

# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND

AUTUMN 2025

**A NEW SEASON,  
A NEW AIM.**

À LA  
CARTY  
*JACK CARTY*

THE ROCKIES  
ROAD  
*KATHRYN DANE*



RUGBY PLAYERS  
IRELAND



**GREAT TASTE.  
ZERO ALCOHOL.**

**A FRESH  
TAKE ON  
REFRESHMENT.**

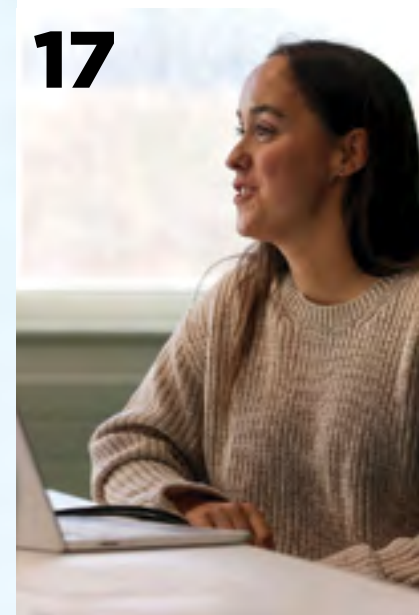
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**14**



**17**



**26**



**32**



# CONTENTS

- 2** Represent - CEO Address
- 4** News - Rugby Players Ireland
- 6** News - Rugby Players Ireland
- 8** News - IRPA Update
- 10** Develop - Jack Carty
- 14** Engage - Kathy Baker
- 17** Engage - Anna McHale
- 20** Engage - Golf Classic 2025
- 22** Represent - Signify
- 24** Develop - Ireland Sports Fund
- 26** Engage - Beyond the Game
- 30** Engage - Alex Wootton
- 34** Engage - Kathryn Dane
- 38** Develop - Harry McNulty

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# CEO ADDRESS

SIMON KEOGH



## As the new season kicks off, it can be easy to keep moving forward.

As high-performing athletes we tend to place our focus on the next game, and then the one after that. It's part and parcel of our sport. Yet, through greater exposure to wellbeing practices through Tackle Your Feelings, I do think there comes a time when it is equally important to take a moment to pause and reflect. There has been good things, there have been things that could have gone better, and there have been learnings in each.

Silverware has tended to distinguish recent seasons. It speaks volumes that Leinster Rugby might view their 24/25 campaign as somewhat disappointing despite lifting the URC title. It's a reflection of the high standards that have become the norm in our game, which is why 25/26 might now stand out as being unusually fallow.

Across the Men's Six Nations, we again saw familiar competitiveness and consistency in the team led by Simon Easterby. Indeed, while one loss mirrored last year's Championship winning record, this time it resulted in a third-place finish. It is an outcome that will undoubtedly fuel renewed determination for the season ahead.

Our Women's Six Nations team also finished third, but their campaign told a richer story of growth, confidence, and progress. That momentum carried into the Rugby World Cup, where I was immensely proud to watch our players, alongside my daughter, as they gave their all on the biggest stage of their careers. While the disappointment of a narrow loss at the quarter-final stage was and will be keenly felt, it is worth remembering that not long ago, we were looking in at the tournament from the outside. I have every confidence that the green wave will continue to rise.

Many of those in the World Cup squad have considerable 7s experience and will have been close to members of the Men's 7s programme, which came to an end in August. The cessation of the programme was deeply disappointing, but I am proud of how Rugby Players Ireland supported those affected, ensuring their voices were heard and their wellbeing prioritised. Standing with our players, in every circumstance, is central to who we are.

We also had a role to play in securing favourable terms for those fortunate enough to tour with the British & Irish Lions in Australia this summer. To see 18 Irish players in the squad by the end of the Series, with many leading from the front as the Lions claimed victory, was a source of immense pride.

In addition to our representative remit, our Player Development Programme is also at the core of Rugby Players Ireland's work. It continues to evolve, yet this year we were grateful to see the strength



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**These past months have been busy but they have also been testament to the collective resilience, ambition, and unity of both our members and RPI staff.**

of our work endorsed following an extensive independent review. This validation, in addition to ongoing research into the benefits of off-field development continues to show that we have an integral role in shaping the success of our game on the field too.

Our Player Development Programme is much vaunted across the world of sport. Key to this international acclaim has been Dr Deirdre Lyons who now leads Beyond the Game, our dedicated past player programme that is supported by the Global Rugby Players Foundation. Within the past 12 months, Beyond the Game has already been established as an invaluable resource for retired players and those contemplating their next steps, helping them prepare for life after rugby with confidence and purpose.

We are also proud to have completely revamped our TYF Schools campaign in recent weeks. With the continued support of Zurich and the Z Zurich Foundation, we have taken time to reassess the programme, resulting in a new website and Learning Platform that ensures greater accessibility and an improved user experience. The redesign, which is also grounded in PhD research and extensive feedback from teachers and students, is already helping us inspire and connect with young people across the island of Ireland more effectively.

Meanwhile, as conversations continue around the proposed R360 competition, we will continue to engage constructively while ensuring the voice of players remains central to any developments.

While challenges remain, the progress we continue to see is a cause for optimism. I look forward to building on this momentum in the months ahead.

# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND NEWS



## PDP REVIEW

Earlier this year, Rugby Players Ireland (RPI) and the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) announced the successful completion of a comprehensive review of the Player Development Programme (PDP). Internationally recognised for its leadership in nurturing the holistic development of rugby players, the PDP continues to set a benchmark for player development.

The evaluation, conducted by Growth Unlimited, has received strong endorsement and is expected to further strengthen the future of holistic player development in Irish rugby. Commissioned by Rugby Players Ireland and supported by the IRFU, the review aimed to critically assess the PDP's effectiveness, identify areas for improvement, and provide actionable recommendations to enhance player experience and outcomes.

Simon Keogh, CEO of Rugby Players Ireland, said:

*"The insights and recommendations provided by Growth Unlimited are invaluable. We are extremely proud of our programme and are dedicated to ensuring that our players continue to receive the best possible support throughout their careers."*

### Key Findings

The review highlighted several strengths of the current programme, including:

- **Global Recognition:** The PDP is internationally acknowledged for its thought leadership in player personal development.
- **High Satisfaction:** Players at all levels of the professional game report high levels of satisfaction with the programme.
- **Significant Participation:** The programme demonstrates a strong focus on education and professional development.



The review also identified opportunities for improvement, many of which are already being implemented:

- **Tailored Support:** Addressing the distinct needs of women, emerging, and former players.
- **Resource Integration:** Integrating Dual Pathway support resources more effectively.
- **Bridging Skills:** Expanding opportunities for players to gain bridging skills and transferable competencies.

Kevin Potts, IRFU Chief Executive, added:

*"Our commitment to player development is unwavering, and the recommendations from this review will help us build on our successes and meet the evolving needs of our players."*

This review represents a significant collaborative effort between Rugby Players Ireland, the IRFU, and provincial clubs. It reflects a shared commitment to making Ireland the best place in the world to play rugby, fostering both competitive excellence and a supportive environment for players' careers during and after rugby.

The IRFU's endorsement of the review underscores the importance of continuous innovation and improvement in player development.

## ROOKIE CAMP

In mid-August we were at Druids Glen Hotel & Golf Resort for our latest Rookie Camp. 52 academy players from across the four provinces were in attendance for a two-day induction course to explore the challenges and realities of life as a professional athlete.

A number of wide ranging workshops were facilitated and kindly provided by our friends at Bank of Ireland, Active Consent, Signify Group, Epic Global Solutions, Tackle Your Feelings and Santosha Wellness. Former player Tommy Bowe also delivered a session on Media Awareness, while Andrew Conway and Peter Smyth called by to share their own insights into the professional the game.

Our thanks to the IRFU for their continued support of the Player Development Programme.



