

# ANNUAL REVIEW 2025



RUGBY PLAYERS  
IRELAND



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## A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT IAIN HENDERSON

**Earlier this year I was thrust into the spotlight at the Rugby Players Ireland Awards in Peter O'Mahony's absence. And I'm still here! I am genuinely privileged to have been elected as President of Rugby Players Ireland, and I'm fully aware of the responsibility that comes with stepping into Pete's considerable shoes.**

Having served on the Executive Board for the past five or six years, it is a real honour to now lead the players' association which, over the course of my career, has become one of the most progressive and influential in any sport.

Pete's tenure as President came to an end as he signed off at the close of the 2024/25 season, alongside others who have defined the most successful era in Irish rugby history. With Conor Murray heading into a well-earned sunset and Cian Healy finally putting his feet up after 18 years at the coalface, we said farewell to almost 400 caps of international experience. In any industry their departure would leave a significant void, and rugby is no different.

Many others have also stepped away. I recall Eimear Considine speaking so honestly at the RPI Awards as she reflected on what the game had given her. Dave Kilcoyne had his own unique take, but like so many past players they will benefit from Beyond the Game, Rugby Players Ireland's dedicated past player programme supported by the Global Rugby Players Foundation. It is reassuring to know it will continue to soften what can be a difficult transition for players at the end of their careers.

Before we look too far ahead, I want to reflect on the past year. It hasn't been an easy one, on or off the field, and yet I consider it a privilege to take my place on the Board at a time when so much is shifting in the game. From commercial pressures to structural changes and the increasing emphasis on player welfare, these are pivotal times. It is more important than ever that players' voices are represented as key decisions that affect us all are made.

Yes, it hasn't been a season for the ages, but we should remember that it wasn't long ago when a Triple Crown would have been celebrated in the pubs for months. Such has been the rise in standards that even a single loss in the Six Nations leaves us disappointed. That speaks volumes about how far we've come.

There were also moments to be proud of. We had a record number of players tour with the British & Irish Lions during the summer, and I was especially pleased to see Simon lead the way on a landmark agreement with the Lions, one that offers greater protection and recognition for players.

I was equally proud of Edel McMahon and Sam Monaghan as they led the Green Wave to England for the Rugby World Cup. While they will have been disappointed with the loss to France, their performances and the support behind them has shown to me that momentum is firmly with the women's game.

We need to remember that not every season is going to be full of silverware and standout moments. That's sport. And yet it is in these fallow seasons that we learn to appreciate the good days when they come. A Tackle Your Feelings clip I saw once said: "It's never as good as you think it is, and it's never as bad as you think it is either." Finding that balance is key.



## A MESSAGE FROM THE CEO

### SIMON KEOGH

**As we set out our goals for 2025 around this time last year, one of our key goals was in the establishment and development of Beyond the Game, our past player programme which is delivered in partnership with the Global Rugby Players Foundation.**

Under Dr Deirdre Lyons' leadership, this work has become a defining feature of 2025. Not only have I enjoyed getting the chance to reconnect with many of my own former teammates, it has also underscored something I believe deeply: that providing a meaningful social outlet is one of the most important commitments we can make to those who have given so much to our game.

It has struck me over the past year just how much former players have appreciated a coffee or a check-in text. For too long, too many of them shied away from their connection to the rugby community here. I understand that many want to create an identity away from the game, but equally it was such a significant part of our lives and should never be ignored entirely.

I believe our off-field progress has been significant this year. Tackle Your Feelings has been revitalised with a revamped platform, informed by research and feedback, offering teachers and their students an even stronger resource to support mental wellbeing.

We were also delighted to launch HerForm in Dublin, an EU-funded project led by Rugby Players Ireland and developed with international partners over the past three years to support female athletes and ensure their pathways and wellbeing are prioritised. Sadly, Pamela Gilpin, who has driven this project alongside Finola Roache, is moving on from the players' association after more than a decade of invaluable service.

While our work off the field has been a real highlight, the past year has been a little more mixed than we might have hoped. Such has been the standards we have set in recent seasons, we have become the victims of our own recent success and the expectations that have come with it.

For the Men's XV's, the season brought moments of promise without delivering the consistency we have come to associate with the side. A Six Nations campaign that despite just one loss fell short of our high standards and a November window that ended in frustration will leave the group hungry to put things right. That is often the best way to head into a new competition.

In sport, every season offers the opportunity of a turning point and through our Women's XVs, we were taken on a green wave into the Rugby World Cup. Despite the heartbreaking loss to France, their progress and energy have been refreshing, and I believe they will continue to build upon this platform.

Unfortunately, while some aspects of the Irish Rugby programme have kicked on, we were sorry to lose the Men's Sevens programme this year. We shared the players' disappointment with how the situation unfolded and continue to work with them as they get on their feet in other areas. Following these experiences, we are determined to work closely with the IRFU to ensure the women's programme is safeguarded and supported to grow.

It goes to show that nothing in our game is ever set in stone. Success is not guaranteed. Losses are not permanent. Careers come and go. However, whatever the future has in store for you, remember that Rugby Players Ireland will always be here.



SECTION 01

# REPRESENT



## WHO WE ARE

Now seen as one of the leading player representative organisations in sport, Rugby Players Ireland was formed in 2001 as the Irish Rugby Union Players' Association (IRUPA). It is committed to making Ireland the best place in the world to play rugby.

Following discussions between Donal Spring, Peter McKenna, Liam Toland and the IRFU, Rugby Players Ireland came into being with the remit of promoting and protecting the welfare of all professional players across the four provinces. The association has evolved considerably over the past 19 years and its membership now encompasses female international players in addition to former professionals.

While the functions of the association have grown to include a world-leading player development syllabus, a dedicated past player programme 'Beyond the Game' and a community engagement portfolio that includes a public mental wellbeing campaign in 'Tackle Your Feelings', the backbone of the organisation remains in the representation of its membership on issues of importance in the game.

## THE RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND EXECUTIVE BOARD

Following his retirement at the end of the 2024/25 season, Peter O'Mahony stepped down from his role as President of Rugby Players Ireland.

Elected President after Rob Kearney's seven-year tenure came to an end in 2021, Pete played a hugely influential role in numerous RPI initiatives including the deferred Covid-19 salary arrangements, the successful Collective Bargaining Agreement negotiations, and British & Irish Lions discussions. Throughout his term, he was an exemplary representative of RPI, approaching the role with the same determination that underpinned his professional rugby career.

Iain Henderson has since been elected President, with Tadhg Beirne nominated by his Munster Rugby teammates as their representative in O'Mahony's stead. Both captains of their respective provinces, Henderson and Beirne are highly respected figures in Irish rugby. Capped 85 times by Ireland, Henderson has been a member of the national set-up since 2012. He joined RPI's Executive Board in 2019 when he replaced Darren Cave. Beirne, the reigning Players' Player of the Year, has followed a less conventional path to become one of the game's standout performers, earning the admiration of peers nationwide.

This year, we also welcomed Patrick Manley to the Executive Board. Manley is a former CEO of EMEA General Insurance at Zurich Insurance Group AG and previously served as CEO of Zurich General Insurance, Europe, and Zurich Ireland. He is also a former Chairperson of the International Rugby Players Executive Board, bringing significant governance and executive experience to support RPI's ongoing work.

We also acknowledge the contributions of Bryan Mollen to the Executive Board. Joining on a voluntary basis following Billy Dardis' retirement after Paris 2024, Mollen played a valuable role during a transitional period, particularly in supporting matters related to the cessation of the Irish Men's 7s programme.



**Iain Henderson**  
President/Ulster Rugby



**Patrick Manley**  
Chairperson



**Tadhg Beirne**  
Munster Rugby



**Enya Breen**  
Women's XV's



**Dave Heffernan**  
Connacht Rugby



**Rob Kearney**  
Past Player



**Amee-Leigh Costigan**  
Women's 7s



**Garry Ringrose**  
Leinster Rugby



**Ciarán Medlar**  
Non-Executive Director



**Peter McKenna**  
Non-Executive Director



**Maura Quinn**  
Non-Executive Director



**Simon Keogh**  
CEO, Rugby Players Ireland

“

FROM MY VANTAGE POINT AS PRESIDENT, I'VE SEEN THAT THE FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS ARE PUT IN PLACE LONG BEFORE THE LIGHTS TURN ON AT THE AVIVA. IT'S IN THE SMALL MARGINS. IT'S IN HOW WE TRAVEL, RECOVER, SUPPORT EACH OTHER, AND STAY CONNECTED TO OUR COMMUNITIES. IT'S ALSO IN THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE IRFU AND RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND TO CREATE A PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT THAT ENABLES PLAYERS TO THRIVE, WHILE GIVING THEM THE SPACE TO BE THEMSELVES.

