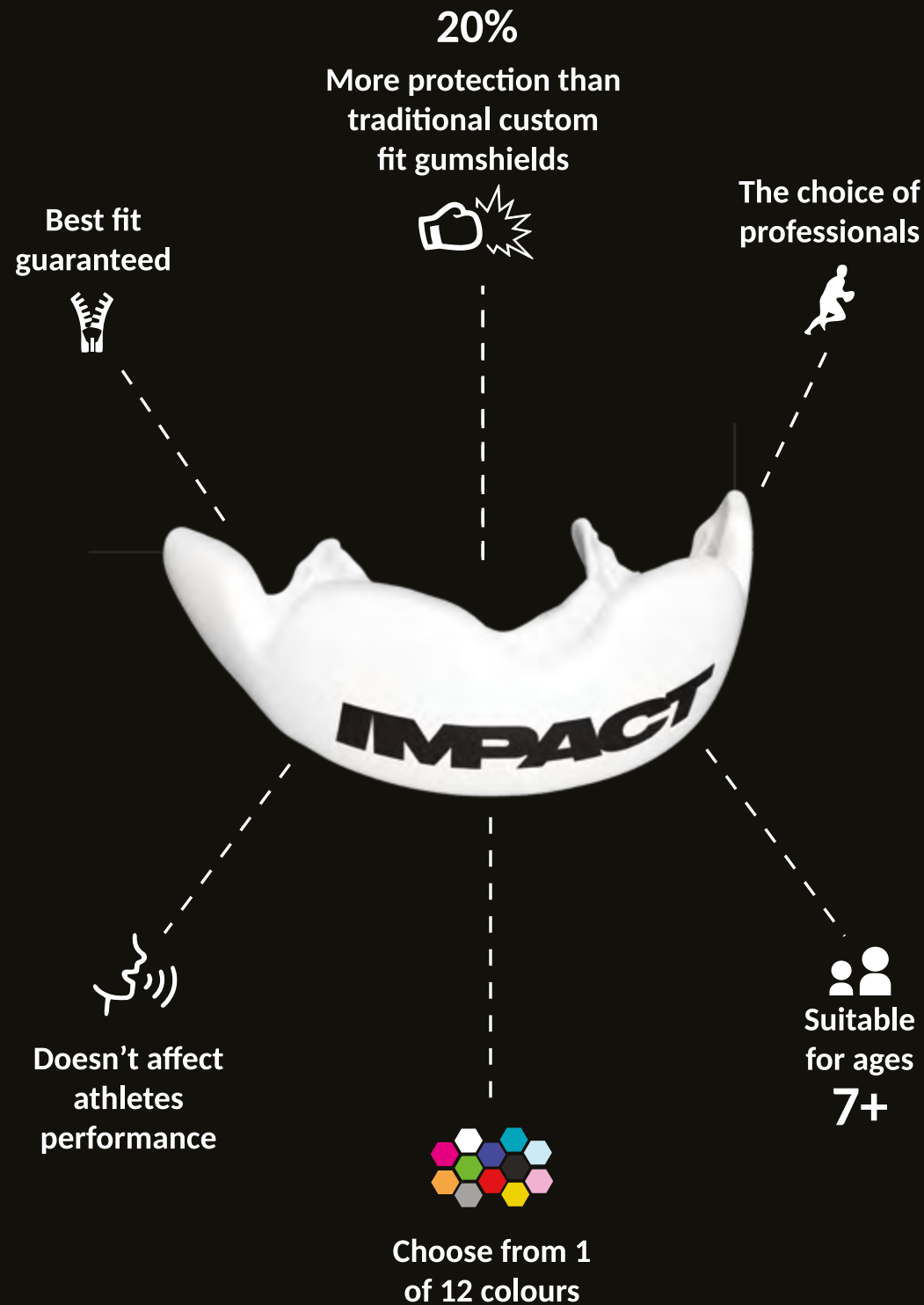
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THE COLLECTIVE
BARGAINING AGREEMENT
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CONTENTS

- 2** Represent - CEO Address
- 4** News - Rugby Players Ireland
- 6** News - The Transition
- 8** News - Retirement
- 10** Represent - CBA
- 14** Develop - Adam Byrne
- 18** Develop - HerForm
- 20** Engage - Tackle Your Feelings
- 26** Develop - Women's Rugby
- 30** Develop - Jake Flannery
- 34** Engage - Emily Lane
- 38** Develop - Paul Marshall



Directors:

P. O'Mahony (Chair), E. Breen, B. Dardis,
D. Heffernan, I. Henderson, R. Kearney,
A.L. Murphy Crowe, G. Ringrose, S. Keogh (CEO),
C. Medlar, P. McKenna, M. Quinn

CREDITS

Published by:

Rugby Players Ireland,
Block B, Parkview House, Beech Hill Office
Campus, Clonskeagh, Dublin 4

Phone: +353 1 676 9680

Email: info@rugbyplayersireland.ie

Web: www.rugbyplayersireland.ie

Facebook: facebook.com/RugbyPlayersIreland

Twitter: @RugbyPlayersIRE

Instagram: @rugbyplayersireland

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/irupa

Photography by Inpho
(www.inpho.ie) unless otherwise stated.

Written & Edited by:
Richard McElwee & Finola Roache

Design by:
Brian Gillis & Laura Wilkinson

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MUCH TO BE PROUD OF

CEO Address

SIMON KEOGH



When I look back on 2023 in time to come, I'll think of it as a year where triumphs and disappointments shared the stage, leaving an indelible mark on the landscape of Irish Rugby.

Undeniably, our Rugby World Cup exit casts a large shadow over all that was achieved by our members over the past 12 months. There were Grand Slam victories (x2), a triumphant URC campaign for Munster Rugby, Olympic qualification for both Sevens teams, and promotion in the WXV competition—all contributing to a tapestry of achievement that would ordinarily go down as one of the finest in our history.

Yet in speaking to the players involved in France, it was the support of Irish fans that has resonated most deeply. As Johnny Sexton implied in his retirement post, sometimes the biggest disappointments yield the most profound lessons. "We lost, but we won," he said - a sentiment that captures the essence of sport more than most.

While Johnny and Keith Earls didn't ride off into the sunset with a Rugby World Cup medal, their lasting legacies transcend the

game and set a standard for all professional rugby players in Ireland. It's a standard we all aspire to and through our recently negotiated CBA, we believe we are creating a sustainable future for our members - something that should always remain at the core of our work (see page 10 for more).

While we can't claim to kick the points or score the tries, at Rugby Players Ireland we have assembled a team to ensure we understand our players off-the-field, which ultimately helps to drive their on-field performance. Coupled with the unwavering support of our partners, we aim to not only protect our membership but also propel them to new heights.

There remains plenty of reason for optimism. Paris 2024 looms large, the women's rugby programme will continue to grow, the talented pools of players coming through our academies show no signs of abating, some of the best players in the world are happy to play their rugby in Ireland.