## HERFORM

Rugby Players Ireland's Erasmus+ project, HerForm, has now entered its final phase and is set to conclude at the end of 2025. The 3-year initiative is addressing the personal development challenges faced by female athletes.

Over the past six months, project partners have piloted the digital learning module with nearly 100 female athletes across Europe and South Africa. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with participants praising the quality and relevance of the educational content. Building on this momentum, the HerForm platform will be officially launched at our dissemination conference in November.



# EAPA/WPA GENERAL ASSEMBLIES

All roads led to Rome in September as the European Athletes and Players Association and the World Players Association hosted their General Assemblies in the Italian capital. Discussions over three days centred around connecting athletes and players, to foster greater collective influence at a global level.



# ROAR ROOM



Against the backdrop of the UEFA Women's EURO 2025, several representatives of Rugby Players Ireland were in Switzerland for a two-day event focusing on women's sport.

Kicking off in Nyon and facilitated by World Players and FIFPRO, Roar Room: the Women's Sport Strategic Summit gathered union leaders, researchers and player advocates from across the world for interactive sessions designed to address some of the challenges facing the women's sporting landscape.

The second day led participants to the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Geneva, for a day of discussions concerning working environments and responsible event hosting in women's sport. The event was jointly organised by the Swiss government, the Centre for Sport and Human Rights and the ILO.

# WOMEN'S RUGBY WORLD CUP

Ireland's Rugby World Cup journey ended in heartbreak at the quarter-final stage as they were edged out by Six Nations rivals France in a nail-biting contest. Despite surging into a commanding 13-0 half-time lead, a combination of testing Exeter conditions and a determined French fightback ultimately swung the contest in Les Bleues' favour.

Though the result was bitterly disappointing given how close Ireland came, the team departed the tournament with immense credit. The grit, style of play, and spirit shown by Edel McMahon, Sam Monaghan and their teammates, both on and off the field in England, won admiration and fresh support throughout the tournament.

The Green Wave continues to rise.



# INAUGURAL PADEL TOURNAMENT

Our inaugural Past Player Padel tournament took place at the House of Padel in Dublin. With almost 40 in attendance, there was plenty of healthy competition with Kevin McLaughlin and Paul Clinch ultimately ousting Simon Danielli and Bryan Mollen in the Advanced Final. Ailsa Hughes and Paul Marshall were the victors in the Intermediate Final.

The Padel Tournament is just one way in which our new Beyond the Game programme is giving former players the opportunity to reconnect, both with each other and with Rugby Players Ireland.



# ATHLETE FRIENDLY EMPLOYER NETWORKING BREAKFAST

We were delighted to be at Sport Ireland along with many athletes and notable Irish companies for the Athlete Friendly Employer Networking breakfast. Amongst those present were numerous players who have recently retired from the game.

A photograph of a group of people wearing green and white Ireland Rugby World Cup gear. They are all smiling and holding a green and white bag.

## HERSPORT WRWC COLLABORATION

Several members of Rugby Players Ireland staff were in Brighton for Ireland's Rugby World Cup clash with the Black Ferns. With a number of past players travelling to the game, RPI teamed up with HerSport to kit out the group with some bespoke kit. Our thanks to former Irish captain Carole-Anne Clarke for facilitating.

# IRISH MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

Our congratulations to Paul Marshall (Diploma in Leadership) and Kieran Lewis (Diploma in Management) on their respective graduations from the Irish Management Institute recently. Both were recipients of the Rugby Players Ireland scholarships which have this year been offered to Eoin Griffin and Mick Kearney.





# IRPA UPDATE

September started with a new look from the International Rugby Players Association, the global players body, who refreshed their brand.

Meanwhile, led by their head of Rugby Operations and former All Black Conrad Smith, IRPA are continuing to work with the World Rugby on reviewing the laws of the game.

Following on from the "Shape of the Game" conference at the start of the year, IRPA has looked at crucial areas of the game like the 20-minute red card, the restart, protecting the 9, the role of the maul and other on-field aspects that need, or may need, improvement.

The global player body is also working towards implementing minimum standards for player load. It wants to see:

- A five-week (consecutive) off-season with no rugby
- A maximum 30 match season or a one week break after every 6 games
- Communication protocols between clubs and countries to ensure players aren't overloaded with excessive matches and training

IRPA is also debating with World Rugby and the professional competitions around non-contact periods during the season and is hoping to see some movement on this in the coming months.

**Check out [rugbyplayers.org](http://rugbyplayers.org) for more information and to see more about what IRPA are doing for you!**

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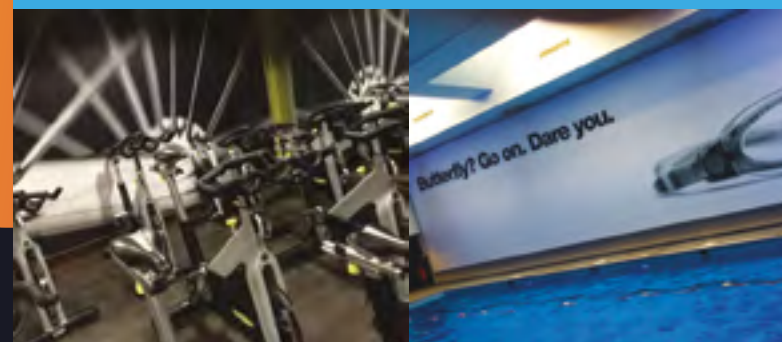
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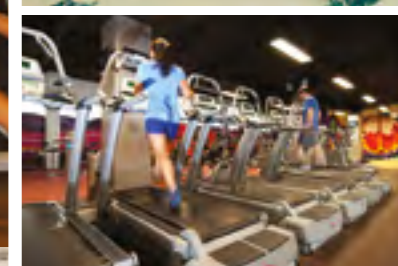
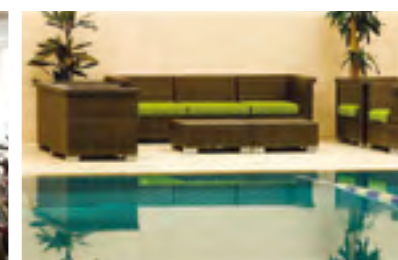
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# À LA CARTY

Courts, Curiosity and Commitment

**JACK CARTY**



**For many professional athletes, one career is more than enough to manage. The hours of training, the demands of competition, the constant drive to perform at the highest level consumes time, energy, and focus. For Jack Carty, however, the past 18 months have been about much more than rugby.**

In that time, the experienced Connacht Rugby out-half has launched two businesses, tied the knot with his partner Sarah, and secured a new deal to extend his playing career in Galway. It has been, by his own admission, a whirlwind. But rather than be overwhelmed, the challenge seems to have energised him.

"I think when you have things in shape off the pitch, it gives you that bit of space and capacity to be able to focus on performance," he says. "It's easy to be consumed by the game, I know I once was, but if you manage to strike the right balance, you can switch focus when you need to."

Not that it was intentional. Indeed, Carty's first venture outside of the family's well-known pork and bacon business wasn't always in the roadmap. Instead it began with a personal health journey that would ultimately lead to Cognitive Blends.

Always curious about health and peak performance, Carty enjoyed experimenting with the latest gadgets and wellness gimmicks. However, it wasn't until he attended a specialised health check at Randox, that his perspective truly shifted.

"Thankfully there was nothing to worry about other than the usual stuff that could be addressed with a few lifestyle changes to help maintain my hormonal balance," Carty reveals. "That stayed with me because while I had an awareness of the space, it dawned on me that most people wouldn't know where to turn."

Hormonal health refers to the balance of key hormones that regulate everything from energy, mood, and muscle recovery to metabolism and long-term wellbeing. They are areas that are critical to a professional athlete but often overlooked by the general male populace.

"Walk into a pharmacy and you'll see an aisle dedicated to female hormonal support and supplementation but when it comes to men's hormonal health, options are limited.