*Peter O'Mahony*

*President, Rugby Players Ireland Executive Board (2021-2025)*



## MEMBERSHIP

Since 2018, Rugby Players Ireland has expanded its offerings to cater for all professional rugby programmes in the country. This includes the provision of representation, personal development services and corporate engagement opportunities, with a dedicated Player Development Manager (PDM) assigned to each group. In 2023, contracted members of the Irish Women's XVs and Sevens programmes were captured in the latest Collective Bargaining Agreement with the IRFU.



“

AS AN ORGANISATION WE'RE CLEARLY REPRESENTING QUITE A BROAD RANGE OF PLAYERS FROM THOSE STARTING OUT, THE MEN'S GAME, THE WOMEN'S GAME, THE 7S PROGRAMME, SO WE NEED TO BE VERY AWARE OF THE DIFFERENT REQUIREMENTS OF EACH LEVEL WITHIN THE ORGANISATION AND THAT WHEN WE COME TO THE TABLE WE NEED TO BE CERTAIN THAT WE'RE COVERING ALL BASES AS BEST WE CAN.

*Ciarán Medlar*

*Rugby Players Ireland Non-Executive Director*

“

I CONSIDER IT A PRIVILEGE TO LEAD THE BOARD AT A TIME WHEN THERE'S SO MUCH HAPPENING IN THE GAME. FROM COMMERCIAL SHIFTS AND FINANCIAL PRESSURES TO A GROWING FOCUS ON PLAYER WELFARE, THESE ARE PIVOTAL TIMES FOR THE GAME AND IT'S VITAL THAT THE VOICES OF THE PLAYERS ARE HEARD AND REPRESENTED AS KEY DECISIONS THAT AFFECT US ARE MADE.

*Iain Henderson*

*President, Rugby Players Ireland Executive Board*



### PREVIOUS CHAIRPERSONS (PRESIDENTS AS OF 2025)

<b>2005-2007</b>	MARK MCHUGH
<b>2007-2011</b>	MARCUS HORAN
<b>2011-2012</b>	BRIAN O'DRISCOLL
<b>2012-2013</b>	JOHNNY SEXTON
<b>2013-2021</b>	ROB KEARNEY
<b>2021-2025</b>	PETER O'MAHONY

## BRITISH & IRISH LIONS AGREEMENT

Following the successful 2025 British & Irish Lions Tour to Australia (proudly featuring a record-breaking number of Irish representatives), the significance of the new player agreement introduced ahead of the series has become even clearer. The players' first-ever profit-share model and a more collaborative approach to scheduling, preparation, and welfare ensured that athlete welfare and performance needs were fully integrated into tour planning.

This shift was driven by the leadership of Rugby Players Ireland CEO Simon Keogh, who represented all players throughout the negotiation process. Keogh played a key role in framing the agreement, ensuring that the voices of both current internationals and former Lions were central to discussions. The resulting structures, ranging from enhanced preparation windows to strengthened off-field support, created an environment that contributed meaningfully to the squad's success in Australia.

“

PLAYERS ARE CENTRAL TO THE ONGOING SUCCESS OF THE BRITISH & IRISH LIONS TOURS, AND WE ARE DELIGHTED THAT THEIR VIEWS HAVE BEEN HEARD THROUGHOUT THIS PROCESS. I'D LIKE TO THANK THE BRITISH & IRISH LIONS FOR THEIR HONESTY, TRANSPARENCY, AND GENUINE CONSIDERATION OF THE PLAYERS' VOICE. AS A RESULT, I BELIEVE THAT WE HAVE REACHED AN AGREEMENT THAT IS BOTH FAIR AND REFLECTIVE OF THE STRONG COLLABORATION BETWEEN ALL STAKEHOLDERS IN RUGBY.

*Simon Keogh*



## IRELAND MEN'S SEVENS

Following the announcement that the Ireland Men's Sevens programme would cease operations from August, Rugby Players Ireland expressed its disappointment at a decision that carries substantial professional and personal consequences for the players and staff involved.

While the rationale was understood to be linked to broader funding structures and changes to the World Rugby model, the late timing of the communication placed considerable and unnecessary pressure on those affected as they sought clarity about their futures.

Throughout this period of uncertainty, Rugby Players Ireland worked closely with all impacted members to ensure they received appropriate support. In addition to guidance from their dedicated Player Development Manager, players were provided access to Rugby Players Ireland's full range of supports, including mental wellbeing supports and transition resources, as they navigated this unexpected change.

Additionally, we were delighted to bring members of recent squads together for a golf morning at Killeen Castle.

“

OUR PRIORITY REMAINS THE ONGOING FAIR TREATMENT AND WELLBEING OF THE PLAYERS. WE WILL CONTINUE TO WORK CLOSELY WITH THOSE AFFECTED AND ENGAGE WITH THE IRFU TO FACILITATE A SMOOTH TRANSITION AND TO SUPPORT THE CONTINUED DEVELOPMENT OF THE WOMEN'S SEVENS PROGRAMME.”

*Simon Keogh*

## WOMEN'S RUGBY WORLD CUP

In the lead up to the Rugby World Cup in England, Rugby Players Ireland together with senior players from the national squad successfully agreed a new fee structure for the tournament.



## SIGNIFY

Rugby Players Ireland, the IRFU and the four provinces has partnered with Signify Group's Threat Matrix service to provide year-round protection against online abuse for players, officials, staff, and their families. Using a combination of AI technology and human analysis, Threat Matrix identifies targeted abusive or threatening content on major social media platforms, risk assesses the most serious cases, and provides actionable evidence to support sanctions, including venue and ticket bans or Garda referrals. The service also includes dedicated reporting and investigation processes for harassment via Direct Messages.

## AGENT REPRESENTATION

Since 2015, Rugby Players Ireland have administered the Agents Registration Scheme on behalf of the IRFU. Designed to safeguard the players in addition to improving the agency environment, the scheme is also on a similar footing in both Wales and England. This year almost 40 agents registered under the Home Nations scheme were at Rugby Players Ireland's offices for a series of talks designed to help them in their representative pursuits. This included a discussion with David Humphreys about the contractual landscape in Irish Rugby.

## LEADERSHIP

Executive Board member Garry Ringrose drew widespread acclaim ahead of the second Lions Test as he voluntarily withdrew from the team with lingering head injury symptoms. Having narrowly missed out the 2017 and 2021 tours, the Dubliner was commended for his selfless decision and the strong message it sent about prioritising brain health.



## OLYMPIC ATHLETES

An Ipsos poll for UNI World Players showed strong public support for fair pay and greater influence for Olympic athletes, with 65% backing revenue sharing and over 60% favouring equal decision-making, despite athletes receiving just 0.6% of Olympic revenue. Irish Olympian and former 7s captain Billy Dardis joined the call, urging fair compensation and real empowerment for athletes within the Olympic movement. Along with Harry McNulty, Dardis was also elected to Team Ireland's Athletes' Commission for the 2025–2028 term.



## ROAR ROOM



Kicking off in Nyon against the backdrop of UEFA Women's EURO 2025, 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 then 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 two day event was facilitated by World Players and FIFPRO.

“

**RETIRING EARLIER THAN I HOPED WAS TOUGH, BUT IT REINFORCED THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAYER WELFARE AND THE VITAL WORK OF RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND IN SUPPORTING PLAYERS THROUGH TRANSITIONS BEYOND THE GAME.**

*Jamie Heaslip*

*Ireland & UK Strategic Growth Lead, Stripe*





All roads led to Rome in September as the European Athletes and Players Association (EAPA) held its General Assembly in the Italian capital. Aligned with the World Players Association, delegates' discussions focused on strengthening connections between athletes and players to enhance their collective influence on the global stage.

In his role as Vice-President of EAPA, Simon Keogh also addressed several international forums over the course of the year, including the EU Sport Forum where he spoke about the increasingly demanding scheduling and performance standards elite athletes face and how members of Rugby Players Ireland are supported by their players' association. He also attended FIFPro Europe's General Assembly in Stockholm.