New ground will continue to be broken in 2024. The lessons of the past year, the successes, and the challenges will serve as a robust foundation for the opportunities that lie ahead.



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



N-PRO

Rugby Players Ireland and N-Pro, an innovative sports technology brand dedicated to revolutionizing impact protection for athletes, are thrilled to announce a new strategic partnership. This collaboration combines the players' association's commitment to player welfare with N-Pro's cutting-edge headgear technology, bringing unparalleled safety advancements to rugby players across all levels.



MSL MOTOR GROUP

Earlier this season, Rugby Players Ireland announced a partnership with MSL Motor Group, the family-owned business dating back to 1959. In activations to launch the partnership, both Jimmy O'Brien and Billy Holland featured as coaches of young players who share in a dream to go green – with a nod to the unmistakable EQB, the electric vehicle that symbolises the future of sustainable mobility.



GOLF CLASSIC

The recently redeveloped Druids Glen course played host to a memorable Golf Classic in August. Bringing together players past and present, the event is an important highlight of the players' association's calendar. While it goes some way to ensuring that the organisation can continue to support its members, it also gives attending players an opportunity to mingle with many of those who underpin their game.



PDP UPDATE

Towards the latter part of 2023, Growth Unlimited began an extensive project in reviewing the Rugby Players Ireland/IRFU Player Development Programme. This process will evaluate the efficiencies of the programme through consultation with the IRFU, RPI PDMs, players and management staff connected to all professional rugby teams.

In an effort to keep evolving, members of the PDP team also undertook a harm minimisation program led by EPIC Risk Management. The independently accredited training has been developed to help individuals and organisations across the sports wagering ecosystem to minimise the risks posed by gambling harm. The PDP team also engaged in Neurodiversity Training to help build awareness around neurological diversity and the various ways it may manifest itself in individuals, and its implications for players in high performance environments.



HALL OF FAME 2023

On November 10th, Rugby Players Ireland welcomed Alison Miller and Shane Horgan into the Rugby Players Ireland Hall of Fame where they joined the likes of Keith Wood (2004), Ronan O'Gara (2016) and Brian O'Driscoll (2018) in an illustrious list of previous inductees. Hosted by Darren Cave, the event saw friends, family and former teammates of both players come together to celebrate two of the great careers in Irish Rugby history.

One of the game's great finishers, it was Ali Miller's hat-trick of tries in a first-ever win over England that teed up the victorious Grand Slam campaign of 2013, while she will always be remembered for her contribution to Ireland's historic pool triumph over New Zealand in the 2014 Women's Rugby World Cup.

Having made his Leinster debut against Ulster in 1998, Shane Horgan proceeded to rack up over 200 appearances for the province, scoring 71 tries. His powerful presence also extended to the international stage, earning 65 caps for Ireland. The Lion also played a pivotal role in the Triple Crown successes of 2004 and 2006, while his iconic try against England at Croke Park in 2007 will live long in the memory.



THE TRANSITION

Over the course of a professional rugby career, players will encounter various transitions or turning points. From entering their first high performance environment and signing their first professional contract, to changing club or dealing with a major injury, these periods of transition can be challenging to navigate. Through Rugby Players Ireland, supports are available to players at all stages.



RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND/IRFU ROOKIE CAMP

All roads led to Glasdon Lakehouse at the outset of pre-season 2023, as the Rugby Players Ireland/IRFU Rookie Camp 2023 took place. Led by Marcus Horan and facilitated by Rugby Players Ireland staff over two days, 52 of the latest recruits in the men's game joined us for a comprehensive series of workshops designed to help them transition into the world of professional rugby.

Run in partnership with the IRFU, the players also had the opportunity to get to know their Player Development Manager who will be an integral part of their professional rugby journey. Over the coming years, our PDMs will help every player to develop the skills, competencies, behaviours and relationships that a rugby career can help to nurture, so that players can maximise their time in rugby, however long that may be.



RWC 2023

The aftermath of a high-stakes championship, such as a Rugby World Cup, is one of the most difficult transitions a player can experience. Preparing for the emotional and practical consequences of returning from the Rugby World Cup and engaging in support (both formal and informal) is fundamental to managing the post-tournament blues.

Research led by International Rugby Players has shown that players' preparation for the post-Rugby World Cup period has often been inadequate. Positive transitions were more likely to be experienced by players who make plans for their post-RWC phase, and who receive strong support from their family, teammates, as well as the support staff within governing bodies and/or player associations.



RETIREMENT

With the retirements of some key players in the Irish system following the Rugby World Cup, media coverage has placed its focus on the frustrations, loss of identity, loneliness, panic, and depression that retired athletes can encounter. However, it should be noted that retirement can also bring about but a sense of gratitude, optimism, a readiness to move on, excitement and challenge of a new role.

“

WHILE RETIREMENT IS NEVER AN EASY DECISION, NOW IS THE RIGHT TIME AND I FEEL INCREDIBLY FORTUNATE TO GO OUT ON MY OWN TERMS.

Keith Earls



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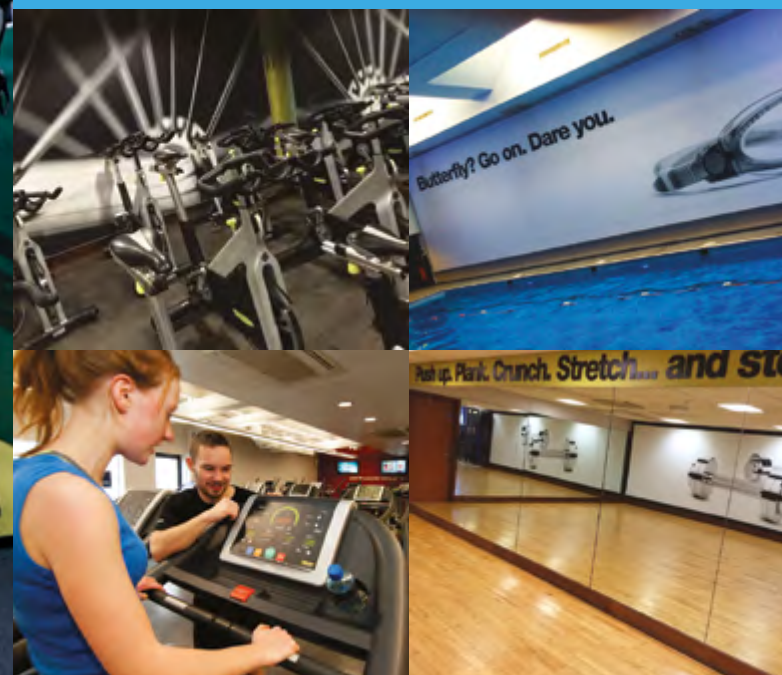
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THE COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENT

And why it is so Important to Irish Rugby

SIMON KEOGH



In December, the IRFU and Rugby Players Ireland announced that they successfully concluded negotiations on a new Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA). This new agreement will cover the professional rugby landscape in Ireland until 2027. It is the second such deal between the two sides, following on from what was a landmark agreement in 2019.