"In fact the more I looked into it, the only real option I could find was TRT (testosterone replacement therapy) injections. But that comes with a lot of side effects, especially around fertility. It didn't make sense to me that there weren't more alternatives on the market."



Having worked with him during his time with Ireland, Carty sought out the help of Dr. Alan Farrell, one of Ireland's leading hormonal consultants for men. Together, they tested a range of natural ingredients over the course of three months. While the results weren't miraculous, they were nevertheless significant with improvements of 5–6% in areas such as free testosterone and sex hormone binding levels.

"Think of it this way, total testosterone is like the full wallet of money, free testosterone is the cash you can actually spend, and your sex binding testosterone is the tight clip holding most of the notes together," Carty advises. "Those little percentages mightn't sound huge, but in a sporting context a 1% gain can be a total gamechanger.

"Sometimes we have the tendency to look at sport in isolation," he notes, "yet the same principle can apply to everyday life, as with a lot of stuff we do. Small improvements in your health, energy, or focus can have a big impact on how you feel, how you perform at work, and how you go about your day."

From there, and following further discussions with Sarah and a range of other advisors, the idea for Cognitive Blends took hold. The brand is built around carefully formulated supplements for men, but it also has a broader mission to raise awareness about the role hormones play in energy, sleep, fertility, and mental health.

"Men don't often talk about things that are personal to them," Carty points out. "If you're not feeling yourself, the instinct is to push it down the road but we know those issues don't just go away. They will show up in some way in another five minutes, or five years.

“In much the same way that Tackle Your Feelings does a great job in encouraging a proactive approach to mental health, Cognitive Blends is about getting men to think about their health earlier a little earlier too.”

If Cognitive Blends was about addressing a gap in men’s health, Carty’s second business venture was more of a cultural opportunity with a health benefit. Padel has been booming on the continent, and it’s clear now that Irish folk are starting to see it as more than a holiday pursuit with several courts popping up across the country.

The Carty-led Project Padel now offers Galway’s sporting community a new space to play, train, and socialise.

“I was actually at a wedding and met a guy called Fergal Hynes, who by complete coincidence became my neighbour shortly afterwards. That night we spoke at length about setting up a padel court in Galway and when he moved in next door, we started spit-balling ideas again.

“As people in Galway know well, the winter here (and summer too!) can get quite dark, wet and gloomy. Beyond the pub, gym or the cinema there’s not a lot to do so we wanted to provide the community with a different space and social amenity to connect, sit, have a coffee and be active together.

“We actually found the perfect spot pretty quickly so we acted on it, but we were paying rent on it for months before we had even secured planning permission. At times it all felt crazy, but we stuck with it and Fergal has now come on full-time since we opened in July.”

Amidst the rush of new ventures, Carty has also been celebrating his marriage to Sarah. A commercial and residential interior designer, Sarah’s influence runs through much of Carty’s off-field pursuits. While she has her own business to manage, her creative instincts have been an invaluable asset to her husband’s endeavours.

“Sarah has been brilliant, not only from a creative perspective. Having set up on her own, she’s familiar with the less glamorous side of business too and has been keeping my feet on the ground.

“You can be swept away by the excitement of it all when you get your idea off the ground but at the back-end there is so much more that needs to be taken into account. There’s the admin, the planning, problem-solving. It’s been a steep but valuable learning curve.

“In that sense you probably can draw a comparison back to rugby. The matches are the glamorous bit but the day-to-day grind is where you can really grow. I still do.”

At 33, you’d have thought that Carty’s on-field learnings might have maxed out but he insists that



ahead of the 2025/26 season, he’s absorbing more than ever. The introduction of Stuart Lancaster in particular, has been an energising factor.

“It has amazed me how Stuart sees a game, and how much I have already learned because of that,” Carty reveals. “There was great excitement across the province when his appointment was announced, and that was shared by our dressing room. His reputation preceded him and we couldn’t wait to tap into one of the most formidable rugby brains in the sport.

“However, as most people would know, Stuart is very strong on leadership and on people. So while I’ve been learning more about the game, I’ve also been learning more and more about the personalities within our squad, and how to bring the best out of them. That’s his approach to leadership. We need to recognise that we all have a role to play in supporting one another.

“It’s early days yet but in many senses it feels similar to when we went on the great run in 2016 with Connacht. There’s a growing sense of togetherness here.”

Alignment is a growing theme in Carty’s life it seems. Business, rugby, and the everyday demands of personal life are all demanding in their own ways, but he is learning how to bring it all together rather than letting them compete.

Looking further ahead, Carty knows rugby won’t last forever. That’s partly why he has invested so much energy into his off-field ventures. But for now, the balance is serving him well.

“There’s a lot of learning, a lot of challenges, but I think it all feeds into making me better as a player and a person,” Carty believes. “After family, rugby is still my main priority, but these projects give me perspective. They keep me sharp.

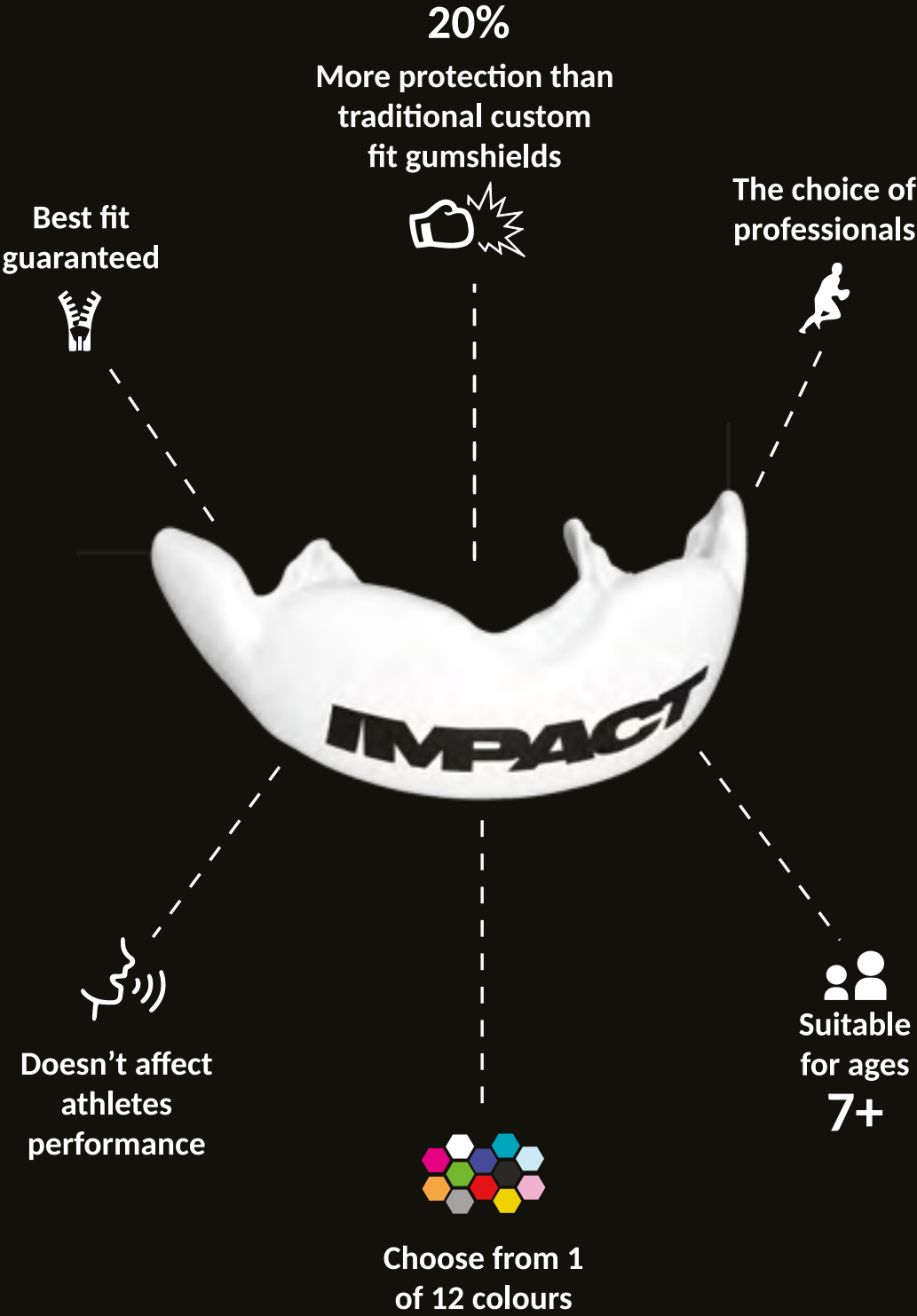
“Deirdre [Lyons] was always a great advocate for off-field development and how it can ultimately benefit your performance. As a young player it’s hard to buy into it and as a result you can become consumed by the sport, which isn’t helpful either.