## PROTECT INTEGRITY

Rugby Players Ireland continued its long-standing involvement with the PROtect Integrity campaign, contributing to the latest phase of the initiative. An EU-funded project led by EAPA, PROtect Integrity Responsibly places a renewed emphasis on promoting integrity and values in sport, with a particular focus on educating athletes about responsible gambling practices. This year also included a Train the Trainer workshop in Madrid facilitated by EPIC Global Solutions.



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 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.



SECTION 02

# DEVELOP



## THE PLAYER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (PDP)

The aim of the Personal Development Programme is to foster the personal growth and development of players while they are still playing and ultimately prepare and support them for life after rugby.

The Player Development Programme (PDP) is a jointly funded initiative between Rugby Players Ireland and the IRFU. It is a person-centred approach, where the individual needs of each player are assessed, and personal development action plans are tailored to those needs. The PDP encompasses six fundamental areas that contribute to the overall personal development and growth of players while supporting a positive transition from the game.

“

UNDERSTANDING WHO YOU ARE – NOT JUST AS A PLAYER, BUT AS A PERSON, IS ONE OF THE MAIN GOALS OF OUR PLAYER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME. HELPING PLAYERS TO UNCOVER THEIR VALUES, STRENGTHS, MOTIVATORS AND PASSIONS ALLOWS THEM TO MAXIMISE THE OPPORTUNITIES THEY HAVE OPEN TO THEM AS PROFESSIONAL AND ELITE PLAYERS, AND ALSO EASE THE TRANSITION INTO THEIR NEXT CAREER.

*Dr Deirdre Lyons*

*Director of Player Development & Welfare  
at Rugby Players Ireland*



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



### RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND / IRFU PLAYER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

#### CAREER ADVICE & GUIDANCE

- Career coaching, advice & guidance
- Work experience
- Mentoring
- Networking
- CV & interview preparation



#### PLAYER WELLBEING

- Mental health
- Physical health & self-care
- Self-awareness & personal leadership
- Player representation
- Sport integrity

#### EDUCATION, TRAINING & SKILLS

- Academic & trade qualifications
- Flexible learning options
- General interest courses
- Coaching qualifications
- Life skills

#### SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

- Brand awareness & development
- Social media
- Media & public speaking skills
- Community & charity engagement
- Personal responsibility

#### FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT & PLANNING

- Basic financial education
- Long term planning
- Tax advice
- Pension advice
- Insurance advice

## PLAYER DEVELOPMENT TEAM

The Player Development Programme underpins the work of Rugby Players Ireland. Each Player Development Manager (PDM) works with emerging players (academy and pre-academy) and currently contracted players across the men's and women's squads. Since 2024, Dr Deirdre Lyons has been acting as a dedicated resource for former players with the support of the Global Rugby Players Foundation.



**Dr Deirdre Lyons**  
Director of Player Development & Welfare



**Dr Emma Burrows**  
PDM  
(Leinster Rugby)



**Gráinne Finnegan**  
PDM  
(Ireland Sevens)



**Pamela Gilpin**  
PDM  
Head of Player Development & Wellbeing,  
World Players



**Marcus Horan**  
PDM  
(Munster Rugby)



**Aoife Lane**  
PDM  
(Ireland Women's XVs)



**Ronan Loughney**  
PDM  
(Connacht Rugby)



**Paul Marshall**  
PDM  
(Ulster Rugby)

“

RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND HAVE BACKED ME SINCE I WAS A SUB-ACADEMY PLAYER. THEY GAVE ME THE CONFIDENCE TO STEP OUTSIDE THE IDENTITY OF 'JACK THE RUGBY PLAYER' AND INTO 'JACK WHO PLAYS RUGBY.'

THEY HAVE BEEN THERE THROUGH IT ALL: COLLEGE, PERFORMANCE ON THE PITCH, AND BUILDING SOMETHING MEANINGFUL BEYOND IT.

*Jack Carty*

Founder, Cognitive Blends  
Co-Founder, Project Padel Galway  
Connacht Rugby Player



“ THE ROLE OF THE PDM IS TO PROMOTE THE PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELLBEING OF PLAYERS BY EMPOWERING THEM TO TAKE OWNERSHIP OF THEIR OWN DEVELOPMENT BOTH ON AND OFF THE SPORTING FIELD.



World Players

## 2024/2025 ANNUAL REVIEW

# 407

players engaged with their PDM in the 2024/25 season across the academy, senior, 7s, women's and past players membership, more than a 30% uplift in engagement due to our focus on 'Beyond the Game', a newly funded programme targeted specifically at transitioning and retired players.

## 92%

of all senior contracted players engaged with the Player Development Programme, and met their PDM on average 4 times across the season.

## 97%

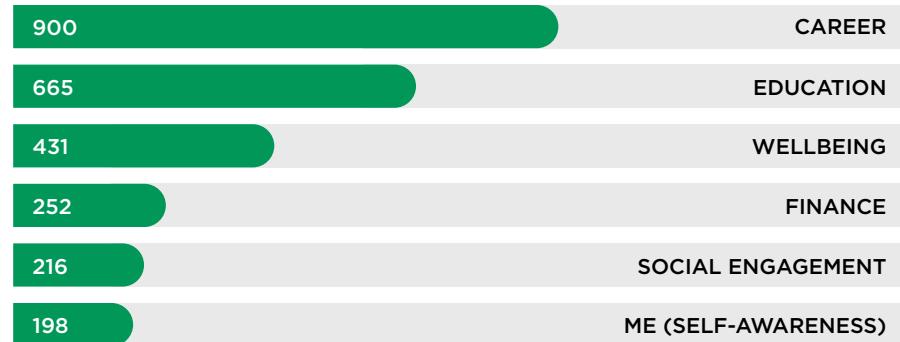
of all Academy players engaged with player development programme and met their PDM on average 6 times across the season

# 1,799

consultations were held with current and former players, the highest number to date, again a 30% increase on last season's interactions. Face to face meetings accounted for the vast majority of interactions (55%), with players choosing a variety of ways to connect with their PDM via email text/WhatsApp message (20%), phone (13%), email (7%), video call (4%) and social media (1%)

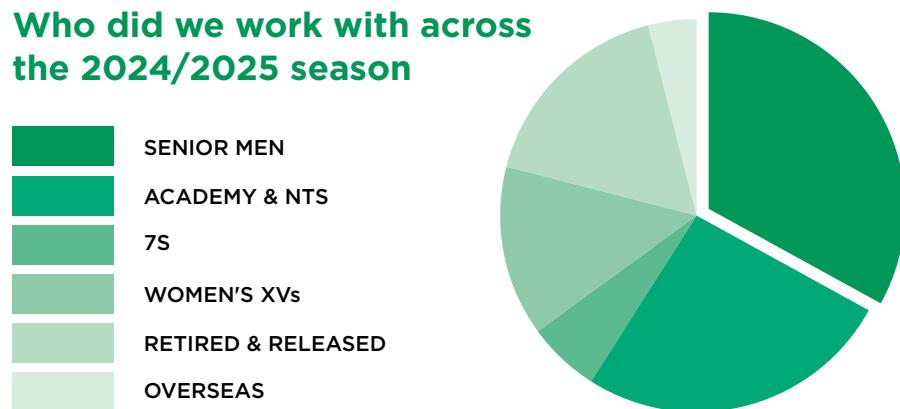
FACE TO FACE MEETINGS	55%
EMAIL TEXT/WHATAPP MESSAGE	20%
PHONE	13%
EMAIL	7%
VIDEO CALL	4%
SOCIAL MEDIA	1%

## What do players want to talk about?



Based on the main pillars of the Player Development Programme, RPI have developed a database to track the areas players want support from their PDM with. Education was discussed in half of all consults, with post playing career planning arising in 37% of consultations. Wellbeing issues were discussed in one quarter of all interactions. It is important to note that player consultations can cover more than one area of personal development e.g. finance and wellbeing.

## Who did we work with across the 2024/2025 season



PLAYER STATUS	NO. OF CONSULTATIONS	% OF CONSULTATIONS
Senior Men	584	33
Academy & Nts	473	26
7s	115	6
Women's Xvs	257	14
Retired & Released	302	17
Overseas	68	4

## PLAYER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME 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:

*"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."*

## IRISH RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION



## 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.

## PORTERSHEd X RPI

We were delighted to renew our partnership with PorterShed, one of Ireland's leading innovation hubs, connecting our players with the country's dynamic tech and start-up community.