On the same day the IRFU reported a strong financial position for the year ending July 31st 2023, it might have been easy to overlook the significance of the CBA as the media zoned in on the rising costs associated with a bid to take the Webb Ellis trophy home. However, it is the success of the CBA that largely underpins Irish Rugby's on-field potential.

"Our vision is for Ireland to be the best place in the world to play rugby," Simon Keogh, CEO of Rugby Players Ireland states. "People will tend to judge that purely on results but to get players out on the field and performing to the best of their abilities, we have to ensure that we have created the right conditions off it.

"Thankfully we have worked hard over the years to create a good working relationship with the IRFU. With the framework of the CBA in place, we have been able to come to the table and thrash out the issues at hand. While we might not always agree, the opportunity to openly discuss matters is not one we take for granted."

In light of the protracted dispute between the other players' associations and their national unions, Keogh is evidently appreciative that the IRFU have kept the door open to their key stakeholders.

"It hasn't always been so," Keogh adds. "In the early days of the players' association, staff or our active members were often treated with suspicion. Decision makers in the Irish game felt that IRUPA (as it was then known) were simply out to cause trouble. As a result, the opinions of some of the union's biggest assets weren't counted.

"Over the years we have worked hard to create a more trusting and collaborative partnership, whilst ensuring that we retain our integrity. The power of the collective voice is understood by the IRFU. Equally, we understand that it can't all be one-way traffic.

“While we might not always agree, the opportunity to openly discuss matters is not one we take for granted.”





“Our relationship has also been helped over the years by better lines of communication, while our evolving Player Development Programme which is led by Dr Deirdre Lyons has now become a reference point for other players’ associations has become a real feather in the Irish rugby bow.

“Ultimately, whether you’re working as a Player Development Manager or in the logistics office on Lansdowne Road, we all have the same goal - for our teams to succeed - but for that to happen, or indeed for any business to thrive, you need to have happy individuals playing their part.”

The CBA encompasses 2023-2027 and features several aspects that will enhance the player experience during their career in Ireland. Amongst these is a recognition of a players’ right to disconnect. Other elements include an uplift in pay for academy players, improved sick pay provisions, tailored breaks for Sevens players, clear maternity and paternity policies, and college relocation costs.

“There are a number of clauses in there designed to enable and empower our players” Keogh notes. “Most were consistently raised by the different squads. For instance, the matter of disconnection was quickly identified as an area that needed resolving. Players appreciate that they are subject to leave periods with a difference, yet they didn’t want to see their entitled rest dissipate because of constant monitoring.



“I also found the players’ understanding of the CBA’s role in futureproofing the professional game to be commendable. As a former player, it was heartening to hear from established internationals as they raised concerns about the additional demands being made of academy players. Many of them kept in regular contact with us for an update on how those talks were progressing. Thankfully, academy players will now receive an uplift in pay.

“While there is an appreciation that demands will increase on players from time to time if we aspire to win World Cups and Olympic medals, players also have a thorough understanding of the modern game and know where a balance can be struck.”

Such is the workload involved, the lifetime of CBA 2.0 actually stretches back to January 2023 when Rugby Players Ireland representatives first met with Peter O’Mahony (RPI Executive Board Chairperson) and several teammates in Limerick.

Over the following months, workshops took place so as to consider the needs of every professionally contracted squad in Ireland. As the 2019 document had largely been drafted to cover players affiliated with the senior men’s provincial sides, the new and unique needs of the Irish Sevens programme and the Women’s XVs therefore became a large feature of discussions.

As Keogh says, “thanks to the efforts over previous years, a lot of time was actually spent refining existing clauses based on players’ experiences and feedback over the past four years. However, the introduction of a full-time women’s programme and the growth of Sevens meant that we also needed to really get a full understanding of those new environments to ensure they are adequately catered for in this CBA.

“This was why we felt it was so important to meet and engage with every player group at the outset. Since then player input has predominantly come through our Executive Board which has been an invaluable forum for the likes of Amee-Leigh [Murphy Crowe] and Billy [Dardis] to air their views and get feedback from someone like Pete O’Mahony. It was a learning experience for all.

“Of course, it’s impossible to legislate for everything that comes down the line,” Keogh adds. “The reality is that something we could never have anticipated will inevitably happen. However, I believe that while we have incorporated mechanisms by which we can address things as they arise, I think the real strength of our CBA model lies in our opportunity to revisit it in its entirety every four years.

“I’m delighted that it is now signed, sealed and delivered but, as ever, we’ll be keeping our ears to the ground. Our work towards CBA 3.0 starts now.”

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RESILIENT OUTPUT

Nine surgeries, one Ireland cap and zero regrets for the ex-Leinster and Connacht winger forced to retire at 29

ADAM BYRNE



In the end, there was no fond farewell or fairytale finish. Instead, Adam Byrne quietly slipped off into the 'real world', leaving behind a rugby career that he had spent most of his life working so hard for.

There were highs, there were lows, broken bones, torn muscles and many tears shed, but a few months ago when Byrne decided it was time to call it a day, he did so comforted by the fact that he had given his all to a sport that wasn't always kind back to him.

His injury record is the stuff of nightmares as one of the country's one-time brightest young prospects battled his body before, nine surgeries later, enough was enough.

At 29, the Kildare native had years left in him, and while he was close to joining Chicago Hounds with his former Leinster team-mates Dave Kearney and Nick McCarthy, a golden job opportunity proved too good to turn down.

Byrne still made it to America, only now he is working in Boston as a performance specialist with Output Sports, an Irish company that has designed a wearable sensor that he describes as 'the GPS of the gym'.

Throughout his many stints out injured, Byrne had time to plan for the future, and even if he was not

expecting his playing days to end this early, he retires without any regrets.

"I did biomedical engineering in UCD and then a Masters – it normally takes five years, it took me nine," Byrne laughs.

"It's the story of my life. I was injured and getting grinds from the now CEO of Output Sports. It was great because every time I was injured, which was a lot, I did some work experience and jumped across different departments.

"I never thought I would have this opportunity to continue working in sports and move to the US. As far as transitions go, I have been very lucky."

Then again, Byrne deserved the rub of the green because for so long the world seemed to conspire against him. Not that he ever looked at the tough hand he was dealt like that. The way he sees it, he got to live the dream for 11 years.

In that time, he scored 24 tries in 66 games for Leinster, three tries in his one injury-hit season with Connacht last year, while he was capped by Ireland in 2017 and played sevens.

A favourite of Joe Schmidt, it looked as though the powerful winger was set to become a regular for Ireland, but his body had other ideas.

"Rugby has given so much," Byrne reflects. "So many good mates, great memories. I always wanted to give back to my family and friends. I know I had more injuries than the average player, but I see the scars I have in a positive light. They taught me a lot.