“It’s great to have Locks [Ronan Loughney] in the building now to follow-on from Dee’s brilliant work. He was an integral part of the 2016 side and is so deeply rooted in the fabric of the club. When he speaks, I have no doubt that the lads sit up and take notice.

“So when he joined us on our pre-season outing to Westport and spoke about what Connacht Rugby really represents, everyone took it in. He told us that more than any other club, Connacht Rugby is a community and a way of life that goes beyond the pitch and that it’s something we need to tap into.

“For me, that’s about valuing the right things,” Carty reflects. “Rugby is my career, but health, family, and building something beyond the game matters too. That’s what gives everything we do on the field purpose.”

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# STRENGTH THROUGH STRUGGLE

A Tackle Your Feelings Impact Story by Kathy Baker, Ireland 7s

KATHY BAKER



**When I first tore my ACL a few years ago, I had no idea how deeply it would affect me. It wasn't just my rugby career that took a hit because the injury spilled into other areas of my life. The rehab was long, painful, and isolating. The whole process wore me down physically and, even more so, mentally.**

Somewhere along the way, I stopped enjoying rugby. More worryingly, I stopped enjoying life. I found myself in a very dark place and I can clearly remember a time when I didn't want to be here anymore. That's incredibly hard to admit – and even harder to write – but it was my reality.

Things started to change when I began to open up. The floodgates didn't open all at once but little by little I became more comfortable sharing how I was feeling with the people closest to me. With every single conversation it felt like a little more weight was taken off my shoulders. And with that relief came the realisation that I needed to prioritise my mental health.

Better awareness of my mental wellbeing is a big reason why the Tackle Your Feelings (TYF) campaign means so much to me. Having been through my own struggles, it feels like a privilege to speak from the other side. This campaign has the power to make a real difference, and if sharing my story helps even one person feel less alone, it's all worth it.



That understanding of myself was really put to the test when I tore my ACL for a second time. The fact that it occurred in the months leading up to the Olympic Games really compounded things. It was a brutal blow for several reasons. All of a sudden the opportunity to go to the Olympics seemed to be taken from me, which was a bitter pill to swallow. What made it worse was that I knew what the road to recovery looked like. And that terrified me.

Thankfully, from the moment it happened, I was surrounded by an incredible support system. Even when the future looked really bleak, my friends and family found words and ways to give me hope. Instead of giving up on my Olympic dream, their belief in me helped to fuel my determination to explore every possible avenue to make it to Paris 2024.

When I think back on that journey, I think of Ed Mias. Ed was my physio, but he became so much more than someone with responsibility for my rehab. He became, and continues to be, a true friend. Together we made a commitment to work hard, to be brave, and to be smart. I really felt like we were on this road together.





Still, some days were really tough. But Ed never let me sink. He reminded me of my goal and nudged me a little forward, day after day. When things didn't seem to be happening for me, Ed had a great ability to make me laugh. In hindsight, that entire experience – as painful as it was – was also incredibly enriching. It taught me about resilience. It taught me about myself, and the importance of my people. Oddly enough, I wouldn't change it.

Outside of rugby, I've always found peace in the simple things. I take my rugby very seriously but I have never been one to be totally consumed by it. So, during my recovery I already had a number of outlets to turn to. I grew up in an outdoorsy family, I love being surrounded by animals and I'm also quite creative. During one of my injuries I took up crochet and it turned out to be a great way to learn that I could express myself in different ways.

Almost without realising it, I was looking after myself and recognised that proactive wellbeing management is essential for me. It took time to figure out what works, but now I make sleep and nutrition a priority, especially during stressful periods. When those slip, everything seems a little bit harder.

And while asking for help was the toughest step, once I did, things began to shift. It started with telling just one person I trusted. That led to real support and, ultimately, to hope.

I suppose that's what TYF is really about: hope, support, and the reminder that you're not alone. I wish something like this had existed when I was younger. So much goes on in school, and often it feels like no one has time to notice how you're really doing. Campaigns like TYF show young people that everyone has their challenges and that it's okay to talk about them.

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**I think sport has an amazing ability to connect people, and therefore it is a great vehicle to support mental health initiatives.**

Through my involvement with TYF, I've learned to be more open to having the kind of conversations I might once have avoided, especially at home. I used to dodge anything that felt uncomfortable, but now my family and friends better understand how I cope. We're a tight-knit group, and opening up has made us even closer.

One of the most rewarding parts of this journey has been leading transition workshops for athletes and staff at Special Olympics Ireland. In talking through my own Olympic experience, I realised that my biggest learning came in the months that followed the Games. I went from the lowest of lows to making Team Ireland and scaling the heights of elite sport on the world stage — but afterwards, I was left with an unexpected sense of loss and a lingering question: What now?

Talking about that post-Olympic reality has been both cathartic and eye-opening. The most powerful moments in those workshops come not from the achievements, but from the honest conversations about uncertainty, identity, and moving forward. The openness and connection was really special.

I think sport has an amazing ability to connect people, and therefore it is a great vehicle to support mental health initiatives. I consider my teammates to be a second family. Through the sharing of commons interests, experiences and goals we keep growing closer and my eyes have been opened to the fact that everyone needs a bit of help from time to time. It's inspiring to see rugby become a platform for honest conversations and wellbeing strategies.

I hope that by continuing to be part of this campaign, we can make a real impact on mental health and wellbeing in the young people of Ireland, and beyond.

# TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS

## EMPOWERING STUDENTS, SUPPORTING TEACHERS, ONE SCHOOL AT A TIME

Tackle Your Feelings (TYF) is a mental wellbeing campaign run by Rugby Players Ireland in collaboration with Zurich Ireland. It is powered by the Z Zurich Foundation.



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# LEADERSHIP STARTS YOUNG

## Why Role Models Matter More Than Ever

Anna McHale, PhD researcher on the TYF Schools programme, University of Limerick

ANNA MCHALE



**During one of our TYF Schools workshops, a teenage boy told us how hearing a pro rugby player talk honestly about their experiences with mental health and being a good teammate changed how he treated his own friends:**

**“I used to slag the lads if they got nervous. Now I think more before I speak.”**

That moment was a simple but powerful reminder that leadership starts early, shaped by the people young people see and listen to.

### **What Makes a Good Role Model?**

Through my research which examines the use of sportspeople as role models for wellbeing promotion, one thing is clear: young people don't connect with perfection. They connect with authenticity. The most influential role models are relatable, genuine, and successful, not because they're flawless, but because they're real and honest.

It was really nice to see the rugby players opening up and being authentic about their experiences, because it made us able to connect with them more as people and not just see them as sports stars.

Social learning theory supports this. Young people imitate what they see, especially from people they admire or relate to. Behaviour spreads, which can be a good thing if those behaviours are positive.