The partnership focuses on creating opportunities beyond sport, enabling players to engage with entrepreneurs, innovators, and mentors shaping Ireland's future economy.

Originally sparked through workshops several years ago, our collaboration with PorterShed is now reignited, giving players access to an inspiring ecosystem built on creativity, collaboration, and ambition.



## DUBLIN FIRE BRIGADE

Several members enjoyed a unique day out with Dublin Fire Brigade as they brought several players to the station for a glimpse into life as a firefighter/paramedic as part of Dublin Fire Brigade's recent recruitment drive.



## GAINLINE

Added to the PDPs resources in 2023, all players have access to the IRFU GAINLINE platform. Developed in partnership with the IRFU, the e-learning series complements the workshops and one-to-one coaching already being offered by players' PDMs. Programmes currently available include:

### Smart Money Habits

Money Goals and Budgeting; Tax and Payslips; Getting Mortgage Ready; Pensions; Loans & Credit Cards; Savings & Investments; Paths to QFA

### Career

CV Development; Networking 101; Growing and Maintaining Your Professional Network

### The Professional Game

Active\*Consent: How to Support Yourself and Your Peers; Contracting an Agent; Professional Standards of Behaviours Men's XV's; Being Online as a Professional Athlete

“

I WOULDN'T BE WHERE I AM TODAY WITHOUT RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND, AND THEIR HELP OFF THE PITCH. THEY ARE INCREDIBLE PEOPLE FOR KEEPING US GOING AND SUPPORTING US WITH WHAT WE WANT TO DO. THEY ARE SO IMPORTANT TO US.

*Anna McGann  
Owner, Chaos the Label*

## TRANSITION WORKSHOPS

Transition Workshops continued to play a central role in our player development programme this year, offering current professionals the space to explore life beyond rugby.

Through real-life stories from past players and insights into a wide range of industries, these sessions help athletes recognise the possibilities that lie ahead and the skills they already possess. While many players are progressing through education or undertaking dual-career pathways, the workshops encourage them to actively experience other careers and begin planning for their future. Our past players remain an invaluable resource in this process, providing honest, relatable perspectives that empower the next generation to prepare confidently for their post-rugby journeys.



“

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 TELL THEM TO GET CURIOUS ABOUT LIFE OUTSIDE RUGBY. IT WON'T HURT YOUR GAME. IF ANYTHING, IT'LL MAKE YOU A BETTER PLAYER AND PERSON.

*Alex Wootton  
Founder, The Sheds*



“

WHEN I WENT THROUGH MY LAST FEW YEARS, I WAS STUCK IN THE GYM TRAINING HARD TO GET FIT. IT WAS DEMORALISING. IF I SAW A CAREER THAT APPEALED TO ME AT THAT STAGE, I WOULD HAVE CONSIDERED IT [RETIREMENT] EARLIER, BUT THERE'S A WORRY ABOUT LETTING RUGBY GO BECAUSE THERE'S A FEAR OF THE AFTERLIFE. AT SOME POINT, YOU HAVE TO GET REAL ABOUT YOUR FUTURE.

*Tommy Bowe  
Broadcaster*

## COLLABORATIONS

Following greater exposure to international practices, Rugby Players Ireland has been firmly established as world leaders in the Player Development space. Learning from best practice all over the world, and not just in rugby, has enabled the PDP to grow and constantly evolve to meet players' needs.

### World Players

Members of our PDP team travelled to both Rome and Auckland to attend the World Players Association's Elevate Conferences. The Elevate series is designed to connect and upskill player development professionals worldwide, fostering shared learning, collaboration, and best practice across sports.



### International Rugby Players Association

Throughout the year, we maintained regular engagement with the International Rugby Players Association. As Head of Global Player Development, Dr. Deirdre Lyons played a key role in these ongoing collaborations. She was also present at the Stadio Olimpico in Rome for the launch of the Italian Rugby Players Association's (GIRA) Player Development Programme, Oltre la Mischia, supporting the initiative and gaining insight into its structure and objectives. These interactions offered valuable opportunities to exchange ideas, observe emerging best practices in player development, and strengthen connections across the international rugby community.

### Irish Athletes Alliance

In addition to amplifying Irish representation at various international meetings, the Irish Athletes Alliance delivered a small number of targeted development opportunities this year. Members took part in a LinkedIn workshop facilitated by the Gaelic Players Association and Sport Ireland, as well as a personal branding session with Áine Killilea and Retake.ie, the creative agency co-founded by 2025 All-Ireland winning hurler and dual-career athlete, Conor Stakelum.



### Sport Ireland

Rugby Players Ireland had a strong presence at the Sport Ireland Institute for their Athlete Friendly Employer Networking Breakfast. Attended by notable Irish companies and athletes from across Irish sport, the event, facilitated by the Institute's Performance Life Skills team, featured far-ranging insights from dual-career athletes such as Hugo Lennox, who studied and worked part time in the property sector before launching his own property business, Achara Properties, in the months following Paris 2024.



### Irish Management Institute

Our congratulations to Paul Marshall (Diploma in Leadership) and Kieran Lewis (Diploma in Management) on their recent graduations from the Irish Management Institute. Both were recipients of Rugby Players Ireland scholarships, which this year have been awarded to Eoin Griffin and Mick Kearney, continuing our commitment to supporting former players in developing their careers beyond rugby.



## ROOKIE CAMP

In mid-August, we hosted our latest Rookie Camp at Druids Glen Hotel & Golf Resort, led by Paul Marshall. Fifty-two academy players from across the four provinces took part in a two-day induction designed to explore the challenges and realities of life as a professional athlete.

A wide range of workshops were delivered with the support of partners including Bank of Ireland, Active\*Consent, Signify Group, Epic Global Solutions, Tackle Your Feelings, and Santoshia Wellness. Former player Tommy Bowe also facilitated a session on media awareness, while Andrew Conway and Peter Smyth joined the group to share their personal insights into the professional game.



“

**ROOKIE CAMP IS SUCH A VALUABLE EXPERIENCE. AS YOUNG PROFESSIONALS WE ALL NEED TO LEARN THAT THIS ISN'T A CAREER THAT WILL LAST FOREVER, AND WE NEED TO BE WELL EQUIPPED FOR LIFE AFTER RUGBY.**

*Sam Berman  
Ulster Rugby*

## SOCIAL IDENTITY

The Player Development team delivered a research-informed 90-minute workshop designed on the principles of the Australian More Than Sport intervention, adapting its core social-identity concepts to the Irish rugby pathway.

The session combined input from past-player role models, who shared firsthand experiences of maintaining identities beyond rugby, with a dedicated reflective workbook that guided players to explore the social groups they belong to and recognise the value of sustaining meaningful connections outside the sport.

Following the workshop, we collected measures to better understand its impact, and the results showed that while players reported strong identification with both their sport and club, it was their confidence in managing multiple social groups, rather than the strength of any single athletic identity, that was most closely associated with life satisfaction. These findings reinforce the workshop's central premise: that helping young athletes build and maintain diverse social identities can meaningfully support their well-being and resilience during their transition into professional rugby. A manuscript discussing these findings is currently under review with *Frontiers in Sport and Active Living*.

## HERFORM

2025 marked the final year of Rugby Players Ireland's HerForm project, co-funded by the EU Erasmus+ programme.

Created to address the specific personal development needs of elite female athletes, HerForm responded to the persistent inequalities women face in high-performance sport, including limited pathways, unequal resources, and under-representation at decision-making levels. HerForm was therefore created to provide research-driven, gender-specific, personal development training to help athletes navigate these challenges and build their personal and professional potential.

In 2023, research conducted with over 130 elite female athletes across 17 countries, alongside focus groups with athletes and support staff, identified key areas of need. Challenges included contract negotiation, returning to sport post-maternity, securing sponsorship, managing mental health, and balancing career and family life. Armed with these findings, the HerForm team developed five personal development modules, which were housed on a digital learning platform, offering freely accessible, evidence-based training to support female athletes and their support networks.

The voice of the athlete was central throughout. The platform was piloted by 112 athletes across Europe and South Africa, whose feedback drove refinements in content and delivery. In response to their preference for mixed media, podcasts were added to enhance accessibility and



engagement. A highlight of the project was the HerForm to HerSolution Conference in Dublin in November. The event served as the official programme launch and a critical forum for discussion. The event brought together athletes, coaches, service providers, and decision-makers, and high-performing athletes who shared practical insights and solutions to the challenges faced every day by women in high-performance sport.