I know I had more injuries than the average player, but I see the scars I have in a positive light. They taught me a lot.





“When I was in the academy, you’d have people coming in talking about life after rugby. I was thinking, ‘That’s never going to happen to me’. Then all of a sudden, it does! Those injuries taught me loads about myself. I built up a lot of resilience, built me as a person as well.

“Somebody sent me an Instagram message asking what would I give to have had an injury-free career. I would’ve liked to have played more minutes and won more caps, but I am a believer things happen for a reason. I feel extremely lucky to have gotten that opportunity.”

Speaking to Byrne now, his resilience shines through. He could easily be broken from the toll rugby took on him, but he didn’t fight back from the brink without having that never-say-die attitude.

“When I went to Connacht, all I wanted was one more stab at it,” Byrne admits. “It completely



“**Even watching the World Cup, that’s the pinnacle. I wanted to at least be pushing to try and get in the Ireland team.**

changed my mindset. After the two years I was injured at Leinster, I read a lot, listened to a lot of different podcasts. I was definitely of the belief that I’d give it my best at Connacht, have no regrets, but I had three big injuries – torn plantar fascia, torn calf and then ankle surgery.

“Even watching the World Cup, that’s the pinnacle. I wanted to at least be pushing to try and get in the Ireland team. When it came to it, retiring was a decision I was happy to make. I felt lucky. I think back to some of my good mates, like Dan Leavy. It can be very tough. I didn’t know how I would feel, whether I would have that regret, but I loved getting up early to watch all the rugby games. I have no regrets so far.”

Byrne’s resilience was never tested more than that painful two-year stint out when he wondered if he would ever step foot on a rugby pitch again.

As he revisits that horror show, it’s a wonder he made it back at all. “I would definitely be a positive person, glass half-full,” he reveals. “To get the best out of me, a slap on the back would do, whereas some players respond better to getting a bollocking.

“That two-year spell, I try not to say [it was] tough because I thought it was four weeks out with a small hamstring injury. That turned out to be two years in the end. I kept tearing my hamstring in the last week of rehab. I just remember the last one, coming back, I was crying on my bed thinking that was it.

“The medical staff in Leinster were brilliant. It was an injury that was hard to diagnose because there was a split between two of the hamstring muscles, which is hard to see on an MRI. So I got that stitched up, I was coming back in record time. Then another rehab run, partially tore my Achilles.

“That was another whole kettle of fish. I was flying back and forth to surgeons and specialists in London. Two top specialists in that field were disagreeing about what it was. I just said, ‘I’m not leaving until I get an answer. This is my third time flying over. I have been out for months already’.

“Eventually, that came good, [I] was allowed back 20 months later. All the lads clapped me onto the field. It was a sunny day, my body felt great, then I tore my quad off the bone in a simple drill. I remember I had the ball in my hands, I just put it on the ground and walked in. I allowed myself to feel s**t and the ‘Why me?’ for a couple of weeks, then I just saw it as a challenge to embrace.”

At least October 9, 2021 will forever be a cherished memory for Byrne, as he made his long-awaited comeback on an emotionally-charged day at the RDS.

Afterwards, he embraced his mother Gillian in what became a powerful photograph that he holds dear. “That’s one of my favourite photos,” Byrne says. “That photo summed up a lot of things for me. I came back for that game but believe it or not, I injured my ankle the Tuesday beforehand. It was pretty bad. Looking back on the scans, I should

have got a wire put in it, but I just sucked it up, strapped it up, I wasn’t missing that game.

“I scored two tries, I should have had a third. I enjoyed every moment. Every training session I came back to, I realised it could be my last. I went over to my parents and my mum leaned across and gave me a big hug. She was crying her eyes out. It got me a bit emotional, but it was a happy day. I had my friends from Kill there too, so I have another photo with them.”

Byrne is still in regular contact with his former team-mates, many of whom were in France as part of Ireland’s Rugby World Cup squad. In another world, he could have been there too, but we was happy for those that were, including his former long-term housemate Josh van der Flier who contacted Byrne to wish him luck ahead of his club debut, just as he was preparing to face South Africa.

“That was a mark of the man,” Byrne says. “He rang me to make sure I was alright. He is the ultimate gent.”

Byrne got through his first game for the local club in Boston unscathed, but there is no sense of what might have been. “You’ll actually laugh at this,” he adds. “The lads put a video into the WhatsApp group, they are all slagging me. I was full-back and was closing on the edge, your man had nowhere to go. Hugo (Keenan) would have been proud of me for getting the angle right! But just as I was about to tackle him, he kicked the ball and it goes through my legs, nutmegged for a try.

“The lads thought it was hilarious. The coaches were like, ‘We have a lad here who played with Ireland, Leinster and Connacht, and here he is getting nutmegged!’ But it’s all good fun.”

So, with that, Byrne closes one chapter of his life and opens another, ready to meet whatever is thrown at him, just as he did throughout his rollercoaster rugby career.

This article was written by Cian Tracey of the Irish Independent and is reproduced here with his kind permission.





Led by Rugby Players Ireland, HerForm is dedicated to empowering female athletes during their transition into elite performance environments. Recognising the absence of tailored personal development programmes for female athletes, HerForm, conducted extensive research to identify and address their unique needs, and exercise managed by our project partners DSK (Deutsche Sporthochschule Köln) with support from the SACA (South African Cricketer's Association).

The study involved 132 elite female athletes from various team sports across Europe and South Africa. The research aimed to establish a scientific foundation for designing personal development modules. Key findings from a literature review and an online survey on predetermined development areas highlighted critical needs.

The top five topics were:

- **Contract Negotiation**
- **Return to Sport after Childbirth**
- **Obtaining Sponsorship Contracts**
- **Developing and Managing a Personal Brand**
- **Managing Mental Health**

Through an analysis of the survey results based on career stages (early, mid, and late), variations in athletes' needs emerged. The study indicated that early-stage athletes emphasised dealing with sexist/racist comments and social media, mid-stage athletes highlighted adapting training to the menstrual cycle, while late-stage athletes prioritized balancing sport and family life.

To further validate and explore these findings, focus groups were conducted in five countries, revealing common concerns. Athletes expressed frustration with the lack of information sharing by clubs and coaches on crucial topics such as nutrition and contract negotiation. They also highlighted a deficiency in proper support structures, a lack of diversity in coaching staff, and the pressure of maintaining a perfectionist mindset.

The athletes' receptiveness to workshops and digital panels for improvement was noted, suggesting a willingness to enhance their knowledge. HerForm plans to integrate these research insights into the development of a digital platform. This platform will house modules addressing the identified needs, fostering personal development for female athletes entering elite sports. By bridging these gaps, HerForm aims not only to support individual athletes but also to promote female role models, encouraging greater participation in high-performance sports among young women.

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DON'T GET IN YOUR OWN WAY

Irish stars visits former school with TYF to encourage wellbeing practices

TADHG FURLONG



As Tadhg Furlong pulled up at his old stomping ground to link up with Tackle Your Feelings Schools, he couldn't help but draw comparison with one of last times he was on the avenue at Good Counsel in New Ross.