### **Role Models in Sport: Leadership in Action**

Sport is a perfect place for early leadership development, sometimes even before young people realise they're leading. It could be the captain encouraging a teammate after a bad play, or a squad player setting high standards by showing up early. Leadership is being modeled all the time.

Through TYF, we've seen young athletes pick up leadership skills just by watching their teammates.

I would tie in being a role model with leadership massively. So I think the two of them kind of go hand in hand and I think it's something that's really important, something I like to model myself on in terms of being a role model and as a leader is transparency.

Simple behaviours like owning mistakes, supporting others, giving quieter voices space, aren't big heroic gestures, but they matter. Over time, these habits spill over into other parts of life, like school, work, or even family.

### **TYF Insights: The Ripple Effect**

One of the most interesting findings we've seen with TYF is how role models spark a ripple effect. When students see their role models in sports talking about respect, resilience, and asking for help, they don't just hear it, they imitate it.

In focus groups, teens described checking in on friends more and judging less. Teachers also noticed better empathy and communication in classes that took part in TYF. What starts on the pitch ends up in school corridors too.

Just from seeing the Irish rugby players, the ambassadors for the Tackle Your Feelings programme creating short videos...you see lads that want to drive this and...be real leaders...We had our mental health week last week and the lads driving it in TY were helping first years with doing the coffee morning or setting up the sports day and just making sure that they're asking lads are they OK.

It shows one big truth: leadership isn't about a fancy title, it spreads through what people actually do.

### **From Locker Room to Boardroom**

So what can business learn here?

Just like in sport, workplace culture is shaped by behaviour, not by slogans on a wall. People follow what they see from leaders, especially under pressure. Authenticity, accountability, and real support build trust, and trust builds performance.

Workplace role models, just like athletes, should be honest and human. When they share setbacks and show up consistently, they prove that leadership isn't about being perfect, it's about making others feel valued.

If leadership is really 'behaviour in action,' then we can't wait until someone has a 'senior' job title to develop it. Sport shows us that young people can lead if they have role models worth imitating and a culture that supports them. Businesses have the same chance. Investing in role models early means stronger, more resilient teams down the line.



# GOLF CLASSIC 2025



# TACKLING ONLINE ABUSE



**Players' body and IRFU  
appoint specialist company  
to investigate online abuse**

*This article appeared in The Irish Times  
on 18/08/25*

## **The IRFU and Rugby Players Ireland (RPI) have appointed Signify Group to safeguard players, coaches and officials against online abuse and threats.**

Signify is a British company that uses AI and human analysis to monitor, investigate and report abusive content on social media. It has previously partnered with several other sports organisations.

It has a long-standing relationship with FIFPro, the largest players' representative in soccer. In 2024, Arsenal announced it had banned three fans from attending games over online abuse after hiring Signify to monitor social media posts for the club.

In rugby, the group have previously been hired by World Rugby for the 2023 World Cup. That arrangement also covered the Women's Rugby World Cup which concluded recently.

Director of Communications and Legal Affairs at RPI, Richard McElwee, said the organisation has been trying to safeguard players from online abuse for years.

"It's always been in the ether, but we never really knew what direction to take," he explains. "We felt that now was the right time to start moving because we didn't want to be left behind. There have been isolated incidents over the past seasons where we felt that players and their families were in need of additional support."

The level of abuse on social media, particularly on platforms like X, means many players feel less inclined to post content on these platforms, according to McElwee.

"Social media offers players a huge opportunity to leverage their profile and to influence communities in positive ways, but over recent years some players may have felt a little less inclined to post."

He hopes that the nuanced moderation provided by their new partner will allow players to be more open when interacting on social media.

"I think it gives them greater confidence to be able to go out and be more authentic online, without being afraid of the repercussions," he said.

McElwee has seen many cases of online abuse in sports and feels that negative comments tend to attract the most attention. This means social media users behave "like moths to a flame" when abusive language is used.

Similarly, he added that conversations he had with players revealed they tend to focus more on negative comments.

"You sit around with players and you ask them to recall a negative comment that they would have received. Nine times out of 10, they'll be able to directly recite a comment of that nature."

**"You sit around with players and you ask them to recall a negative comment that they would have received. Nine times out of 10, they'll be able to directly recite a comment of that nature"**

"But if you ask them for a positive comment on the other hand, they're not able to recall it as quickly because the negative commentary sits with them more. And so [we are] trying to wipe away that negativity from their lives as much as possible."

McElwee also believes the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns contributed to a greater amount of abuse, as more people sought a platform to join in with conversations remotely.

He said: "I think there was a huge spike during Covid when everybody was back home and got involved in conversations online, with the most outrageous comments getting the most attention. It's now obvious to me that there is a lot of abuse that gets thrown around unnecessarily [from] people just looking to weigh in on a topical conversation."

The goal is to promote players' mental health, he added, rather than to stop fans from expressing opinions online, as the large majority of fans are not abusive.

"Personally, I don't think it's a huge issue that's out of control or an epidemic," said McElwee. "We're not going to try and skew conversation, we're just trying to help by getting on top of messages that are unnecessarily abusive. There's a player's wellbeing at the back end, which is the ultimate priority."

Conversations were held with players and administrators about what steps to take to help ease the problem. Signify's high-profile clients in sports made them an obvious candidate to speak to.

"We had an awareness that Signify had worked with FIFPro, the global body for footballers, some Premier League sides, the Olympics and World Rugby."

"After last season we got around the table with the IRFU and the provinces and we agreed that Signify, who are, I suppose, the market leaders in this respect, [would] perhaps be worth speaking to, just to see what they could do for us."

Signify analyses social media posts and flags potentially abusive content, including direct messages where players have consented to monitoring. Only messages from non-connected users are intercepted. Based on the tier assigned to an individual post or message, Signify can report the content to the social media platform, the IRFU or, in very extreme cases, alert law enforcement.

The organisation is well connected in the tech world and can have troll accounts shut down.

"An awful lot of this stuff comes through troll accounts and avatars, and [Signify] can have those accounts shut down," McElwee confirmed.

Signify Group state that they have flagged over 60,000 abusive messages for World Rugby since they partnered with them in 2023, 11 of which were reported to the police. Seven of these have resulted in prosecutions or official legal warnings according to the company.

# THE IRELAND SPORTS FUND

**A powerful new initiative aimed at supporting the future of Irish rugby players has officially launched. The Ireland Sports Fund, founded by former Ireland 7s captain Billy Dardis, is a dedicated scholarship programme designed to help professional rugby players prepare for life after sport.**

After years in the making, the fund aims to remove financial barriers to education and career development, empowering players at all levels to build fulfilling futures beyond the pitch.

"This is something I've wanted to build for a long time," said Dardis. "The rugby journey can be exciting and incredibly rewarding, but it can also be cruel and unpredictable. Whether a career lasts one year or fifteen, every player deserves the chance to prepare for what comes next — and money should never be a barrier."

The transition from professional sport to a new chapter in life can be daunting. Identity loss, uncertainty, and financial pressure often accompany retirement from the game. Dardis, who was fortunate to be supported through education during his playing career, hopes this fund will provide others with a similar platform for long-term success.

"I want players to perform better on and off the pitch, play for longer, and then leave rugby with excitement for their next chapter — not with confusion and fear," he said.

The Ireland Sports Fund is proudly established under the Rugby Players Ireland Foundation, working alongside other impactful initiatives like the Tackle Your Feelings (TYF) campaign and past-player support programmes. With charitable status, the fund is structured to maximise the value of donations and deliver meaningful impact for players.

A passionate board of advisors, founding donors, mentors, and organisations such as MindaClient have already helped bring the vision to life, with Rugby Players Ireland CEO Simon Keogh and Player Development Manager Deirdre Lyons instrumental in the fund's early development.

The Ireland Sports Fund is also an opportunity for the wider rugby community to give back. Fans, former players, and supporters are invited to help grow the fund, contribute financially, or offer mentorship and career opportunities.