Top-tier speakers contributed crucial support perspectives on women's sport, including Maria Walsh (Member of the European Parliament), Nancy Chillingworth (High Performance Manager with the Olympic Federation of Ireland), and Paola Ottonello (European Commission Sport Unit). High-level athletes such as Silvia Turani, Edel McMahon (Rugby), and Lisa Koop (Basketball) provided invaluable, lived-experience insights from across the European continent.

As the project nears its conclusion, it stands as a remarkable collaborative achievement across Europe, advancing gender-specific development and equipping female athletes across Europe with the tools to thrive both on and off the field.



Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

# HerForm Modules

## Module 1 **HerFoundations** The concept of self

**Scope of Content >**  
Success, Self-esteem, Personal development, Identity, Dreams, Perfectionism

## Module 2 **HerBody&Mind** The concept of female health

**Scope of Content >**  
Body confidence, Dietary restrictions, Mental health & self-care, Pre-baby adaptations & RTP post-partum, Female menstruation

## Module 3 **HerRelationships** The concept of communication

**Scope of Content >**  
The senior H-P environment, Business of sport, Support teams, Managing expectations, Confidential communication skills, Advocating needs

## Module 4 **HerRights** The concept of safety

**Scope of Content >**  
Rights, responsibilities & needs, Labor law, Safe work place, Gender equity & equality, Agents

## Module 5 **HerTransitions** The concept of change

**Scope of Content >**  
The female athlete journey, From junior to senior, Relocation, Injuries



## THE 5RS OF RUGBY

This year saw significant progress in Rugby Players Ireland's ongoing commitment to evidence-based player welfare, with the publication of two major studies examining the mental health of professional rugby players.

Produced in collaboration with Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Derby, the research highlights the importance of bridging academic insight with real-world practice and demonstrates how trusted partnerships can deliver meaningful impact within elite sporting environments.



Published in PLOS Mental Health and Case Studies in Sport and Performance Psychology, the studies evaluate the '5Rs of Rugby' programme: Recognise, Reach Out, Refer, Remain Supportive, and Realities of Rugby - a mental health literacy initiative co-developed and delivered by Rugby Players Ireland during the 2023/24 season. The programme introduced players and staff to a shared framework designed to build awareness, challenge stigma and encourage help-seeking behaviours.

Key findings across the two papers show that:

**Strong social norms already exist**

Most players are willing to support teammates facing mental health challenges, though awareness and confidence in how to do so can be strengthened.

**Context is critical**

Rugby's unique high-pressure environment, with short careers, intense competition, and changing-room culture, demands tailored, collaborative interventions.

**Sustained action is essential**

Players and staff stressed that one-off sessions are not enough; ongoing engagement is needed to normalise conversations around mental health.

“

THE 5RS OF RUGBY GIVES PLAYERS A SHARED LANGUAGE TO LOOK OUT FOR EACH OTHER AND TO SEEK HELP WHEN IT'S NEEDED. THIS RESEARCH SHOWS THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUSTED RELATIONSHIPS - PLAYERS ARE FAR MORE LIKELY TO OPEN UP WHEN SUPPORT COMES FROM PEOPLE THEY KNOW. IT UNDERLINES OUR COMMITMENT TO BUILDING ENVIRONMENTS WHERE PLAYERS CAN THRIVE AS PEOPLE AS WELL AS ATHLETES.

*Dr Deirdre Lyons*

*Director of Player Development and Welfare*



SECTION 03

# ENGAGE





**OCC Consulting Men's XV's  
Players' Player of the Year**  
Tadhg Beirne

**OCC Consulting Women's XV's  
Players Player of the Year**  
Aoife Dalton

**TritonLake Men's 7s Players' Player  
of the Year**  
Dylan O'Grady

**TritonLake Women's 7s Players'  
Player of the Year**  
Lucinda Kinghan

**Zurich Contribution to  
Irish Society**  
Eimear Considine

**Nevin Spence Men's XV's Young  
Player of the Year**  
Sam Prendergast

**Energia Women's XV's Young  
Player of the Year**  
Erin King

**MSL Mercedes-Benz Ballsbridge  
Men's XV's Try of the Year**  
Dan Sheehan (v England)

**AIB Corporate Banking Women's  
XVs Try of the Year**  
Anna McGann (v Italy)

**Druids Glen Hotel & Golf Resort  
Moment of the Year**  
Ireland Men's XV's Triple Crown Win  
(accepted by Caelan Doris)



## RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND ANNUAL GOLF CLASSIC

The Annual Rugby Players Ireland Golf Classic took place at Druids Glen.

Bringing together a host of players past and present, along with sponsors and guests, the event remains an important part of Rugby Players Ireland's social calendar. This year we were delighted to have over 30 current and former players in attendance, including several Lions who had just returned from their Series win in Australia.

### 1ST PLACE:

Josh van der Flier & Heineken Ireland

### 2ND PLACE:

Rugby Players Ireland feat. Shane Byrne, Michael Jackson, Simon Keogh & Bryan Mollen

### 3RD PLACE:

Rónan Kelleher & CRM Interior Fit-Outs

### LONGEST DRIVE:

Audrey O'Flynn





# HALL OF FAME

This year, Rugby Players Ireland was proud to induct Dr Claire Molloy, Stephen Ferris and Jamie Heaslip into the Heineken Rugby Players Ireland Hall of Fame.

Established in 2003, the Hall of Fame recognises former players who have made an outstanding contribution to Irish rugby, both on and off the field. Molloy, Ferris and Heaslip join a distinguished group of previous inductees who have shaped the game and helped elevate Irish rugby to new heights.

The trio were honoured at a special ceremony at the Marker Hotel in November, where they were joined by family, friends and former teammates. The occasion served not only to celebrate their individual achievements, but also to highlight the work of the Rugby Players Ireland Foundation and the players' association's strengthened commitment to the past players through Beyond the Game, an initiative delivered in partnership with the Global Rugby Players Foundation.

**Dr Claire Molloy's** contribution to Irish rugby is exceptional in scale and influence. Across a 12-year international career, she earned 74 caps, led Ireland at multiple major tournaments and played a central role in memorable successes such as the 2013 Grand Slam and 2015 Six Nations title. Her ability to balance elite sport with a demanding medical career has made her a powerful role model for athletes across the system.

**Stephen Ferris** remains one of the defining forwards of his era. Explosive, uncompromising and influential across every game he played, he made 106 appearances for Ulster and earned 35 caps for Ireland. His performances in the 2009 Grand Slam campaign, the British & Irish Lions tour that followed, and the 2011 Rugby World Cup left a lasting imprint on Irish rugby.



Although injury curtailed his career, his legacy endures through the impact he made in a short but exceptional period at the top.

**Jamie Heaslip**, one of the most decorated Irish players of the professional era, represented his country 95 times and played a central role in numerous Six Nations triumphs. A cornerstone of Leinster's golden period, he won multiple European and domestic titles and toured twice with the British & Irish Lions. His professionalism, consistency and leadership continue to influence the standards of Irish rugby today.

**“** IT IS A GREAT HONOUR TO BE INDUCTED INTO THE RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND HALL OF FAME. I AM PRIVILEGED TO FOLLOW IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF GREAT PLAYERS AND TEAMMATES. NONE OF IT WOULD HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY, AND HAVING THEM HERE TODAY MAKES THIS OCCASION EVEN MORE SPECIAL.

*Dr Claire Molloy*



**“** I'M INCREDIBLY HUMBLED TO RECEIVE THIS AWARD. I FEEL LUCKY TO HAVE BEEN PART OF SUCH SPECIAL TEAMS, GUIDED BY BRILLIANT COACHES AND SUPPORTED BY MENTORS, STAFF, FAMILY, AND FRIENDS WHO SHAPED ME ON AND OFF THE PITCH. REPRESENTING LEINSTER AND IRELAND AND SHARING THOSE MOMENTS WITH TEAMMATES AND FANS WAS A PRIVILEGE I WILL ALWAYS TREASURE. I TRULY HAD THE TIME OF MY LIFE.