"You'd have the boy racers in their Starlets and jumped up Golfs," he begins. "There were the Cinquecentos and then you had the rich families with the real nice cars too. Anyways, we were all bombing it around the place one day including David Flynn and his Honda Civic.

"Now David fancied himself in his cars and so when we had a chance, we put his car up on blocks and took the wheels off. Well, the boys got to the top of the avenue and they threw those wheels... I reckon they're still going."

"I was looking from a distance of course," Furlong clarifies, "directing the traffic, shall I say."

Notwithstanding his impish grin, imagining Furlong as a passive observer is a hard sell. It even proved challenging to find isolated shots of the prop without a melee enveloping him to accompany this article. The man is all-action.

It's hard to think that the school corridor was any different.

Having made his Leinster Rugby debut back in November 2013, Furlong has been at the coalface of the game's physicality for over a decade. Yet despite his vast experience, he still carries the weight of the world on his shoulders from time to time.

"I still worry about playing well on the big stage," the Irish stalwart admits. "I've found that if I'm ever feeling boxed in, talking to my teammates makes a massive difference. I just get it out there.

"Back in the day people used to think that if you weren't sick to the stomach with nerves before a game, you wouldn't play well. You'd almost be proud of the lads heading to the toilets for a puke.

"Nowadays, the mental approach has all changed. There's an understanding that to show the best version of yourself out on the field, you have to be free and confident off it."

While Furlong is keenly aware of the privileges that elite rugby players enjoy, in speaking to the students in New Ross he emphasised that while rugby players are often portrayed as infallible beings, they face many of the same stresses, strains and difficulties that accompany any profession.

“I’ve found that if I’m ever feeling boxed in, talking to my teammates makes a massive difference. I just get it out there.”





He's not looking for any sympathy, mind. He appreciates it's a handsomely remunerated job which a player ultimately chooses to pursue, thus placing themselves on a platform from which people will judge, scrutinise and criticise their actions. However, that does not trivialise the issue of mental health in rugby in comparison with any other sector of society.

"Everyone thinks rugby players have a grand rosy life," Furlong says. "They all think we play rugby on a Saturday and swan around drinking coffee for the rest of the week. It's not like that. People deal with injuries, people deal with selection, people deal with stuff going on outside of rugby.

"You can get up in your head about all sorts of things. In rugby we do a lot of work to clear your head or 'not get in your own way,' as we call it, so you can put your best foot forward at the weekend or help the other lads prepare if you're not going to be involved.

"I think schools and other professions could really benefit from some of the tools we're using."

For Furlong, the first challenge lies in creating environments where students, employees or players are comfortable in sharing or discussing their feelings. This was borne out of his time in Good Counsel where good relationships with his teachers empowered him to overcome some of the challenges of school life.

"If you look at the young players always coming through at Leinster," Furlong begins, "they have

“
I think schools and other professions could really benefit from some of the tools we're using.

the most to learn and so they need to feel as comfortable as a senior player in terms of asking questions and picking other players' brains. We've all been in their shoes.

"It's the same with kids at school. They'll question themselves on their first day. They'll question themselves before exams. They'll question themselves going into social situations. I think the biggest thing is not letting those questions get on top of you.

"Ideally, you develop the skills to identify how you're feeling and at that point it's a good time to get whatever it is off your chest whether it's to a teacher, to a coach or to a colleague in the office. You will find someone.

"As the saying goes, 'a problem shared is a problem halved.'"

Furlong has long been typecast as a typical non-nonsense front-row forward - one you'd assume would have little patience for any game preparation beyond a deep squat in the gym. However, as the game has developed, Furlong recognised the need to keep up. New exercises and techniques slipped into his routine, along with a heightened awareness of what suited him best.

"When I'm alone after a tough loss," he says, "I end up filling the empty space in my head with my own thoughts. I think about the mistakes. I think about the other team celebrating. I get too deep into it.

"People feel weighed down by all sorts of things in life. Like sport, every day is not going to be a great day but there's no need to panic. Stick to what you know, trust the groundwork you've laid, and you'll regain control."

Having lined out in European Cup Finals, Rugby World Cups and Lions tours in recent seasons, you'd think Furlong's life has been entirely consumed by his sport. Yet despite his formidable reputation on the field, he defies the stereotype by valuing more than just the sport by embracing the broader spectrum of athlete wellbeing.

"I'll put it this way," he says, "if a fella walked into the dressing room ten years ago and said 'hey lads, I'm going to do a meditation,' he'd have been laughed out of the building. These days, mindfulness, sleep and recovery are just as important as the physical stuff.

"I'm not the best sleeper but I understand that about myself. Sometimes as soon as I put my

“
People feel weighed down by all sorts of things in life. Like sport, every day is not going to be a great day but there's no need to panic.

head on the pillow, the hamster gets on the treadmill and starts running. The head can run amuck over silly stuff. I've learned to catch myself when that happens.

"Having an ability to switch off is as important as any preparation for a game. I watch very little TV but I love YouTube. I go down a rabbit hole with all the weird and wonderful stuff. I could tell you a little bit about a lot of things.

"I like to see a bit of grass too," Furlong adds, with a nod to the window. "The countryside helps me to chill out. Wexford, well it's a great part of the world. The beaches, the fabulous food.

"We're in real Wexford here," he continues. "We're in the deep south where it's nice and pure. The north of the county would get a lot of passing commuter traffic but down here is a real escape. I bet a lot of the Dubs don't even realise it's in Leinster.

"We'll keep it that way."



TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS

CALLING BY OLD FRIENDS

As schools put their first weeks of the new term behind them, we brought Alan Quinlan back to his alma mater at the Abbey School in Tipperary to meet with Liam Carew and Shane O'Connor, two students who are helping to inform mental wellbeing supports in schools across Ireland.

Liam and Shane were winners of the BT Young Scientists and Technology Exhibition (BTYSTE) for their project; "Assessing the impact of second-level education on key aspects of adolescents' life and development" which told us that 33% of teachers across Ireland do not believe their school actively supports their students' mental wellbeing.



ONE YOUNG WORLD

The Tackle Your Feelings team were also present at the recent One Young World Summit in Belfast. An annual conference, One Young World convenes the brightest young leaders from 190+ countries and 250+ organisations, working to accelerate social impact.

Over four transformative days, delegates participated in a range of workshops and networking events with several influential political, business, and humanitarian leaders such as President Mary Robinson, Didier Drogba and Professor Muhammad Yunus.

Legendary All Black Sir John Kirwan was also in attendance and spent some time with TYF discussing his own mental health journey and his life mission, embodied by MITEY – an organisation that seeks to help children mentally thrive in New Zealand.

PARTNERSHIPS

TYF continues to grow into the community with several schools signing up for the Schools Programme, while clubs and workplaces continue to avail of bespoke wellbeing workshops. This season also sees TYF adorn several club jerseys across the country.