"I see this as a way to connect the past and present of Irish rugby — and to give fans a real way to support the people who give so much for our country," Dardis said. "This is just the beginning, and I have big ambitions for what this Fund can achieve."

The first scholarship window, which closed in early September, saw 40 players apply for support.



## 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.

# BEYOND THE GAME

An Impactful Year Supporting Former Players

DR DEIRDRE LYONS



*Our Past Player Programme is brought to you in partnership with: The Global Rugby Players Foundation*

**When the Global Rugby Players Foundation (GRPF) launched just a year ago, its mission was simple but ambitious: to support professional players as they transition into life beyond the sport.**

The recent release of the GRPF's inaugural Trustee's Report saw the Foundation celebrate a transformative first year, while looking ahead with even greater purpose. To understand what this means in practice, we sat down with Dr Deirdre Lyons, who leads Beyond the Game, a pioneering programme for former rugby players in Ireland.

**A year of progress**

"Year one has been all about proving the concept," Lyons explains. "We wanted to show that with the right resources, rugby players can transition successfully into new careers, strengthen their wellbeing, and discover opportunities they may never have considered."

One of the first four pilot programmes funded globally, Beyond the Game has taken a leading role in Ireland, partnering with Rugby Players Ireland to support the specific needs of former players. The GRPF also backed pilot programmes in New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, and South Africa, each designed to respond to the particular needs of former players in those countries.

"It's amazing to think that over 400 former players have engaged with the programmes globally. In Ireland, we've already seen real impact through various meet-ups and events like our inaugural



**It's amazing to think that over 400 former players have engaged with the programmes globally.**

Padel tournament, our famous Legends fixture and other networking and educational opportunities.

"By reconnecting with former players in this way, we're creating pathways, sparking conversations, and giving players the space to think things through a little bit with the people who understand them best.

"Transformation will never happen overnight but what we can do is help them regain direction, confidence and purpose through their own peer group or the supports offered by Rugby Players Ireland."

**Beyond the Game in Ireland**

At its core, Beyond the Game focuses on personal development, career transition, and emotional wellbeing underpinned by the our four pillars: Change, Care, Connection, and Community. It combines events workshops, one-to-one guidance, and practical resources to help players design a future that excites them.





"It's not only about next careers, it's about rediscovering purpose, building healthy routines, and reconnecting with family, friends, and passions beyond the sport."

"One of the most powerful things we've seen through Beyond the Game is the impact of peer-to-peer support," Lyons shares. "When players realise they're not alone in this transition, it changes everything. It becomes a community, not just a programme."

The success of the first year has been so clear that the team has applied for further funding to extend the initiative in Ireland. "We don't want this to be a one-off," Lyons says. "We've laid the groundwork, and now we need to build on it."

Global support, local impact

The past year has also seen the GRPF launch of a new free online learning platform which is available to all current and former professional players

**We've already seen former players move into new careers, start businesses, and take on leadership roles in their communities.**

worldwide. Courses range from business and career development to communication skills and emotional wellbeing, along with a newly launched financial wellbeing offering in partnership with HSBC.

"The new learning platform is yet another way to connect," Lyons says. "It means that whether a player is in Dublin, Durban or Fiji, they will be able to access resources that help them take control of, and plan for, their future."

Looking forward

For Lyons, the growth of the GRPF and in particular, Beyond the Game in Ireland, marks the beginning of something bigger. "This is about changing the narrative around life after rugby. Already we are creating greater awareness of what the players face in their retirement and that can only be helpful for younger players coming through.

"By opening up these conversations early, we're also future-proofing the next generation. Players still in the game can see that planning for life after rugby isn't about endings, it's about setting the stage for the next chapter. As the GRPF continues to expand its reach, Beyond the Game stands as proof of what's possible when players are given the right support at the right time."

"We've already seen former players move into new careers, start businesses, and take on leadership roles in their communities. These stories show what's possible, that life after rugby can be not just fulfilling, but inspiring for others coming through."

"The message we want to send is that players are not alone. There's a community behind them. One that is invested in their future long after the final whistle."



# DRUIDS GLEN

## HOTEL & GOLF RESORT

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# BREWING A NEW IDENTITY

Former winger shares how coffee, community and curiosity helped him rebuild life after rugby

ALEX WOOTTON



**In the months leading up to my retirement, I remember listening to Brian O'Driscoll speak in a documentary about how sportspeople die twice. It was a scary concept.**

When I was at Munster and Connacht, we often had former players come in to speak with us about the transition but, to be honest, for most of my career that was all white noise. I was too busy thinking about the game at the weekend.

Things changed for me when I went into my final season knowing it would be my last. I spent a lot of time with Deirdre Lyons in those months. We talked about everything and anything, and with a bit of hindsight I've realised that she was getting to the root of what really makes me tick. You spend so much time immersed in rugby that it starts to feel like it's all you know, so that whole process was a bit of a relief.

It's rare to meet someone like Deirdre who can shine such a different light on your thinking. She encouraged me to try out a few different things, and that I should be working out what wasn't for me as much as what might be. That perspective gave me a

kind of quiet confidence to start stepping into new spaces and try new things without needing them to be perfect.

I also came to accept that my retirement didn't have to be perfect either. Once I was mentally clued into it, I began to make the most of any opportunity to learn a bit more. Having largely ignored what they'd had to say, I began to note the little nuggets of wisdom former players were sharing with us. I remember one saying that there was no need to rush, and that the first step didn't have to be the final one. That resonated strongly with me and put me at ease.

I appreciate that not every rugby player will have the luxury of a break post-retirement, but I took six months to just... pause. I wanted to spend time with my family. I wanted to think. I'd signed my first professional contract with Northampton Saints straight out of school and since then rugby had been the centre of everything. So, taking a step back was important for both me and those closest to me.

Now, don't get me wrong... I didn't spend all that time with my feet up. For the first couple of weeks I walked to the shop for the paper in the morning, had a coffee and put my feet up for the day. However, it didn't take long before the lack of structure started to frustrate me. I missed having a routine and a clear sense of purpose. I missed the team environment and being part of something bigger than myself. Slowly, I started to join the dots.

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**Get curious about life outside rugby. It won't hurt your game. If anything, it'll make you a better person.**





One of the biggest things I noticed during that time was how much I missed the Irish coffee culture. My love of coffee first took root in the team rooms at Munster and Connacht where there was plenty of laughter and camaraderie amidst the hum of the coffee machine. My coffee palette was expanded when we travelled to away games. We couldn't go to the pub so we made it our mission to find the best coffee spots in every town we visited. That was quite an education!

Having lived in Barna during our time in Galway, my wife Lucy and I had also been spoiled by a range of quality coffee shops and brunch spots in our neighbourhood, underpinned by a strong community vibe. Back home in the UK, I'd go out for brunch and it'd be a basic fry-up. Nothing wrong with that, but I found myself asking: where's that little magic touch that turns a coffee or brunch into an experience?

The community aspect was very important to me. When I'd first arrived at Connacht, Andy Friend and I were very open with each other, and said that while Galway might not be our long-term home, we

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**Like my data insights, I think my open-minded approach to feedback comes from my rugby days.**

were going to invest fully into the club and into the people while we were in the area.

Even then it was clear that something special was building, and we wanted to enhance that journey. I'm very proud to see what's happening there of late – a new stadium, three British & Irish Lions and Stuart Lancaster coming on board. It's the kind of excitement that the community we came to know so well deserves.

Having returned home to the north of England, Lucy and I would often talk about how we missed the community feeling of Galway. We joked about opening a coffee shop of our own and trying to recreate what we had in Barna. It was fanciful chat at first but the idea didn't go away.

After a bit of back and forth, I decided I needed to get it out of my head on down on paper. Once I felt I had something worth sharing, I spoke to my dad, to my former teammate Matt Healy, and a few others. Their feedback gave me a little more belief. I remember Lucy and I looking at each other one day and saying, 'this could actually work.'