*Jamie Heaslip*

**“** WHEN I RETIRED I WAS OFTEN ASKED IF I HAD ANY REGRETS ABOUT HOW MY CAREER PLAYED OUT. I HONESTLY WOULDN'T CHANGE A THING. IT'S EVERY YOUNG RUGBY PLAYER'S DREAM TO REPRESENT THEIR PROVINCE AND THEIR COUNTRY AND I HAVE BEEN ENORMOUSLY PRIVILEGED TO HAVE DONE BOTH. WHEN RETIREMENT CAME, IT WAS ALL ABOUT THE NEXT THING AND SO I HAVE ENJOYED THE LEAD UP TO THIS EVENT, TAKING THE OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT ON IT ALL AND THINK OF ALL THOSE WHO HELPED ME ALONG THE WAY.

*Stephen Ferris*



# RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND FOUNDATION

The Rugby Players Ireland Foundation aims to provide financial and practical support for players and their families who find themselves in difficult situations such as career ending injury, illness or disability.

As a registered charity, the support provided by the Foundation will take many forms including financial assistance, help with medical treatment, rehabilitation equipment, counselling and education. The Foundation provides an emergency support for those who are struggling in various ways while also giving players the opportunity to be part of a 'players supporting players' community.

## Rugby Players Ireland Foundation Board:

Simon Best | Shane Byrne | Simon Keogh | Ruth O'Reilly | David Wallace

## THE RPI FOUNDATION IN CHICAGO

Several representatives of Rugby Players Ireland were in Chicago where a group of former players hosted a special lunch celebrating the work of the Rugby Players Ireland Foundation, ahead of Ireland's game with the All Blacks.

Driven by former player Barry O'Mahony, the event brought together many familiar faces united by a shared commitment to player wellbeing and long-term brain health.

Proudly supported by the Irish American Partnership, it was also a fantastic opportunity to highlight the community spirit of rugby on both sides of the Atlantic.



**A BENEVOLENT FUND THAT PROVIDES PROGRAMMES TO SUPPORT RUGBY PLAYERS, IN HARSHSHIP AND IN HEALTH, DURING THEIR RUGBY CAREER AND BEYOND**

### TACKLE YOUR FEELINGS

A public-facing mental wellbeing campaign that empowers individuals to proactively care for their mental health, using rugby players as role models.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH 

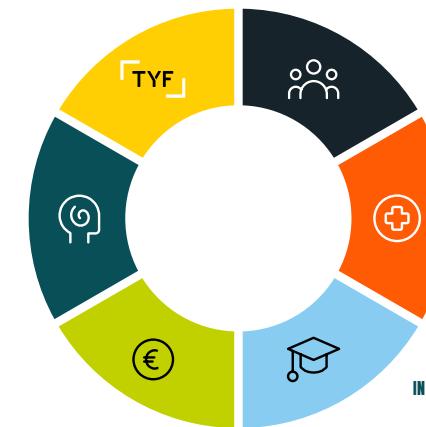
### BEYOND THE GAME

A dedicated resource for former players, focusing on four key pillars - Care, Change, Community & Connection.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH 

### MENTAL WELLBEING SERVICE

A confidential support service for current and former players, and their partners, providing access to mental health and wellbeing support whenever needed.



### BRAIN HEALTH

A comprehensive screening evaluation for past players tailored to assess and document current psychological health and cognitive functioning.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH 

### SUPPORT FUND

A purpose-driven fund offering short-term financial support to players facing unexpected challenges, helping them regain stability and focus on the future.

### IRELAND SPORTS FUND

A specialised fund providing financial support for players to pursue education and career opportunities.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH 

**OUR VISION IS TO EMPOWER RUGBY PLAYERS TO LEAD HEALTHY AND FULFILLING LIVES BEYOND THE GAME.**

## BEYOND THE GAME

Having launched in 2024, Beyond the Game has continued to expand Rugby Players Ireland's support services for retired players, offering proactive, personalised assistance to those transitioning out of professional or international rugby.

Backed by the Global Rugby Players Foundation (GRPF) and the Rugby Players Ireland Foundation, the programme has already established itself as a key pillar of our long-term commitment to player wellbeing beyond the pitch.

Led by Dr Deirdre Lyons, Beyond the Game provides year-round support anchored in four core pillars: Change, Care, Connection, and Community. Through tailored transition planning, career mentoring, and wellbeing resources, former players are supported not only to manage the challenges of retirement, but also to build purposeful, fulfilling lives after the game.

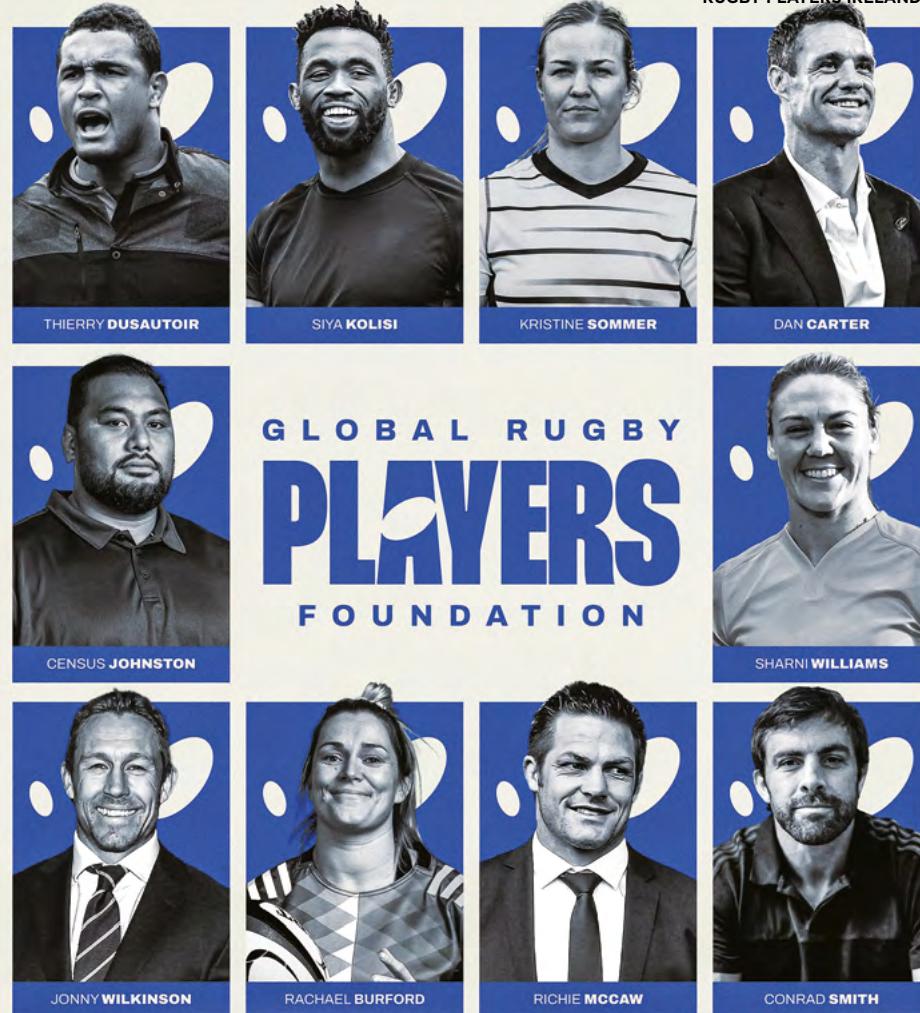


“

WHEN I FINISHED UP PLAYING RUGBY AT A HIGH LEVEL, I REALLY STRUGGLED WITH MY IDENTITY. I WAS NO LONGER ‘RUTH THE RUGBY PLAYER’ - SO WHAT WAS I? HOW DID PEOPLE PERCEIVE ME? HOW SHOULD I PRESENT MYSELF TO THE WORLD. I THREW MYSELF INTO WORK AND REPLACED MY TRAINING HOURS WITH WORK, AND THAT WASN’T SUSTAINABLE. IT TOOK ME A WHILE TO FIND MY EQUILIBRIUM AGAIN.

*Ruth O'Reilly*

*Johnson & Johnson MedTech*



The programme's impact continues to grow through its partnership with the Global Rugby Players Foundation. Founded by leading current and former players including Dan Carter, Jonny Wilkinson, Rachael Burford and Siya Kolisi, the GRPF aims to ensure that players worldwide are equipped for the significant life shift that follows retirement.