Meanwhile, TYF has also joined forces with R;pple, a new digital tool that intervenes where a user searches for harmful content online. Using innovative technology, R;pple aims to ensure that immediate mental health support and resources are readily available to individuals in their time of need.



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FINDING A WAY

A New Voice at the Table

ENYA BREEN



It was the 84th minute. As Ireland stared down the barrel of a first Six Nations wooden spoon since 2004, Enya Breen took the game against Scotland by the scruff of the neck. Converting her own try, Breen sealed the deal before running back to half-way to be engulfed by her teammates and backroom staff.

Alas, that was 2022. It remains a nice memory but a disappointing 2023 Six Nations has since intervened. Having been injured in the opening game, the side could have done with Breen's experience and capacity for big plays in what was a challenging championship.

Whether or not it would have made a difference is anyone's guess but Breen might have allayed some of the apprehension that set in as the tournament progressed. Despite being just 24-years of age and still finding her own feet in the game, the Skibbereen native has a seasoned and calming presence.

These attributes would have helped her cause as Breen was appointed to Rugby Players Ireland's Executive Board – the first women's XV's representative since Ciara Griffin. At the time of Griffin's retirement in 2021 murmurings of a full-time programme had gathered momentum and as the newly installed Irish captain, Nichola Fryday undertook temporary representative duties until the landscape became clearer.

Following Fryday's retirement last summer and the changed contractual situation of the women's squad, candidates were then sought to fill the void on a permanent basis. With 17 Irish caps to her name and a wealth of experience in the domestic game, Breen was deemed to be an ideal fit by her teammates.

"It was a huge year for us," Breen says, as she reflects on a transformative period for women's rugby. "This year is going to be just as important too. We're breaking new ground but we're also at a crucial stage."

"We're a young group, so most of the players had never experienced a high-performance environment before. I think we've all been happy to feel our way through it but naturally, any new programme is going to have a few things to iron out."

"The Board gives us a mechanism to feed back or voice any concerns, but more importantly I think, it'll allow us to tap into the experience around the table, learn from other players, compare to their programmes, and even get some reassurances that we're headed in the right direction."

While her squad involvements were curtailed for much of the year, Breen's appointment underlines her continued standing within the group.

While some can grow disillusioned with the game from the treatment table, Breen has instead doubled down on the sport. Coaching roles in a Dublin school and with Blackrock College RFC, whom she joined from UL Bohemians in 2022, have reminded her why she fell in love with the sport to begin with.

“It was a huge year for us. This year is going to be just as important too. We’re breaking new ground but we’re also at a crucial stage.”



"It's been an up and down period, if I'm honest," she admits. "Touch wood it's going to be my only long-term injury because some of the challenges along the way have been pretty tough."

"At the same time, it's been nice to have a get a bit of space away from the game. I've enjoyed going out and exploring who I am a little bit more because I've never really had the opportunity to throw on a few different hats."

"I feel like I've always had good perspective but seeing the world in other ways is always helpful. You take bits and pieces from everything you do and I think that can only help when I'm trying to be the voice for my teammates. It can't be just my own agenda."

"So as much as being injured hasn't been a great experience, it has really, at the end of the day. Does that make sense?!"

Breen acknowledges the challenge that lies ahead as new expectations are made of her. Things will happen and she will need to address them. Yet, just as she plays the game, she is unfazed by the task at hand. Indeed, she has already identified some of the issues she'd like to address.

"I think helping the Board understand the make-up of our squad will be key. We're in an interesting position. Our squad is comprised of centralised Irish players, non-centralised Irish players and then we have a number of players coming in from the UK."

"We're also heading into a really important period as a team with World Cup qualification just around the corner. It's so important that everyone, no matter their playing status, is aligned and we are in the best place possible to perform as a team."



"Yet as much as we want everyone at home and training away in the HPC, we also have to respect the decision that every individual has made and support their growth as much as we can."

As she embraces her new role, Breen recognises the significance of guiding the squad through a transitioning phase. "It's still baby steps at the moment, but I have to ensure that each step goes in the right direction," she asserts, reflecting a proactive stance that is balanced between progress and thoughtful navigation.

"My appointment wasn't something I'd thought about or expected," she admits, "but that doesn't mean I don't want to be there. It's a huge honour. Now that I've been voted in by my teammates, I have to ensure I represent them as well as I can."

"Nothing beats getting back out there on the pitch with them though."



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ONE STEP AT A TIME

Young out-half has Grand Masterplan

JAKE FLANNERY



As the Rugby World Cup took centre stage in France and captivated the imaginations of millions worldwide, it's understandable that young players in the game will have been blinded by the lights. Yet the reality is that while the tournament represents the pinnacle of a playing career, only a fortunate few will ever get to experience their sport on its biggest stage.

Jake Flannery's ambitions are undeniable. Recognition at international level and lining out at a Rugby World Cup holds certain prominence on his lengthy to-do list. However, the young Tipperary out-half takes a pragmatic approach to his life. His ultimate ambition therefore sits as a lofty goal propped up by the building blocks of his master plan.

While an Emerging Ireland tour and a new three-year contract at Ulster Rugby ensure his rugby objectives remain on track, many would be surprised to learn that academia and charity have been given their due standing in Flannery's grand strategy.

Following the Bansha native's recent graduation from the University of Limerick, the latest phase of his construct has drawn to a close. With maximum points in his Leaving Cert, a Naughton Scholarship and an U20 Grand Slam already in his back pocket, Flannery is now a qualified Chemical Engineer.

"When I left school [Rockwell College], I was by no means assured of a place in the [Munster] academy," Flannery tells us. "In hindsight, that lack of clarity probably gave me a bit of freedom in making the decision to do chemical engineering.

"Make no question, a place in the academy remained the priority but I ended up doing what I wanted to do in college because I was good at maths and chemistry, and not because it was a course that fitted with the demands of rugby.

"It was when my game began to progress that I realised I had a bit of a challenge on my hands. I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a temptation to quit at that point. I'd seen a few lads drop out or change course on the basis that they wanted to give rugby their all, so it was only natural that I began to wonder whether I'd be seen as a less committed player if I didn't do the same."

It's a crossroads many young sportspeople come to. Understandably, aspiring athletes walking the tightrope of sporting expectation will make decisions based on external pressures. In so doing,

they can overlook the support systems that are in place to enable them in realising their full potential both on and off the field.

To this end, Rugby Players Ireland are primed to meet young rugby players at the intersection of personal growth and sporting ambition. Incidentally, 58% of the players' association's membership are engaged in or have completed third-level education – above the national average despite their extensive rugby commitments.

"I came to the conclusion that it would be a complete waste if I neglected that side of my life," Flannery admits. "Once I sat down to map it all out, I realised that there are enough hours in the day. It's a practice I still do every Sunday evening. I plan out my week so I can maximise the time available to me for study, recovery or extra skills work. I've found ticking everything off as I go through the week gives me a lovely sense of productivity.