I signed up for a few courses, and I did something that felt a bit bold. I approached the owner of the best coffee shop in Manchester, introduced myself, shared my idea, and asked if I could spend a couple of days shadowing their operation. Thankfully, they were open to it. I turned up with a notepad and pen, and did everything from taking the bins out to pouring the perfect coffee. It wasn't glamorous but it was exactly what I needed.

Those two days laid the groundwork for what eventually became The Sheds, which we opened just over a year ago in the old post office in Bunbury, a small village in Cheshire. Taking a deep dive into everything helped me see the business clearly and shape it with intention. I didn't try to reinvent the wheel. Every decision we made was thoughtful, informed, and authentic. While I relied heavily on my instincts, I also grounded my choices in data, just as I had throughout my career.

There was also a lot of learning on the job. Even now, I'm constantly asking the team questions and encouraging honest feedback from our customers. Like my data insights, I think my open-minded approach to feedback comes from my rugby days. I learned so much from teammates, coaches, and from watching myself back critically. In Ireland, the rugby media are also smart and detailed. They'll pick your game apart, and as a player, you either learn from it or let it break you. Not many people will be used to that but I do think there is a lot to gain from that honesty.

As well as open communication, I've taken many things with me from my rugby career. I have a good sense of leadership, and I understand the importance of a good team ethic. I have good values and I am always open to learning. I wasn't the most talented athlete but I was prepared to work hard and push my body to places it didn't want to go.

All that being said, it's fair to say that I've parked my rugby career. I don't cling to it. I retired relatively young but I felt at peace with that decision because I was ready and excited for something new. From a personal perspective, I'd been away from home for over a decade. Some people asked if I ever thought about getting an opportunity abroad, and I'd laugh and say, "I've already been abroad for ten years."

Did retirement seem like a death as O'Driscoll mentioned? It certainly wasn't easy but being able to acknowledge that it was going to be a difficult process was helpful. By speaking openly about it with my family and people like Deirdre [Lyons], I'd like to think I was somewhat prepared for it – and so were they.

For instance, during Christmas of my last season I sat down with Lucy and we started to plan for the next stage of our lives. We began to get really excited about it and that mindset shift was huge. Instead of



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**Instead of mourning what we were losing, we looked forward to a new beginning for our family.**

mourning what we were losing, we looked forward to a new beginning for our family.

The Sheds has become a massive part of that exciting new phase, and continues to be. We have goals to grow and expand but I'm not rushing it. What's the point? For me, The Sheds isn't just a coffee shop. It's a community. A place with high-end offerings that's accessible, welcoming, and grounded.

Staying grounded should be an important value for any professional rugby player. It's easy to get lost in all the opportunities the game brings, and for a while I was no different. In my head, the post-career advice didn't apply to me because I had a full and long rugby career ahead of me.

I sometimes think back to that young person in those workshops, and I think if I could speak to him – or any young player – I'd say this: get curious about life outside rugby. It won't hurt your game. If anything, it'll make you a better person. That curiosity is where The Sheds was born. And that mindset is what carries me into my future.

# THE ROCKIES ROAD

Kathryn Dane on Rugby, Research, and Life in Calgary

KATHRYN DANE



When I decided to come to Calgary, it definitely wasn't for the winter conditions... they're not for the faint hearted! I came to Canada to join the Sport Injury Prevention Research Centre (SIPRC) at the University of Calgary, one of only 11 IOC-designated centres worldwide.

SIPRC has been hugely influential in shaping injury prevention policy and practice, particularly in youth sport, with notable successes in reducing concussions in ice hockey.

Although I am based a number of timezones away, my collaborative work with my Irish colleagues continues. However, the opportunity to work with Professor Carolyn Emery and her team, broaden my expertise and skillset, and participate in world-leading research was too good to pass up. Living at the foot of the Canadian Rockies hasn't been a bad perk either!

“ Although I am based a number of timezones away, my collaborative work with my Irish colleagues continues.

I have been on quite an interesting journey to this point. While I was playing in Ireland, I achieved my PhD from Trinity College under the supervision of Professor Fiona Wilson, and Professor Ciaran Simms. Shortly after that I started working at the Research Ireland Lero & School of Computer Science and Statistics lab with Will Connors and other researchers including Ellen Rushe, Thomas Laurent, and Anthony Ventresque.

Together we all worked on a number of projects that were primarily focused on the use of video analysis, machine learning software, and innovative technology. We recently published a study on combining video analysis and machine learning techniques to understand direct head contact events in elite women's rugby. It is my hope that the findings will support improved coaching practices, as well as reinforcement or modification of current laws to address direct head contacts to tacklers and ball-carriers.

Since moving to Calgary, I have been waiting for ethics approval on my own postdoctoral project. Simultaneously I've been collaborating on a number of international projects across various contact sports, as well as supporting a World Rugby initiative on tackle training and law change evaluation in Canadian female rugby.





This has involved working with World Rugby coach educators to deliver tackle training workshops across Alberta and co-leading a qualitative sub-study on how coaches understand, adopt, and implement tackle safety education. Coaches are central to injury prevention, yet uptake and sustainability of safety programmes are often low, particularly when resources are limited. Our work is helping to address this gap by capturing coaches' voices and experiences in real-world contexts.

To ensure emerging evidence is accessible to those who need it, I've also been active in knowledge translation through local and national media, including a recent article that received a lot of traction in The Conversation Canada.

In addition, to broaden my impact outside of rugby, I was invited to contribute to a systematic review on prevention strategies and modifiable risk factors for injuries to the spine, chest, abdomen, and pelvis in girls' and women's sport. These reviews underpin IOC recommendations adopted by clinicians, sporting organisations, and policymakers worldwide. They are raising global standards, shaping sport-specific practices and medical protocols, and safeguarding athlete health, particularly for women and girls.

Looking ahead, my postdoctoral research partners with Rugby Canada and School Sport Canada to co-create and evaluate a tackle preparation strategy for youth girls' rugby. Phase one, already funded and underway, is combining injury surveillance, practice footage, instrumented mouthguard data, and perspectives from players, parents, clinicians,



**I can tend to go through life at 100mph and not really appreciate the good things, achievements or learnings that I've had.**

and coaches. The goal is to design a contextually relevant programme that balances safety and performance, and that rugby communities can realistically deliver.

As you can probably tell, I can tend to go through life at 100mph and not really appreciate the good things, achievements or learnings that I've had. However, since I suffered a stroke back during a training session in 2022, I have realised when you are in those dark and difficult places, that is when you start to see all the light you have in your life. You can't change the cards you are dealt with. You just have to try and react. It's a chapter in my story that I've had to overcome.

After a brief spell of ill-health here in Canada (thankfully I've got the all-clear again), I've been making the most of life in Calgary from adventures in the Rockies, enjoying Alberta's famous AAA beef, and sampling the local breweries, to experiencing the cultural spectacle of the Calgary Stampede. I've also stayed connected to rugby by guest coaching tackle safety in schools and clubs, as well as supporting technical coaching with the University of Calgary Dino's and the Calgary Irish Senior Women's team.

What drives me most, whether on the field, in the lab, or out in the mountains, is curiosity, and a desire to explore, understand, and try new things. Calgary has given me endless opportunities to do just that, and it's this curiosity that keeps every day exciting and full of possibility.

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# HARRY'S GAME

A Different Kind of Sunset

HARRY MCNULTY



**Sport is a strange thing. One moment, it wraps the athlete in its embrace, giving them a purpose, an identity, and a home. The next, it casts them adrift.**

Take Harry McNulty, for instance. He was the kind of player who left his fingerprints all over a game. Relentless at the breakdown, vocal in the huddle, a leader through both his words and actions.

Indeed, if he hadn't been so busy putting in a typically exhaustive performance, he might have allowed himself to believe – just for a second – that an Olympic medal was within reach as the clock ticked down in Ireland's quarter-final against Fiji twelve months ago.