Through this collaboration, former Irish players have benefitted from:

- Funding and local programme support
- Mental and physical health initiatives
- Career and business coaching
- A global digital community for connection and peer support
- Partnerships that create new development and employment pathways

## CHANGE. CARE. CONNECTION. COMMUNITY.

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. Other activities have included a breakfast morning in Belfast, a gym workout in Galway, collaborations with Leinster Rugby's 1879 Club, the annual Legends fixture in Dublin and a host of other networking opportunities.



**“ WHEN YOU STEP AWAY FROM THE TEAM ENVIRONMENT YOU’VE KNOWN FOR YEARS, IT MAKES A REAL DIFFERENCE TO HAVE AN ESTABLISHED NETWORK OF FORMER PLAYERS WHO’VE BEEN THROUGH THE SAME TRANSITION AND CAN HELP GUIDE YOU ON THE NEXT STAGE OF YOUR JOURNEY.**

*Eoin Griffin*

*Offering Development Associate Manager, Accenture*

## 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.



## IRELAND V ENGLAND LEGENDS

It was a great pleasure to welcome the Irish Rugby Legends for this year's annual fixture against England to kick off the Six Nations.

In front of over 2,000 people at Energia Park the Shane Byrne led side played out an entertaining match boosted by the energy of recent retirees Luke Marshall, Niyi Adeolokun, Harry McNulty, Rhys Ruddock and Jordi Murphy. Their efforts helped raise significant funds for rugby-related charities including the Rugby Players Ireland Foundation and the IRFU Charitable Trust.



“

THE IMPORTANCE OF ALL THE BOYS COMING TOGETHER FOR THE GAME IS HUGE. WE TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH AND WHAT PAST PLAYERS DO AFTER THEIR CAREERS, SO THESE MOMENTS ARE REALLY VALUABLE FOR BOTH THE ENGLISH AND IRISH PLAYERS. WHAT I MISS MOST IS THE BUZZ OF SEEING EVERYONE AND ENGAGING AROUND THE GAME, SO THIS IS A GREAT WAY TO CATCH UP, HAVE A LAUGH, AND ENJOY EACH OTHER'S COMPANY NO MATTER THE COLOUR OF YOUR JERSEY.

*Matt Banahan  
England Legends*



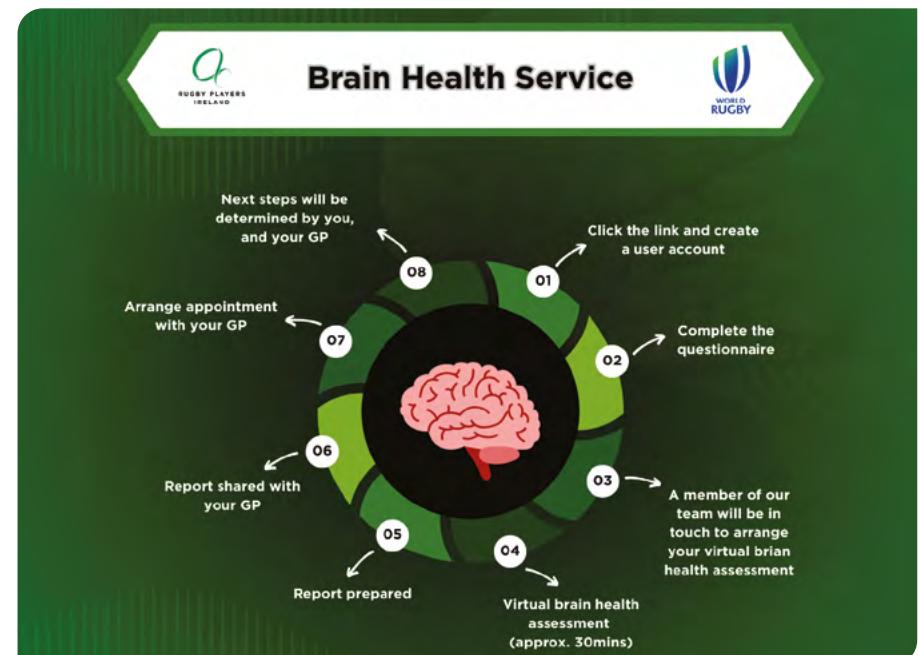
## BRAIN HEALTH SERVICE

In partnership with World Rugby, Rugby Players Ireland continues to deliver the Brain Health Service, providing confidential support to former elite players who have concerns about their brain health.

Available to all retired international men's and women's players across both 15s and 7s codes, as well as former provincial players, the service has now been accessed by over 60 players since its establishment last year.

The programme combines education and awareness with a structured assessment pathway. Participants complete a general health questionnaire followed by an online cognitive assessment conducted by a trained brain health practitioner. This process helps establish a baseline for each individual's brain health, offers tailored advice on managing risk factors, and directs players to specialist care if needed. It also provides a valuable opportunity to reconnect with their local GP and ensure continuity of care.

Each participant receives a detailed report for their GP, including medical recommendations and guidance on sustaining long-term brain health. Individuals are also informed about the wider supports available through Rugby Players Ireland, including mental wellbeing services, personal development initiatives, career support and community engagement opportunities.



## MENTAL WELLBEING SERVICE

Promoting Player Wellbeing is integral to the work that we do at Rugby Players Ireland. We deliver our wellbeing support using a three-pronged approach of:

- Individualized Support
- Education & Awareness seminars
- Stigma Reducing Campaigns (Tackle Your Feelings)

Rugby Players Ireland provide support to current and former players mainly through the Player Development Managers that are based at each professional club, national sevens squads and women's XVs programme. Players can also email the service directly while referrals can also come via Team Doctors or Physios. Since October 2020, our Mental Wellbeing Service has been supported by Sporting Chance, a UK charity dedicated to current and former professional athletes.

The most important piece of information to know about the service is that there is no minimum threshold to access the service. The core principles behind the service are one of early intervention. Once a player feels they might benefit from talking to a professional, they then meet the threshold.

Since 2017 we have had 192 people use the service 59% of these were current players from the men's game across academy (19%), Senior (36%) and Sevens (4%). Our services were also used by our women's teams (36%: XVs and 7s).

Our PDMs signpost players to specialist support via the Mental Wellbeing Services network, which begins with an initial screening process via Zoom. Players also complete the International Olympic Committee Sport Mental Health Assessment Tool 1 (SMHAT-1) in advance of the screening. The highest ranked items by players on the SMHAT-1 have been:

- **I could not stop worrying about injury or my performance.**
- **I found training more stressful.**
- **I was less motivated.**

Following the screening process players can access a large network of experienced psychologists, counsellors and psychotherapists. Some of the issues that players may need support with include stress and anxiety, burn out, adjustment and relationship difficulties, bereavement, addictions, coping with long-term injury and depression. Sessions can be facilitated face to face or via zoom.



“

NOW IT'S SUCH A BETTER PLACE AND PLAYERS FEEL SO MUCH MORE COMFORTABLE IN CONFIDING IN SOMEONE AND OPENING UP. AND EVEN IF YOU DIDN'T WANT TO OPEN UP TO A TEAMMATE, THERE ARE SOME GREAT RESOURCES THROUGH RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND THAT YOU HAVE ACCESS TO, COUNSELLORS AND EXPERTS THAT YOU CAN TALK TO. FOR SOME PEOPLE, THAT MIGHT BE A GREAT WAY TO GET THE BALL ROLLING.

*Andrew Porter*

## MARK SMYTH

Mark Smyth is the lead Clinical Psychologist for Rugby Players Ireland Mental Health service and Clinical Consultant for the Tackle Your Feelings campaign. In 2020 he was the 50th President of the Psychological Society of Ireland. He is also a Chartered Senior Clinical Psychologist with over 20 years' experience.

Mark specialises in working with clients with difficulties in the areas of anxiety, trauma and self-harm. He has a deep interest in the psychology of social media, politics & policing. Mark is a frequent contributor in the media on mental health and psychology matters.

“Pressure of expectations, anxiety and over thinking would probably be the most common issues that players report. As part of their role as a professional rugby player they are expected to achieve to an exceptionally high standard and there is a constant pursuit of excellence. Sometimes a player brings those standards and expectations of perfection into other aspects of their day to day lives or into their relationships which is much less realistic than trying to achieve sporting excellence.

The numbers of players coming forward to seek support has remained consistent that I think is due to better awareness of early intervention with mental health in combination with a willingness and confidence from players from academy all the way to senior players to be more open about when they have struggled with their mental health & the benefits of seeking support. Rugby players in Ireland have been exceptional role models for mental health help seeking, both within rugby and without.”