"I'd seen a few lads drop out of college because they wanted to give rugby their all, so I began to wonder whether I'd be seen as a less committed player if I didn't do the same."



“Obviously, continuing with my degree was going to take a bit more than time management to get by. I needed the support of both the coaching set-up at Munster and my lecturers in UL but as a young lad I was daunted by the prospect of going to both sides and effectively tell them all the things I wouldn’t be able to do for them.

“This was where Marcus Horan (Rugby Players Ireland’s Player Development Manager for Munster Rugby) stepped in to help them see all that I could achieve. We also formed a great relationship with my course director, Professor Witold Kwapiński.

“Throughout my time in UL, both Marcus and Witold were so reassuring. I remember meeting Marcus on my first week at Munster and he just said, ‘use me – I’m here for you!’ His knowledge of Munster allied to his experience of dealing with UL paved the way to my qualification.”

Positive relationships ultimately played into Flannery’s hands when an opportunity to sign for Ulster Rugby transpired in 2022. It was a move that was important to his rugby development but there were other matters that needed addressing.

Throughout his young career Flannery had worked hard to ensure that his books never impeded his commitment to the game. Moving to Belfast inevitably put his future at UL into question.

“**Whether you’re a rugby player or not, your network will help you to get by. It’s something I actively worked on since I’ve moved to Belfast too. I wanted to immerse myself in the community.**

“I think the biggest resource that helped me through was my communication, both with my lecturers and my classmates. Thankfully everyone was very receptive and willing to help. From there everything went online and I spent a lot of time emailing, zooming and doing what I could to put myself out there.

“I’d see a class list posted and I’d cold call someone on the roll to ask if I could do a project with them. I met some of my project partners for the first time when I landed back down to UL to present on a design we had spent the past few months building together!

“Thanks to these experiences, I’ve learned to place a lot of emphasis on networks and managing relationships. Whether you’re a rugby player or not, your network will help you to get by. It’s something I actively worked on since I’ve moved to Belfast too. I wanted to immerse myself in the community. Thanks to Mike McKeever I linked up with Ballyclare High School as a coach, while Pamela Gilpin introduced me to MenCap NI.”

MenCap NI, which supports thousands of people with a learning disability to live their lives the way they choose, has become a focal point of Flannery’s societal contributions. His motivation to get involved is driven by the influence of his late uncle Mark who had Down’s syndrome.



“When I mentioned Mark and my willingness to work with people with learning difficulties, Pam immediately arranged for a meeting with MenCapNI. At first I had no set role so I started to call by on a Monday for a few hours to chat and play games, and it has grown from there. Through my experience with my uncle, I know how much it means to families to see their kids socialising and having fun.

“I just feel it’s important that if you want to feel part of a community, you have to play a meaningful role in it. On top of getting closer to the lads at Ulster, getting involved in others things has also made Belfast feel so much more homely. There’s so much more to me than what I can do on a rugby field and it’s on me to give back to everyone here for welcoming me in.”

Coming into his second season in Ulster, Flannery has taken plenty of positives from a long run into the campaign. 2022-23 was somewhat fractured owing to a few niggling injuries and a period of absence owing to his involvement with Emerging Ireland. A long-term contract extension in addition to the departure of Ian Madigan has now opened more doors of possibility.

“Funnily enough, Mads has probably been one of the best mentors I’ve ever had,” Flannery

“**There’s so much more to me than what I can do on a rugby field and it’s on me to give back to everyone in Belfast for welcoming me in.**

acknowledges. “People sometimes think you can’t trust the guys who are after the same position, but he had a genuine sense of care for me. He was very keen to ensure that I was developing myself away from the game and always stressed the importance of investing in myself.

“Of course, as an out-half I enjoyed being able to pick his brain on a daily basis too and even though we were competing for the same spot, he was always happy to share some tips. I miss his advice, but we’ll stay in contact as he’s promised to line up a few work placements through his network!

“This season is about making a real contribution to Ulster,” he continues. “I really enjoyed pre-season. I really understood what is expected of me and what I can demand of others too. I feel like I’ve put myself in a strong position to break into the matchday 23 on a regular basis and push for a starting spot.

“Every player will have their grand ambitions, but I think all the stuff you dream and think about will look after itself once you keep turning up and putting the work in. It’s about getting better every day and doing everything in my control to improve. That’s my goal. Day by day. Bit by bit.”

NOT LETTING THE WORLD GO BY

Irish Sevens star is Blazing her own Trail

EMILY LANE



It's pretty hard to imagine the Sevens programme without someone like Emily Lane. Her boundless energy ensures she is never far from the action, on or off the pitch. Unyielding and relentless on the SVNS Series circuit, she has become a thorn in the side of many opponents.

Her philosophy is simple: "if you sit back and let the world go by, what do you think is going to happen?" It's a mantra that echoes through her life. Although the one time she let it slip, she nearly passed up the opportunity she craved.

Having surfaced on the Irish Rugby radar as a teenager, Lane initially declined an invitation to join up with the Irish Sevens in favour of continuing her biochemistry studies in UCC. Hailing from Mallow, she didn't feel ready for the hustle and bustle of Dublin and besides, she wanted to embrace the college lifestyle.

However, Lane overlooked the significance of an upbringing in a household that was immersed in sporting excellence. Indeed, achievement was very much part of her youth through the successes of Mounseabbey Ladies Football team and her selections for various Munster Rugby sides.

"When I moved to Cork I plugged the rugby gap with UCC and Ballincollig but turning down the opportunity to link up with the Sevens played on my mind a little bit. I realised I had a very strong ambition to kick on and that I was standing in my own way just because I was a little daunted.

"Then one day my younger sister was playing in a rugby tournament in Dublin, and I decided to go along to watch. By chance Stan [McDowell] saw me there and he asked, almost jokingly, "so, do you want to come back up to us?" and without any hesitation I said 'yeah'... and then afterwards I freaked out a bit!"

And that was that.

Ahead of an impending move to Dublin, Nancy Chillingworth (then of Rugby Players Ireland) liaised with UCD and ensured Lane's academic trajectory remained on track. Lane has since qualified as a biochemist. Incidentally, as Team Ireland's Deputy Chef de Mission for the Paris Olympics, Lane's path will cross with Chillingworth's once again.

Transferring between universities was just one many daunting aspects of Lane's transition. She had never lived in Dublin before, while imposter syndrome had also begun to take hold. Thankfully, the magnitude of her first day as an Irish Rugby player was lessened by the presence of several other 'newbies' including Dorothy Wall, Megan Burns, Anna Doyle and Lucinda Kinghan.

"It was 2018 when we first landed in. I remember a few players were dropped after our first tournament in Kazan. It was all a bit overwhelming, and I think



there was a sense of fear too. We were all young girls at the end of the day. I was 19 and some of the others were just out of school.