One moment, McNulty was ensconced in an all-encompassing battle watched by millions at home on RTE's prime scheduling slot. The next he could only look on as Waisea Nacuqu shattered Ireland's hopes. Despite being on the cusp of the podium, McNulty left Paris 2024 with little more than memories and a suitcase.

Thankfully, McNulty is well accustomed to packing his bags. For years, he was a vital cog in the machinations of Irish Sevens rugby. He was there when Ireland gritted it out at the basement floor of Europe's Sevens circuit. He was also there as they ran out on the grandest global stage a decade later.



He considers himself extremely lucky. The great paradox of the Sevens games is that for all its perceived glamour, careers are typically short and the extensive travelling can be demanding. Yet he revelled in the environment, and was grateful for the opportunity it gave him to wear green with pride across the world.

"It's mad how quickly things can change," McNulty says. "One second you're flying it, the next it's all over. There's no in-between. But that's sport, I guess."

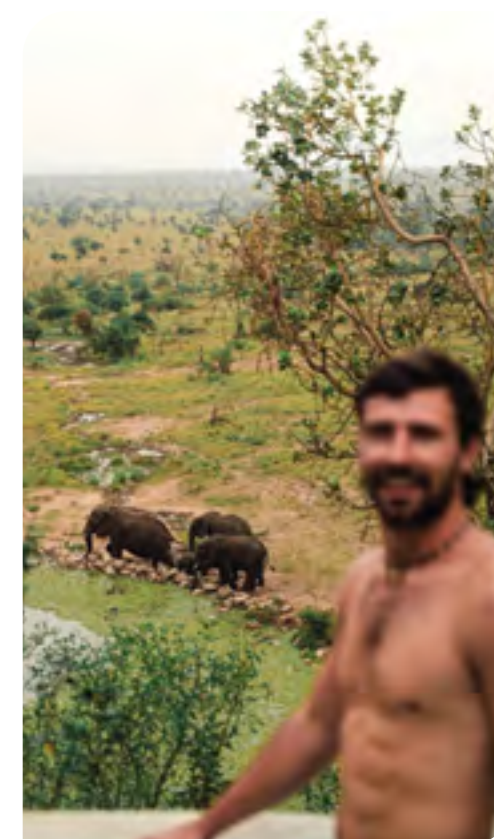
Ironically, McNulty did have something of a middle ground to navigate. Having announced his retirement, he took on a role with World Rugby for the 2024/25 SVNS season. However, when it became apparent that Ireland would struggle to field a side in Cape Town, McNulty's phone rang.

"I had decided that Paris was going to be the last hurrah," McNulty says. "I didn't announce it for a while because I wanted to be sure that it was the right call. I knew I could still play but to be honest, the reality of playing Sevens at 32 years of age began to dawn on me."

"The finances didn't compare to the 15s game for a start, while playing at the intensity of Sevens was also going to push boundaries. I'd managed to get through my career without any significant injury (the lads used to joke that I couldn't run fast enough to get one!), so rather than tempt fate I decided to pack it all in."

"For a few months after Paris I'd say you could count on one hand how many times I went to the gym. I found freedom in not having to be there, but I stayed fit mainly because I appreciate how staying strong contributes to my overall wellbeing."

With several members of the Irish contingent hitched to their beds through illness, McNulty was summoned from a Cape Town bar to tog out just days following the announcement of his retirement. In true form, he barely put a foot out of line.



"Thankfully the adrenaline kicked in and I managed to get through it," McNulty says humbly. "In hindsight I suppose it was nice to get a bonus shot at it all. It was an honour to be called back in, but on a personal level, it also felt like a gentle farewell... a way to ease out of the picture and find peace with my decision."

"I've had a few opportunities come my way which mightn't have happened if I kept playing. I played for the Irish Rugby Legends and I've been to tournaments in places like Fiji and India, where I recently played in the Rugby Premier League with guys like Rosko Specman and Jerry Tuwai. Real bucket-list stuff."

Incidentally, while McNulty was in Australia to support his former teammate Hugo Keenan on the Lions tour recently, he was called in by the British & Irish Legends who were taking on the Classic Wallabies in their own series.

"I think the beauty of having played Sevens for so long is that I've built up a global network. I know that I could pick up the phone to someone almost anywhere in the world, and they'd have me collected at the airport. The SVNS series creates this amazing bond between its athletes."

"But at the same time, I was wise enough to know that I couldn't keep living that dream for ever either."

Having invested time into their off-field development, a number of McNulty's fellow retirees have adjusted reasonably well to life after the game. Both Billy Dardis and Terry Kennedy work in the financial sector with TritonLake, Sean Cribbin works in construction consultancy while Jack Kelly has been a trainee solicitor at one of the country's biggest legal firms.

Rather than be envious, McNulty celebrates their drive and points out that he was always destined for an alternative path. It just so happens that the route has taken him to the rolling plains of Africa.

A keen traveller, McNulty is not one to sit still for very long, even when in recovery mode. Following the 2019 World Series leg in Hong Kong, he made his way home through Uganda. As he relaxed in



the crater of an extinct volcano and observed silverback gorillas on his first safari experience, something stirred in him.

His love affair with the continent had begun and soon he was making plans to return. As the world around him began to shrink at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, McNulty was in Tanzania to witness the Great Migration before pressing on to Kenya's Maasai Mara.

It was there that it all clicked and earlier this year he proudly launched his own business, 890 Expeditions, which sees the much travelled McNulty design and lead bespoke safari adventures.

"People always ask me what the 890 is about, and I'm always delighted to tell them that I'm the 890th person to represent Ireland at the Olympic Games. As a result, that number became a symbol for me, representative of the journey I have been on."

"And that's the point of 890, just like no two people will share the same story and no two Irish Olympians will share the same number, no two safaris will be the same either. Whether you want to go deep sea fishing, or chase the Big Five – I will build the trip around your dreams."

McNulty points out that East Africa has far more to offer than most people realise. Rwanda – whose powerful history continues to shape its present – is a country he believes more people should take the time to understand. Kenya was the first country to roll out the modern safari, while Uganda is known as the 'Pearl of Africa.' And then there's the draw of African wildlife.

"We think we know it all from the David Attenborough documentaries," he adds. "But when you're out there tracking lions at dawn with no phone signal, it awakens a primal connection to the world which is all too absent these days."

"It's a different kind of high," he continues. "It's not something you might realise was missing in your life until you experience it. I mean, I got a great buzz from rugby and all but this was something else completely."

When McNulty spoke to us, he had just returned from his latest passion project. Huhuru House is a beachside hideaway on the Kenyan coast. It sleeps six, each room with its own ensuite, and sits just a short stroll from the Indian Ocean. A hidden paradise, McNulty now offers Huhuru as the perfect contrast following a few days in the bush. For both operator and his guests.

"People don't realise how much work goes into a safari. It's all about timing; when to go, where the animals will be, who the guide is. One small change and the whole trip feels different. That's what I try to nail every time with the help of local knowledge."

"I only work with people I know and trust. I've come to know people in the area and they are keen to help because it also keeps money in the community and making sure tourism is a force for good."

While McNulty also hopes to expand the horizons of 890 Expeditions in the coming months and years, Africa will remain its beating heart.

"I love going off the beaten track and this venture gives me great pleasure in showing this world to others. It's not just about the animals, it's about understanding what is happening all around you. Like my rugby, it makes me feel alive."

From the roar of the Stade de France to the stillness of the savannah, Harry McNulty has found a different kind of purpose. However, it is one that is just as driven, and just as rewarding.

"I used to push myself to the limit physically. Now I help people push themselves in other ways. I love getting them out of their comfort zone. I make them switch off and reconnect. That's where the real fulfilment lies."

While rugby was never going to be the final destination, it was the road that led him off the beaten track.


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