# 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 following his retirement, is a dedicated scholarship programme designed to help professional rugby players prepare for life after sport.

It is known that the transition from professional sport to a new chapter in life can be daunting as it is often accompanied by identity loss, uncertainty, and financial pressure. After years in the making, the fund not only aims to remove financial barriers to education and career development, it also intends to empower players at all levels to build fulfilling futures beyond the pitch.

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.

Following almost 50 applications, the first six scholarships have been awarded.

“

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.

*Billy Dardis*



## SUPPORT FUND

When life throws up the unexpected, the Rugby Players Ireland Support Fund can step in to offer a helping hand when it is needed most.

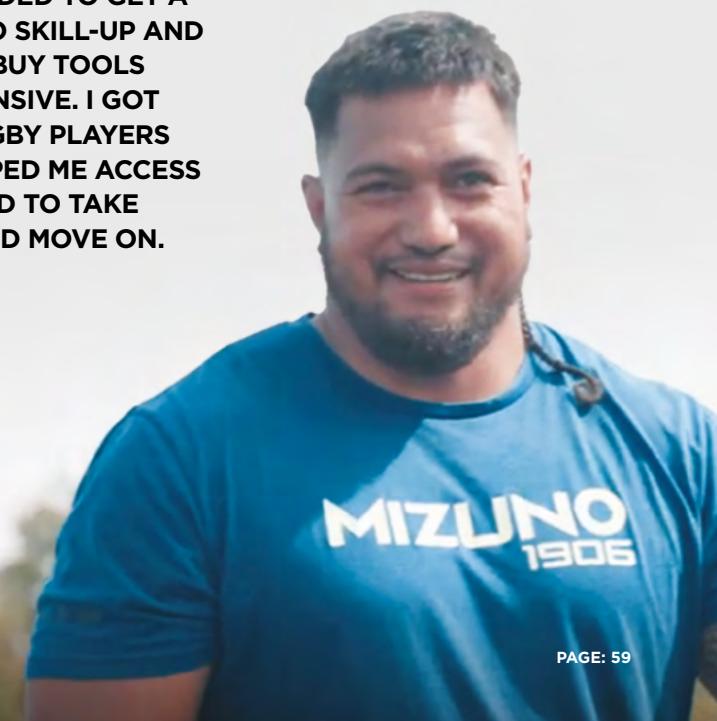
Designed to provide short-term relief during challenging periods, the Support Fund helps players regain stability and focus on their wellbeing and future. Whether on or off the field, the fund ensures that no player faces hardship alone.

The Support Fund is a valuable financial resource that players can access during or after their careers if they encounter unexpected difficulties. To date, applications have covered a wide range of needs related to education and career development, health expenses and mental health support.

“

YOU FINISH UP AND IT'S SAD, BUT YOU HAVE TO FIND SOMETHING ELSE. I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT I WAS GOING TO DO. I NEEDED TO GET A TRADE, I NEEDED TO SKILL-UP AND I ALSO NEEDED TO BUY TOOLS WHICH WERE EXPENSIVE. I GOT IN TOUCH WITH RUGBY PLAYERS IRELAND WHO HELPED ME ACCESS THE FUNDS I NEEDED TO TAKE THAT NEXT STEP AND MOVE ON.

*Mata Fifita  
Plumber*



# TYF 2025



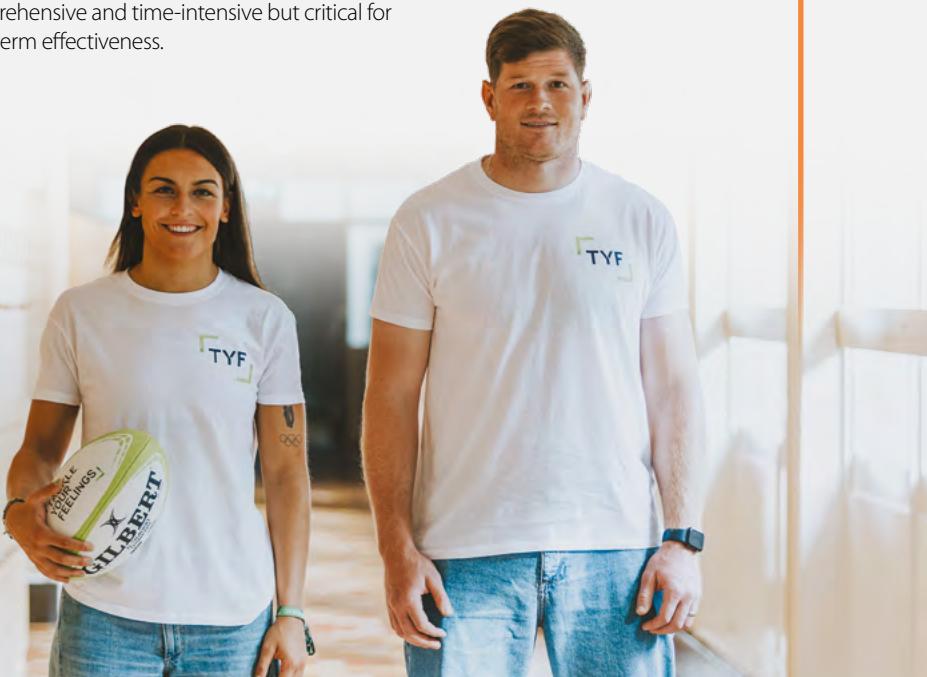
TACKLE  
YOUR  
FEELINGS



## I. FOUNDATIONAL GROWTH

From January to July 2025, the TYF team undertook a comprehensive review of the Schools Programme to ensure it was aligned with our long-term strategic goals. As part of onboarding our new digital marketing partners, Outset, an in-depth audit revealed the need for a substantial redesign of the teaching platform and lesson plans. Feedback from teachers, students, and early academic research was integrated into the rebuild, resulting in a more intuitive, credible, and evidence-based learning experience.

This period also included the consolidation of insights from our four-year PhD study and ambassador interviews, which reinforced the importance of authentic storytelling and informed updates to ambassador training. This process was both comprehensive and time-intensive but critical for long-term effectiveness.



## 2. ENGAGEMENT & PARTNERSHIPS

While significant development work took place behind the scenes, TYF continued to deepen stakeholder engagement. The team worked closely with Zurich Ireland on advocacy initiatives and also strengthened relationships with schools, community organisations, youth services and fellow mental health and wellbeing advocacy groups.





### 3. STRATEGIC POSITIONING

TYF continued to build its reputation as a leading youth mental wellbeing programme across the island of Ireland. A key pillar of this work involved aligning our measurement tools with ZZF's theory of change and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) standards, ensuring the programme remains academically robust, strengthening the evidence base required for future Department of Education recommendations.

This phase also focused on amplifying TYF's brand value proposition, enhancing digital presence, and integrating research findings to position TYF as a trusted, credible resource for teachers and students.



### 4. PLATFORM RELAUNCH & SCALING

In October, TYF proudly relaunched its enhanced Schools Platform, marking a significant milestone in achieving a scalable, digitally led model. The upgraded platform supports easier onboarding, improved lesson delivery, and stronger reporting on lives impacted. With nearly 300 schools registered, 134 actively delivering modules, and 30,123 young people reached in 2025, TYF's scaling efforts demonstrate strong momentum towards its goal of 30% school adoption by 2027. Furthermore, TYF also joined an Educational Coalition and initiated a Mental Health and Wellbeing Coalition, extending influence across the education and wellbeing landscape.

**300**

Schools Registered  
to date

**30,123**

Young people  
reached in 2025

**134**

Schools actively  
delivering modules



## TO OUR MEMBERS

A special thank you to our members who have participated in events throughout the year. Rugby Players Ireland is a player-led body. Without your involvement, we would not be here to represent you. Working together, we can realise our ambition of having Ireland become the best place in the world to play rugby.

## TO OUR SPONSORS & PARTNERS

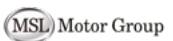
Without the support and assistance of our corporate partners much of what we have been able to achieve at Rugby Players Ireland in 2025 would not have been possible. We would like to thank all our partners and supporters, particularly the IRFU and Zurich Ireland. Through the backing of Rugby Players Ireland, we can ensure that our members have a strong independent body that prioritises them as individuals.



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