"Players used to come and go a lot more but there's definitely a more settled feel to the squad these days. It's probably the year that's in it but there's also greater definition around contractual commitments and an understanding of everyone's role across the wider programme.

"That said, the nature of Sevens is that there's always a bit of movement. We travel a lot; some players even move between programmes. Most people don't care because they just want to play but it can be quite stressful not knowing where you might be from one week to the next.

"Thankfully there's more help on offer. I think there's a recognition that the demands on us as people are greater."

Despite leaning into her tender years, Lane is now a mainstay of the Sevens side. Closing on 50 caps, she's not far behind the OGs (Mulhall, Murphy Crowe and Flood) in terms of SVNS Series caps but still bows to their experience and influence, which has encouraged her to develop a voice of her own.

"We've landed on a really special group," Lane says. "I think in the past, different experiences and mindsets worked against us whereas now I feel everyone is more open - both to each other and to new ideas.

"It's a bit of a culture shift. We've learned that everyone has something to add and have each grown confident in expressing our thoughts. When you've only ever been used to being told what to do, that cycle continues but people like Louise Galvin and Lucy [Mulhall] showed us that sometimes it's OK to challenge things."



Lane also speaks from her experiences of the XV's squad, for whom she won a few caps alongside the likes of Lindsay Peat, Ciara Griffin, Claire Molloy and Sene Naoupu during the pandemic.

"There were girls in that squad who had been playing rugby for a long time and were well established in their own professional careers. They were very sure of themselves. I think that had a considerable influence on me and it empowered me to use my voice when it matters.

"I'm not saying you have to go to war about everything you don't agree with but there are certainly times when you might need to stand your ground on something, especially now that's we're full-time, high-performing athletes. We are bound to have own views and insights. It's not like we're pitching up every now and then.



"I think it's great that our views are being respected and taken into account."

Thankfully, both programmes now occupy a contented place. The players are often like passing ships in the HPC but there's an awareness that both sides are there, working hard in pursuit of their respective goals: a World Cup on the one hand, the Paris Olympics on the other.

"It's just mad to think it's happening," she says of the Olympic Games in Paris. "The way we qualified was so exciting. We thought we'd be aiming at the repechage and so to do it via the Series was a massive thing for us. The party wasn't bad either!

"It's all a bit scary too," she admits. "Ultimately, we have set a new standard for ourselves, and it's high. The added pressure of taking the next step is a bit terrifying, but we can use it to our advantage, to push a little harder.

"If someone told me that in a few years we'd be going to an Olympic Games when I walked in on that first day, I would have told you where to go. Yet here we are. Going to the Olympics is a very real thing and we want to medal, which is important for people to know.

"Don't ask me where I'm going to get my tattoo though," she notes. "I don't want to tempt fate. There's a lot of rugby to come between now and then."

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A NEW PURPOSE

Former Player turned Mentor Shares Wisdom on Transitions, Challenges, and Empowering Players for Success

PAUL MARSHALL



When I finished playing, I wasn't ready to leave sport. To be honest, I wanted to keep going but the circumstances wouldn't allow for it. For months after I was released, I harboured a hope that I might get called back in again, but it wasn't to be. Even though I knew it was coming, retirement caught me on the hop a bit.

Being in my 30s and married with two children immediately put a different perspective on things. I had a responsibility to them. While I had done some work with Pamela Gilpin, I thought I'd have plenty of time to do some work experience. Unfortunately, one of my kids became unwell which put everything on the backburner. There was no time to test the waters.

Looking back, I'm sorry I didn't sample the working world more when I was in my 20s. I left it all a wee bit too late. It was such a wasted opportunity. Back then I could probably have knocked on quite a few doors and got into organisations that interested me. I also would have had the time to see how they operated over a few weeks rather than going in for a day when they're all on their best behaviour.

Even though I was unsure about it, I ended up training to be a PE teacher in the months after



I finished up. I felt it might help pay the bills a bit sooner and would always be something to fall back on. While I had a sense of purpose, it was still an uncertain period. I needed to recognise that I was taking the next step in my career, not the final one.

However, I do believe a player can take greater control of the situation by chipping away at something alongside their rugby. No matter how big or small their commitment might be, it takes an element of the unknown out of the equation.

It can be hard to get messages through to players though, and as a former player I understand that. Some are young lads looking to break into the team. Others are more established in the squad and don't want to deter from that. Thankfully I'm familiar with the Ulster Rugby environment and I'm happy to be onsite, having little conversations in the corridor in the hope they turn into bigger ones.

While I don't have the same wealth of experience of the wider PDM team, I like to think I have a good sense of how a player thinks or feels in certain situations. To have that in addition to the expertise of my colleagues brings a nice balance to what we do.





At the same time, I'm conscious that every club and every culture is different, so each PDM has to find their own way to operate. As a former player I have my own understanding of the dynamics of the environment while having trained as a PE teacher, I'm able to use some of the educational tools and techniques I've learned to help the players.

Coming into this role I've developed a real awareness that players go on very different journeys. It might seem obvious but as a PDM, you have to understand that there's no one size fits all approach. I have the benefit of having experienced the transition but that doesn't mean what I've done was right or wrong. It was simply right for me at the time.

That's not to say it made it any easier. When you're in a team environment you're ingrained in whatever is happening. When that finishes you feel isolated because all the structure around your day, week or year completely disappears. In sport, players and management come and go, so your importance to the organisation can be short lived.

I still remember being kicked out of the WhatsApp group by Darren Cave, who's my good friend. I just felt like, 'right, that's that then.' There was a sense of finality to it because you're not part of the banter that goes on anymore. You're on the outside. It was a swift boot but maybe that's best.

When the end came into sight, I reached out some of my former teammates. Ian Humphreys finished up the year before me and was very

“ I still remember being kicked out of the WhatsApp group by Darren Cave, who's my good friend. I just felt like, 'right, that's that then.' ”

helpful with the kind of conversations I probably wasn't comfortable having in the dressing room. He tipped me off about all the change – income, identity, day-to-day life. There's even a shift in family dynamic because your entire schedule is uprooted.

I remember him telling me that as much as I might miss playing, I won't miss the uncertainty of going in every week and wondering whether I'll be picked in the team or not. Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't change a thing. That's the stuff we buy into as sportspeople. The incredible highs and the disappointing lows are part of the package. But Ian helped me to see some of the positives I was missing, like being able to lead a steadier life.

Personally, the lows always felt a wee bit tougher because I dwelled on them a little longer. Anytime I achieved anything I was always looking to the next milestone. Once you get your first cap, it's about getting the second. I'm sorry I didn't enjoy certain moments to a greater extent because I was always looking beyond them.

I don't think any player who has aspirations in the game can ever really sit still. There's massive opportunity for players to win things these days and forge out a great career. As a PDM, I have to understand that. Yet I also know how having the off-field stuff sorted can ultimately help them get to where they want to go.

Now that I'm on this side of the fence, I still have my ambitions. And I'm in this role to help players fulfil their own.

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